

Pluralism without Democracy, Vertical without Power: From Gor'kii to Nizhnii Novgorod . . . and Back?

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In this article I seek to identify the pivotal elements in the political trajectory of the Nizhnii Novgorod region since the beginning of the 1990s until present; from the first democratic experiences and innovations to their disavowal and repudiation. I intend to trace the main cycles of region's political developments and on this basis define the specificity of its political system and relations with the federal center. By doing so, I retrospectively look at the evolution of the political landscape in the region during a quarter of century, from the first post-Soviet years to mature Putinism, and then discuss how political controversies take cultural form and are reflected in regional identity debates.

The story of Nizhnii Novgorod is an important contribution to the ongoing debate on democracy failures in post-Soviet Russia. As a starting point of my analysis, I share the characterization of Russia's post-Soviet transition as incomplete at best and "hollow" at worst.¹ This general assessment extends to my core argument of a double fiasco: both the democratization project launched in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's fall and what is conventionally known as Vladimir Putin's proverbial "power vertical" ultimately failed on most substantial accounts. As the story of Nizhnii Novgorod tells us, the first post-Soviet decade, with its strong rejection of the Soviet experience, did not produce solid democratic institutions because of the plurality of local political actors. Ironically, Putin's declared intention of re-subjugating the regions to the sway of the federal center ultimately only cemented pluralist, clan-like types of political regimes at the regional level.

Of course, when it comes to center-periphery relations in Russia, there are structural factors common to many Russian regions. These factors include systemic conflicts over resource allocation between regional and municipal authorities detrimental to the governability of the region; fragmentation of local political elites based on clan-like networks than on belonging to institutions such as political parties; and the submission of the regions to Putin's recentralization policies. As I will show in this article, the case of Nizhnii Novgorod seems to nicely illustrate all these commonalities. Yet at the same time, despite often being described as a typical Russian region, Nizhnii Novgorod's post-1991 political trajectory exhibits a number of unique features. Thus, Nizhnii Novgorod was not only one of few regions that in the first years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was ruled by democratically-minded governors (perhaps the closest match to Boris Nemtsov as the head of Nizhnii

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1. Alfred Evans, "The Failure of Democratization in Russia: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 2, no. 1, (January 2011): 49.

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Novgorod was St. Petersburg's mayor Anatoly Sobchak). What is even more important is that the region also experienced a fast transition from a relatively liberal, reform-oriented type of regime incarnated by Nemtsov's governorship to a conservative one embodied by the former head of the local Communists Party, Gennadi Khodyrev, who came to power only four years after the end of Nemtsov's tenure. In this sense, Nizhnii Novgorod highlighted both the opportunities and limitations of liberal governance in Russia and preempted some of the trends yet to unfold at the federal level. This transformation sheds some light on the nature of Putin's regime as transcending ideological oppositions for the sake of what might be dubbed a post-liberal and simultaneously post-political order grounded in a technocratic mode(l) of rule, with governors Valerii Shantsev and Gleb Nikitin representing this trend. At the same time, Nizhnii Novgorod exposed all the weakness and vulnerabilities of the model of governorship appointed by the Kremlin that could not prevent the local ruling elite from conflictual fragmentation, and failed to avert the proliferation of nepotism and corruption in the region.

Against this backdrop, the article offers an insider's perspective on these two failures and proposes two main arguments. First, I propose a nuanced alternative to the binary vision of the 1990s as a struggle between two groups within the Russian elite—liberal reformists and authoritarian retrogrades. In its stead, I look at the 1990s, with Boris El'tsin's presidency at the federal level and Boris Nemtsov's governorship in Nizhnii Novgorod, as a period that encompassed many of the non-democratic trends that became dominant under Putin's regime.

Secondly, I approach Putin's proverbial power vertical as a system of top-down relations subordinating regional governors to the power of the federal center, but in the meantime leaving ample space for a variety of clandestine interest groups to operate within the regional polity. What the power vertical hides is a plethora of irreconcilable conflicts within a seemingly solidified system of governance, including the ruling party hierarchy.

The two arguments have at least one common point: as seen from the Nizhnii Novgorod perspective, there is more continuity than rupture between the decade of the 1990s and Putin's subsequent rule. In the existent literature, one may find a simplistic reading of Russia's transition as a shift from "democratization under El'tsin" to Putin's policy of top-down control over the regions grounded in the dominance of United Russia Party and an "emphasis of keeping conflicts out of the public eye."² Yet the story of Nizhnii Novgorod provides a different perspective, with much less evident capacity for the center to control local agents.³ Numerous indications also exist pointing to the "fragile unity of the United Russia."⁴ Indeed, it would be erroneous to interpret the

2. Donna Bahry, "Making Autocracy Work? Russian Regional Politics under Putin," in William Reisinger, ed., *Russia's Regions and Comparative International Politics* (Abingdon, 2013), 162–63.

3. Vladimir Gel'man and Sergei Ryzhenkov, "Local Regimes, Sub-national Governance and the 'Power Vertical' in Contemporary Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 3 (May 2011): 456.

4. Paul Goode, "The Fall and Rise of Regionalism?," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 26, no. 2 (2010): 242.

situation in the regions as being entirely under the Kremlin's control, and the case of Nizhnii Novgorod is highly illustrative of this argument.⁵ In particular, more than a decade of Valery Shantsev' governorship, characterized by region's full administrative submission to the Kremlin, left unaddressed most of the structural issues inherited from the 1990s, including the organization of municipal power in the city of Nizhnii Novgorod and relations between the regional and city-level authorities. In fact, two decades after Boris Nemtsov's governorship, the region of Nizhnii Novgorod has to face the same type of problems that were first raised and discussed in the first half of the 1990s, including bad governance, corruption, and the ever-precarious relations with the federal center.

In addition to participating as an immediate, yearlong observer of many of these developments, I also served as policy consultant, expert, and media commentator on some of them. Empirically, this analysis is based on three groups of sources. First, I extensively use a series of annual analytical reports issued by the Center for Socio-Economic Expertise in Nizhnii Novgorod starting from the end of the 1990s. Each report covered the most momentous events in the regional polity and explained how they were related to federal politics. The original idea behind the series of reports thus was to monitor major elements in the political trajectory of the region and inscribe the latter into wider political trends unfolding in Russia. Secondly, my analysis is partly grounded in a collection of expert materials regularly published and publicly discussed by the "Mera" analytical center and available on its web site.⁶ My third major source of information is a series of policy analysis sessions convened by the Nizhnii Novgorod Expert Club (NEC) since 2008. There were dozens of panels and round table discussions organized on this platform that aimed at bringing together the most authoritative and knowledgeable people from local academia, the media, policy circles, and political parties.

The 1990s: Boris Nemtsov's Legacy and the Aftermath

All throughout the 1990s, Nizhnii Novgorod was one of the few Russian regions with basic formal democratic procedures in action, including political competition, substantial pluralism in the media, elements of checks and balances in political institutions, and freedom of public speech. For Nizhnii Novgorod the 1990s—the decade known as a "time of trouble" on the federal level—were years of transition from the status of a closed and heavily militarized Soviet city named Gor'kii to a widely-publicized pioneer of market reforms. Throughout the 1990s, Nizhnii Novgorod enjoyed all major elements of a democratic system of governance—a reform-minded governor, plurality of groups of influence, vibrant—according to Russian standards—civil society and private media, and political competition—both between regional and municipal

5. William Reisinger and Bryon Moraski, "Deference or Governance? A Survival Analysis of Russia's Governors under Presidential Control," in William Reisinger, ed., *Russia's Regions and Comparative International Politics* (Abingdon, Eng., 2013).

6. Ekspertnyi Tsentri "Mera" at <https://meracenter.weebly.com/> (last accessed October 12, 2018).

authorities and within each of these groups. Nizhnii Novgorod had one of the densest networks of epistemic communities and policy expertise anywhere in Russia.⁷ The city and the region were among a few “islands of globalization” in Russia.⁸ This included multiple attempts to foster networking strategies of international integration involving business actors, educational communities and civic organizations.⁹ Nemtsov’s image as a young regional manager and promoter of market reforms made Boris El’tsin consider him as a potential candidate for the presidency in the future.

In a matter of a few years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Nizhnii Novgorod reshaped its identity from the stronghold of a Russian military industrial complex and a “closed city” bereft of any foreign contacts to a pilot region, a laboratory of transition to a market economy whose lessons could be meaningful for the whole of Russia. The “Nizhnii Novgorod Prologue,” a program for restructuring the ailing Russian economy along liberal lines, became an internationally recognizable trademark under Nemtsov’s governorship.

Yet the experiences of grass-roots democratic practices under Nemtsov’s rule were quite controversial, and the first sprouts of democracy did not unleash long-term institutional effects. They ended up fragmenting the regional politics that became a battleground for rival administrative and economic groups clashing with each other, with the public being increasingly alienated from political procedures and practices of governance. In fact, first experiences of political pluralism and the “increased political competition in NN did not make the regional politics more democratic or the government more accountable. Its actual impact was felt mostly in the changing methods of electoral struggle and the explosion of creativity in the field of ‘political technologies’ and negative campaigning. Such impact was rejected by the public growing disgusted by the regional elites and the games they play. . .”¹⁰ There are four points I would like to make in this context.

First, the Nemtsov governorship was had become vulnerable due to the needs of coalition building. He started his political career at the end of the 1980s as an initiator of a public grass roots campaigning for the preservation of the city center and against the construction of metro station. All of Nemtsov’s public actions—from environmental protests to opening the city to foreign partners—were highly visible and attracted a great deal of public attention, but were not always conducive to strengthening the institutional environment and making it supportive of his policies, as well as protective against the multitude of political rivals and opponents.

7. Andrey Makarychev, “Public Policy Research and Local Reforms in Russia: The Case Study of Nizhny Novgorod,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 177–86.

8. Andrey Makarychev, *Islands of Globalization: Regional Russia and the Outside World* (Zurich, 2002).

9. Andrey Makarychev, “The ‘Power Vertical’ and Horizontal Networking: Competing Strategies of Domestic and International Integration for Nizhny Novgorod Oblast,” in Graeme Herd and Anne Aldis, eds., *Russian Regions and Regionalism: Strength through Weakness* (London, 2003), 185–203.

10. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, “Why Was Democracy Lost in Russia’s Regions? Lessons from Nizhnii Novgorod,” *Communist and Post-communist Studies* 40, no. 3 (September 2007): 378.

The “Vybor” (“Choice”) foundation that Nemtsov created for sustaining his electoral campaign in 1993 was an example of this deficit of a thick institutional milieu around the governor. To compensate for this deficit, he attempted to create formally extra-governmental organizations that were, however, de facto empowered with political functions. The foundation functioned as a narrow group of administrators, consultants, advisors, policy experts, and businessmen promoting Nemtsov-backed candidates and the governor himself, yet lacking a broader regional strategy. This explains Nemtsov’s heavy dependence on the “old guard” of public servants and former Soviet administrators. In fact, it was the old administrative personnel that technically implemented Nemtsov’s innovative ideas. The most prominent example was Ivan Skliarov, the former first secretary of the Communist Party in the provincial town of Arzamas whom Nemtsov appointed vice governor.

Since Nemtsov badly needed new alliances to broaden his base of support, his attention was captured by financial and economic projects developed in Nizhnii Novgorod by Sergey Kirienko, a former high-ranking functionary of the regional *Komsomol* committee. The Nemtsov-Kirienko tandem was for some time mutually beneficial, giving the governor an advantage in teaming up with a group of young technocrats and managers. The two young leaders, however, both eager to pursue their future careers in Moscow, separated on the basis of divergent attitudes toward the Putin regime. Kirienko, as a key figure within the Union of Right-Wing Forces (SPS), directly advocated for supporting Putin’s presidency in expectation of getting certain status and a position within a new post-El’tsin regime, while Nemtsov has gradually moved to opposing Putin’s rule.¹¹

Thus, Nemtsov’s system of regional governance was based on two pillars—former party officials (exemplified by Skliarov), and former *Komsomol* activists-turned-businessmen and project administrators (epitomized by Kirienko). In 1997, when President El’tsin appointed Nemtsov the first vice premier of the Russian government, the two groups split apart. Skliarov remained in Nizhnii Novgorod as Nemtsov’s successor in the governor’s office, while the Kirienko group moved together with Nemtsov to Moscow. Yet in a matter of months both groups started distancing themselves from Nemtsov: Kirienko and his associates were rather successfully looking for useful administrative connections with the Presidential administration in the Kremlin, while Skliarov drifted toward closer relations with the powerful mayor of Moscow, Yurii Luzhkov, whose relations with Nemtsov were rather tense.

Secondly, during his governorship Nemtsov was at the center of several conflicts with other regional heavyweights, including, for example, the GAZ factory director Boris Vidyayev. Of course, the problem was not in conflicts themselves, but in the way they were resolved. Particularly problematic—yet indicative of Nemtsov’s administrative style—was his clash of interest with the then-mayor of Nizhnii Novgorod, Dmitry Bednyakov, rooted as it was in

11. Sergei Borisov, “Nizhnii Novgorod—lider reform: Vtoroe dykhanie ili novaia versiia bylogo mifa?” Policy memo, 2000, at <https://meracenter.weebly.com/105710771088107510771081-1041108610881080108910861074.html> (last accessed October 11, 2018).

sharp disagreements on the control over financial resources, including land property rights in the city of Nizhnii Novgorod. The conflict erupted in 1993, predetermining a particularly sharp mayoral campaign in 1994. To defeat Bednyakov, Nemtsov supported his own protégé Evgeny Krestianinov who ultimately, having realized his lack of chances to win the election, dropped out of the race at the very end of the campaign, thus making election technically void. A few days later, Bednyakov was administratively removed from the mayoral office by presidential decree, which Nemtsov lobbied for, and then his term was legally cancelled in 1997. This incident attested to Nemtsov's predisposition to apply top-down administrative resources in cases of political expedience, which significantly compromised his democratic credentials. The Bednyakov case was one of first examples of the phenomenon later called "electoral authoritarianism," and widely discussed in the academic literature on the Russian regions.¹²

Evidently, Nemtsov's political career in Nizhnii Novgorod was possible due to elections as a new means of fast and legitimate change of regional elites. Yet, starting in mid-1990s it became clear that the number of aspirants and contenders seeking to use elections as political springboards for their careers was on the rise, and not all of them suited power brokers for personal or political reasons. This explains the lambasting of "non-systemic candidates," that is, those whose political activity was not approved by power brokers and who intended to pursue independent policies, as a new source of threats for incumbent elites. A decade earlier, the United Russia Party incessantly used this rhetoric to ostracize and marginalize their opponents. In Nizhnii Novgorod, the first "non-systemic" candidate was a controversial local businessman named Andrey Klimentiev, who in the early 1990s was part of Nemtsov's informal circle of confidants. Klimentiev's machinations with a banking loan, however, negatively affected a local bank director and one of Nemtsov's loyalists, Boris Brevnov, ruining their relations.¹³ Ultimately, Klimentiev was sentenced to jail for financial fraud and became Nemtsov's most outspoken opponent and rival. In 1997 Klimentiev was released from the jail and immediately ran for city mayor and—unexpectedly for many—won the election. A few days later the results of the vote was cancelled, however, and a new campaign launched. This incident meant that direct elections became increasingly inconvenient for the ruling elite, since electoral procedures could be detrimental for solidifying their power positions. This trend became particularly salient starting in 2000, with Vladimir Putin at the head of the Russian state. Needless to say, Klimentiev's de-facto victory in his public role of a staunch challenger to Nemtsov became a serious blow to the latter's political reputation and legacy in the region that he at that time already left to work in the Russian government in Moscow.

12. Inga Saikkonen, "Variations in Subnational Electoral Authoritarianism: Evidences from the Russian Federation," *Democratization* 23, no. 3 (2016): 437–58.

13. Sergei Borisov, "Khronika Nizhnegorodskoi politicheskoi zhizni," Policy Memo, "Mera" Center Web Portal, 1997, at <https://meracenter.weebly.com/105710771088107510771081-1041108610881080108910861074.html> (accessed October 16, 2018).

Third, Nemtsov's relations with the Kremlin were based on his exceptional treatment by President El'tsin. It is very indicative of this fact that from 1991 to 1994, Nemtsov simultaneously functioned as governor and presidential representative in the Nizhnii Novgorod region, so that he occupied the position that was supposed to provide Moscow's oversight for himself. Yevgeny Krestianinov, appointed presidential representative in 1994 and an integral part of Nemtsov's team, could not effectively play the surveillance role. And, of course, Nemtsov's prospects as El'tsin's potential successor were related above all to the will and decision of the incumbent president, rather than on democratic electoral procedures or public support.

Fourth, the end of the 1990s left the region with many disappointments and disillusionments, the greatest of which was Nemtsov's failure to secure the succession and continuity of reforms after he decided to continue his career in Moscow as Deputy Prime Minister in the Federal Government. In the aftermath of his resignation, Ivan Skliarov took the governorship position, but after four years in office, he lost the election to the Communist Gennady Khodyrev, which, along with Klimentiev's success at the mayoral election, marked a crucial point in the reversal of Nemtsov's political legacy.

Therefore, the experience of the 1990s, and in particular of Nemtsov's governorship, ought to be assessed from two viewpoints. On the one hand, Nizhnii Novgorod became home to innovative reforms (privatization auctions, the experimental introduction of alternative military service, private media), political pluralism and competition, and civic activism of non-state actors. Under Nemtsov's governance, the public space of Nizhnii Novgorod remained diverse and competitive, with uncensored media becoming one of the core elements of the political process. On the other hand, democracy was largely reduced to political technologies and manipulation, "the war of all against all," and heavy reliance on administrative resources. Many of these elements are part of what might be dubbed "subnational authoritarianism" in its "liberal populist version" of the 1990s.¹⁴ In this light, the Nemtsov administration can be viewed as an element of a wider patron-client network politically protected by exclusive relations with the Kremlin; this system sidelined and neutralized its opponents by a combination of administrative/regulatory and public policy measures.

The Coming of the Muscovites and the Vertical of Power

The end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s in Nizhnii Novgorod were marked by electoral fatigue after a decade of political fragmentation that engendered multiple ruptures and splits among regional political elites. It is against this controversial background that Putin's reform of center-periphery relations was launched. Its key structural element was the division of the

14. On subnational authoritarianism, see Vladimir Gel'man, *Dinamika subnatsional'nogo avtoritarizma: Rossiia v sravnitel'noi perspective* (St. Petersburg, 2008). On its liberal populist version in the 1990s, see Sergei Borisov, "Aktual'nyi politicheskii rezhim v Nizhegorodskoi oblasti: Stanovlenie v 1990-e gody," *Polis. Politicheskie issledovaniia*, no. 1 (1999).

whole country into seven federal districts, each one under the supervision of a presidential plenipotentiary representative (*polpred*). Nizhnii Novgorod became the main city (“the capital”) of the Volga Federal District (VFD), which attested to its high-ranking political status in the eyes of Moscow.

The idea of instituting federal districts as an additional—and not envisioned by the Constitution—layer of administrative hierarchy was from the outset perceived quite critically by local analysts. Many were doubtful that the scope of the discrepancies in regional and federal legislations was so large as to require the establishment of a de-facto parallel institution; some others predicted Putin’s territorial reform to end up only imitating “ordering” and argued that “the medicine could be worse than the illness itself.”¹⁵ With a particular reference to VFD first *polpred* Sergey Kirienko, a major point in the debate was whether he would be able to find a balance between three different roles: projecting the Kremlin’s centralization policies onto the district’s regions, lobbying for the regions in Moscow, and creating his own power base through a system of patronage politics.

For my analysis, the most important element of Putin’s power vertical was its quite paradoxical contribution to further diversification and the complication of regional political milieus. There were two reasons for this. First, the federal districts headed by Putin’s envoys turned into an additional gravitation pole in regional politics, with the subsequent shifts of political loyalties and allegiances. Second, according to the reform of local self-governance, cities were now allowed to choose either a mayor-led administrative system, or opt for a “bicipital” scheme with two key positions: an elected head of the city (mayor) and an appointed city manager. Nizhnii Novgorod preferred the second option, as did many other large cities, which led to further fragmentation of the local political scene, with greater opportunities for business-related interest groups to influence decision making.

The mayoral election of 2002 was a particularly illustrative example of different centers of power fighting each other.¹⁶ Regional authorities (more specifically, the then-governor Gennady Khodyrev) lobbied for the first vice governor, Yurii Sentiurin, who—presumably under the pressure of federal authorities—ultimately withdrew from the race. Municipal authorities supported the incumbent mayor Yurii Lebedev, while federal authorities (represented by VFD presidential envoy Kirienko) promoted Vadim Bulavinov, who at that time was a member of the State Duma. Bulavinov ultimately won the election. This group also included regional Legislative Assembly head Evgeniy Liulin and the former Nizhnii Novgorod mayor Dmitry Bedniakov. Multiple personal clashes and skirmishes between contenders characterized the whole atmosphere of the campaign. Sociologists found out that disorientation, apathy, conflictual tensions, loss of trust to public institutions and the media, along with the over-saturation of information space

15. Sergei Borisov, “Novaia praktika utverzhdeniia gubernatorov,” Policy memo, “Mera” Center Web Portal, 2005, available at <https://meracenter.weebly.com/104810891089108310771076108610741072108510801103.html> (last accessed October 16, 2018).

16. Sergei Borisov, Andrei Dakhin, and Andrey Makarychev, “Bez pobeditelia: Vybyry mera Nizhnego Novgoroda,” *Polis. Politicheskie issledovaniia*, no. 6 (2002).

with never-ending “black PR” actions have led to moral devastation of the voters and a very high level of “against all” votes. This state of frustration within the regional polity explains a lot in the ascendance of a group of “Muscovites” to Nizhnii Novgorod. The major reason for this was the gradual yet steady disaggregation of regional and municipal elites into several groups, internally closed and externally clashing with each other, with the ensuing intolerance, disinformation wars, electoral tricks and scandals as key elements of the political process.

Putin’s Regime and the New Federal Nomenklatura

The logic of Putin’s new regime was largely built upon these deficiencies of regional political process. A key feature of this regime was greater autonomy of the state apparatus vis-à-vis society, paving the way for a neo-Soviet model of *nomenklatura*—a system of clientelism, or patronage politics—as a policy tool masterminded by the unitary center as a single source of power ruling through direct control over all strategic policies and promoting its cadre to key decision making positions.¹⁷ The power of the *nomenklatura* started functioning above extant institutions while formally preserving/maintaining them; yet in practice, it formed a parallel network of interconnections whose configuration did not necessarily coincide with legal roles and the official statuses of power brokers. The *nomenklatura* created its own system of loyalties that trumped professionalism, and gave priority to federal interests over regional ones.¹⁸ Against this background, the appointment of Valery Shantsev, a close ally of then-powerful Moscow mayor Yurii Luzhkov to the Nizhnii Novgorod governorship in 2005 attested to the inclusion of the region into the network of the federal *nomenklatura*, which spurred meaningful changes in the entire system of regional governance.

In regional policy, a major interest of the federal *nomenklatura* was to prevent the so-called “non-systemic forces” from legitimizing their ambitions through regional and municipal elections. Political loyalties of regional policy groups could be exchanged for different degrees of autonomy in managing regional issues. Within this system, the institution of elections was aimed at either securing succession, or redistributing resources and forms of political influence within the federal *nomenklatura*. As an analytical report under the aegis of the “Mera” Center stated:

. . . public opinion in Nizhnii Novgorod doubts the expediency and usefulness of elections. The genuine meaning of electoral procedures is seen not in entrusting candidates with power resources, but in reshaping the contractual conditions that stipulate the utilization of these resources by those who already possess them . . . Elections turned into a kind of game played

17. Andrei Dakhin, “Publichnaia politika v situatsii izmeneniia instituta legitimatsii glav ispolnitel’noi vlasti sub’ektov RF,” MegaRegion—Networking Confederation Web Portal, 2006, at www.net-conf.org/articles_text_14.htm (last accessed October 16, 2018).

18. Andrei Dakhin, ed., “Nizhegorodskaiia oblast’—2007: Politicheskie itogi goda i prognozyne gipotezy 2008,” Center for Social and Economic Expertise (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2008).

by rich power holders. This game, as most of the electorate deem, is aimed at diverting attention from real problems and making society believe in quick improvements.¹⁹

The crucial point at this juncture is that for the newly-instituted regime of Vladimir Putin, the direct election of regional governors and mayors was equally seen as problematic, yet for another reason: they were increasingly treated as sources of potential instability. The state failed to further “digest” electoral procedures that became perceived as costly, redundant and excessive, and in 2004, Putin cancelled the direct election of regional heads. Simultaneously, the federal center started undertaking measures for more closely integrating municipal authorities into the power vertical. This policy area was particularly important, since at the end of the 1990s some municipalities in Russia started conducting more self-assertive policies toward regional authorities, which resulted in administrative tensions between city-level and regional-level hierarchies and growing financial imbalances. Nizhnii Novgorod was one of the largest cities whose municipal administration was in a sharp, yearlong conflict with regional bodies. In particular, the city administration de-facto refused to partake in some federal programs that were perceived as a dangerous symbol of disloyalty.²⁰

The U-turn from popular elections to appointments of governors marked the beginning of the illiberal backlash as a counter-balance to the elementary—though largely inconclusive—democratic forms of political activity that had erupted at the beginning of the 1990s. Electoral procedures morphed from a means of renovating and reshaping the ruling elites, as it was the case in Nemtsov’s times, to a burden, and were largely perceived as a zone of shadow/grey political activity with dirty PR technologies. The Putin regime reacted to this by imposing stricter control over electoral procedures, obviously limiting the space for direct democracy.

The year 2004 played a crucial role in the decomposition of Gennady Khodyrev’s administration, which was weakened by corruption charges against close associates of the governor. The regional legislature required the right to formally approve all appointments to the regional government, which the governor qualified as an inappropriate encroachment upon his executive powers. The regional legislature ultimately turned oppositional to the governor: thirty-seven out of its forty-two members demanded Khodyrev’s resignation. Moreover, the regional council of United Russia called to prevent Khodyrev from being considered as a party candidate for the next term in office in an open letter to party head Boris Gryzlov. A nexus between the regional Legislative Assembly and the office of presidential representative

19. Sergei Borisov, “Obshchestvennoe mnenie naseleniia Nizhegorodskoi oblasti na starte kampanii po vyboram deputatov zakonodatel’nogo sobraniia. Rezul’taty programmy sotsiologicheskikh issledovanii,” “Mera” Center (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2006), available at <https://meracenter.weebly.com/104810891089108310771076108610741072108510801103.html> (last accessed September 12, 2018).

20. Andrei Dakhin and Andrey Makarychev, “Konfliktnaia samostoitel’nost’. Munitsipal’naia vlast’ v Nizhnem Novgorode, 1998–2002,” Center for Social and Economic Expertise (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2002).

Sergey Kirienko and his team (including such important figures as Evgeniy Lyulin) strengthened the opposition to governor Khodyrev. Ultimately, Khodyrev, supported even by the wealthy “Basic Element” corporation, lost political influence and failed to keep power in his hands.²¹

There was a broad consensus in the local expert community that public politics in Nizhnii Novgorod is a constant battlefield where power brokers wage “wars of annihilation” with no positive motivation, with the bulk of resources being invested in the tactics of “media terror.”²² The federal center, which saw the structure of regional governance in Nizhnii Novgorod as deeply divided into several clusters of interests, largely shared this view. As seen from the Kremlin’s perspective, the ensuing conflicts required what is known as “manual management,” a top-down technique of personal decisions beyond the existing institutional arrangements. This is what explains the logic of Valery Shantsev’s appointment as governor in 2005, in spite of his lack of any previous experience in, and knowledge of, Nizhnii Novgorod.

Shantsev’s Power Base

Shantsev’s major political resources were three-fold. First, his power was based on a “cabinet agreement” with the President, and a “credit of trust” bestowed to him by Putin. Consequently, gubernatorial elections were reduced to a confidence vote “for” or “against” Putin, which overshadowed issues of substance related to regional political or economic agendas. In these conditions one of the major criteria of successful governorship was to recruit into the regional government people with “good connections” in Moscow and duly react to policy changes at the federal level (“to watch the bobber,” as a local commentator metaphorically put it).²³

Second, governors’ positions were cemented by a series of compromises with the most influential administrative and political actors in the region. Due to this, Shantsev could play the role of an administrative leader, a crisis manager, and a broker in regional conflicts of interests. His administrative weight was enhanced with the resignation of Sergey Kirienko from the position of presidential representative in the VFD, which was instrumental in consolidating power in governor’s hands.²⁴

Third, the regional government heavily relies upon “cadre elevators,” or a system of promoting the new and closely-patronized clientele to top

21. Andrei Dakhin, “Systema gosudarstvennoi vlasti v Rossii: fenomenologicheskii transit,” *Polis* no. 3 (2006): 29–41.

22. Sergei Borisov, “Novaia praktika utverzhdenniia gubernatorov,” Policy Memo, “Mera” Center Web Portal, 2005, available at <https://meracenter.weebly.com/104810891089108310771076108610741072108510801103.html> (last accessed October 16, 2018).

23. Polina Kul’biakina, “Tekhnokraty region na pol’zu,” *Nizhegorodskaia pravda*, March 27, 2017, at www.old.ppravda-nn.ru/archive/2017-03-27/tehnokraty-pojdut-regionu-na-polzu/ (accessed October 16, 2018).

24. Andrei Dakhin, ed., “Nizhegorodskaia oblast 2005–2006: Politicheskie itogi goda i prognoznye gipotezy 2007–2008,” Center for Social and Economic Expertise (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2007).

administrative positions. The initial period of Shantsev's governorship was marked by the overt mistrust of local administrative and managerial cadres' policy capacities. This feeling was clearly articulated by Sergey Potapov, the deputy governor, who claimed that "Nizhnii Novgorod lacks elites . . . there are only separate groups that associate themselves either with the bygone time, or with yesterday's people."²⁵

There were two groups beyond Shantsev's control, however, that the new governor had to cope with. One was the regional Legislative Assembly. Shantsev's first political trial was the voting on Leonid Belov, his protégé, for the seat of the Nizhnii Novgorod representative in the Federation Council, the upper chamber of parliament. Only eleven deputies voted against the new governor's nominee, which meant the end of the legislative majority under Lyulin's aegis. In 2007, Lyulin resigned, signifying the marginalization of the legislative body as an autonomous political group.

The second political sector that initially was beyond Shantsev's control was the Nizhnii Novgorod city administration, chaired by Mayor Vadim Bulavinov.²⁶ Since the governorship of Nemtsov, the division of competences and prerogatives between the regional and the municipal levels of governance was a powerful generator of conflicts. Relations between the two leaders—the regional and the municipal—were in most cases tense and potentially conflictual. Preferring conservative managerial tools, Shantsev looked at municipal authorities as an institution to be subordinated to the unitary control of regional authorities, which explained his consistency in diminishing its powers. This was largely due to his previous vast experience of working in the Moscow government as a centralized administrative system in which municipal authorities were identical to the subjects of a federation. It was in the governor's interest to have a weak chairman of the regional legislature, as well as weak municipal authorities.

In a remarkable imitation of the Putin–Medvedev tandem, Shantsev and Bulavinov tried to form their own political alliance, which was operative for a few years, yet ultimately Shantsev withdrew his support to Bulavinov, since he saw him as a strong political contender deeply embedded in the local political milieu.²⁷ Perhaps the most noteworthy element of this story was the direct public support that Bulavinov received from the federal council of United Russia. In spite of this undeniable power resource, Shantsev's political interests prevailed, and Bulavinov eventually gave up his plans to run for mayor in 2010. This was due to the fact that the majority of the members of the city council (*Gorodskaiia Duma*)—where the vote should take place after the federal center cancelled the popular election of mayors—were on

25. Sergei Potapov, "My sformiruem novuiu elitu," *Newsmaker*, no. 4 (2007): 25.

26. Andrei Dakhin and Andrey Makarychev, "Pervyi god Vadima Bulavinova na postu mera Nizhnego Novgoroda: Otsenki i prognozy," Center for Social and Economic Expertise (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2003).

27. Andrei Dakhin, "Perspektivnye strategii publichnoi politiki gubernatora Nizhegorodskoi oblasti: Analiticheskie otsenki, obshchestvennoe mnenie, tendentsii," in A. Dakhin, D. Strelkov, E. Semenov, A. Makarychev, M. Kazakov, and N. Raspopov, eds., *Sotsial'no-politicheskie resursy ustoychivogo razvitiia v situatsii ekonomicheskogo spada: Regional'nye aspekty v sravnitel'noi perspektive* (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2010).

Shantsev's side. This episode is characteristic of the predominance of local interest groups over the policy of United Russia that, as seen from the local perspective, remained a diffuse and loose agglomeration of economic lobbies and political clans.

The problems existing between the regional and city-level administrations were aggravated by the establishment of a more complicated structure of municipal governance that was divided between the head of city administration (mayor) and the city manager. Shantsev's under-the-carpet battle with Bulavinov cleaned the road to power in Nizhnii Novgorod for a tandem of local tycoons, Oleg Sorokin and Oleg Kondrashov. For Shantsev, this double-headed system of administration permitted him to informally patronize Kondrashov and thus exert some influence over municipal politics. Instead of establishing a system of checks-and-balances, however, a new conflict soon erupted, this time between Shantsev and Sorokin: the mayor started publicly accusing the governor of disregarding the financial needs of the city, mismanaging and impeding lucrative construction projects in the city center, usurping city-level administrative powers, and ultimately of using the infrastructural resources of the city in the parochial interests of the governor and his team. In an attempt to decrease Shantsev's influence in city politics, Sorokin successfully lobbied the city council to dismiss Kondrashov, although he ultimately had to resign himself as well. The new duo in charge of the city was a tandem of Ivan Karnilin (the head of Nizhnii Novgorod) and Sergey Belov (the head of Nizhnii Novgorod city administration), neither of whom might be considered as strong figures with meaningful political capital. Besides, in 2016 Karnilin's reputation was seriously damaged by information about his family's ownership of luxury apartments in Miami, revealed by oppositional leader and corruption fighter Aleksei Naval'nyi.

Karnilin's resignation in early 2017 opened a vacant place at the top of the Nizhnii Novgorod city administration to Elizaveta Solonchenko, Sorokin's protégé, who was considered to generally embody a new type of municipal leadership. "We calmed the situation down and now can think about a new development agenda," she said in one of her first interviews.²⁸ Solonchenko's career was short-lived, however: already in fall 2017, she had to resign due to demise of the Shantsev regime and the ensuing dramatic reshuffle of the whole system of governance in the region.

In these conditions, two trends became visible. First, the game of leap-frog, with fast changing nametags in the city administration, made clear that the contradictions between the two levels of governance are structural and endemic, and do not depend much on who runs the regional government and city administration. Subsequently, there was a growing understanding that it was the repudiation of the direct and popular election for city mayor that constituted a major source of the crisis of leadership. With all due understanding of deficiencies and inconsistencies in the previous models of city governance, many local experts turned their sympathies to "good old days" of

28. "Nizhnii Novgorod—novye litsa v rukovodstve: Kompromiss ili zakonomenost'?" *PolitNN* Web Portal, May 25, 2017, at www.polit-nn.ru/?pt=analytics&view=single&id=4755 (last accessed September 12, 2018).

the Nemtsov-Skliarov tandem as a democratically-legitimate and politically-effective alliance between a governor and a city mayor.

Second, against the tug-of-war between the region and the city, the center of gravity moved to the presidential representative Mikhail Babich, who effectively lobbied for appointing his protégé Roman Antonov as the deputy governor in charge of domestic politics. This appointment increased the weight of the presidential representative in the federal district and, to some extent, balanced Shantsev's power, which was reminiscent of the role played by polpred Sergey Kirienko as a counter-balance to governor Khodyrev. There was very little, however, that the federal power vertical could do to assuage the never-ending political conflict, except displacing Shantsev and removing Sorokin's clientele from power.

New Twists in Identity Discourses: Jumping into the Right Train

Shantsev's governorship was highly indicative of the transformations undergoing in the discourse on regional identity. On the one hand, local political community was always sensitive to the issue of Nizhnii Novgorod's own cultural subjectivity. A "Mera" center report claimed only months before Shantsev was appointed as governor: "Public opinion in the region is critical to the redistribution of property and administrative competences to extra-regional economic actors . . . there is a consensual expectation that the region possesses sufficient human resources, and that the invitation of external figures without due rooting in the local milieu would be considered an undeserved humiliation for Nizhnii Novgorod residents."²⁹ Under Shantsev's rule, many local experts quite pessimistically assumed that "we are going to lose our identity as a city, and in five–ten years from now transform into an urban purlieu of Moscow."³⁰

On the other hand, the Moscow-centrism of identity debates betrays the inherently submissive and dependent status of this region vis-à-vis the national capital. Allegedly, in one of Shantsev's first encounters with people in the streets of Nizhnii Novgorod as the newly appointed governor, one of the local residents approached him with a demand that later became famous: "Make for us a little Moscow up here."³¹ Indeed, under Shantsev, the imitative orientation towards Moscow—economically, administratively, but also culturally—became a core element of Nizhnii Novgorod's identity profile.

29. Sergei Borisov, "Novaia praktika utverzhdeniia gubernatorov," Policy Memo, "Mera" Center Web Portal, 2005, at <https://meracenter.weebly.com/104810891089108310771076108610741072108510801103.html> (last accessed September 12, 2018).

30. "Nizhnii Novgorod budet gluboko provintsial'nym gorodom, poka ne vernët sebe "stolichnost'" v kul'turnom smysle," *NewsNN* Web Portal, June 29, 2016 at <https://newsnn.ru/news/politics/29-06-2016/nizhniy-novgorod-budet-gluboko-provintsialnym-gorodom-poka-ne-vernet-sebe-stolichnost-v-kulturnom-smysle-uveren-aleksandr-prudnik> (last accessed September 12, 2018).

31. Gleb Nikitin poobeschal nizhnegorodtsamne "malen'kuyu Moskvu", a "prodvinutuy agglomeratsuyu" *NN RU* web portal, September 28, 2017, at https://m.nn.ru/news/articles/gleb_nikitin_poobeschal_nizhnegorodtsam_ne_malenkuyu_moskvu_a_prodvinutuyu_aglomeratsiyu/51284581/?from=recommendation_old (last accessed October 28, 2018).

The following opinion of one local expert appears typical: “we need to decide what train we shall jump into. The federal center runs arms production programs, and our region is part of it. Our military-industrial enterprises were always at the top of local industry and procured relatively decent funding . . . The previous strategy of developing Nizhnii Novgorod as a trade-oriented region simply doesn’t work, and we need to gradually write it off.”³² In practice, this represents an appeal to thinking of Nizhnii Novgorod as an economic supplement to federal policies, and downplaying a more autonomous role as an economic crossroads. In a similar opinion, “Nizhnii Novgorod currently faces two options: either we firmly become a resource base of the central state and revive our military industry, or we ultimately transform into a huge Suzdal’”³³—an allusion to a tourist sightseeing town of mainly historical meaning and no industrial importance.

With all due comprehension of Moscow’s upper hand in deciding upon major issues for Nizhnii Novgorod, many local speakers (public figures, including policy experts and journalists) nevertheless engage with a different type of narrative grounded in the revitalization of some components of a distinct regional identity. The idea comes in different versions. One is retrospective. The local community of historians is always keen to underline the pivotal role of Nizhnii Novgorod (a city much older than, say, St. Petersburg) for Russia, both in economic terms (the famous fair in Makarievo) and security-wise (the voluntary armed unit known as *opolchenie* that liberated Moscow from the Polish invaders):

Nizhnii Novgorod is a keeper of Russian statehood. The city was founded for this purpose. This implies both economic and cultural, or spiritual dimensions . . . it was Nizhnii that stood behind the liberation of Moscow from the Poles . . . during the Great Patriotic War each third piece of weaponry was produced here . . . we need to take advantage of the forthcoming anniversary and make Moscow spend federal money not on Chechnia or Tatarstan, but on us as a Russian city . . . this is our bad luck to be a Russian city.”³⁴

Throughout the entirety of contemporary Russia, the spectrum of possible identity politics ranges from consistent accentuation of regional specificity (Tatarstan, regions of Northern Caucasus) to full identification with the newly-discovered Russian national patriotism. Nizhnii Novgorod reinstalls its

32. “Opublikovana stenogramma zasedaniia Nizhnegorodskogo ekspert-kluba 8 iunia, 2016,” *NewsNN* Web Portal, at <https://newsnn.ru/news/politics/14-06-2016/opublikovana-stenogramma-zasedaniya-nizhegorodskogo-ekspert-kluba-8-iyunya> (last accessed October 18, 2018).

33. “Osnovnoi problemoi Nizhnego Novgoroda segodnia iavliaetsia utrata identichnosti, schitaet Evgenii Semenov,” *NewsNN* Web Portal, June 29, 2016, at <https://newsnn.ru/news/politics/29-06-2016/osnovnoy-problemoy-nizhnego-novgoroda-segodnya-yavlyaetsya-utrata-identichnosti-schitaet-evgeniy-semenov> (last accessed September 12, 2018).

34. “Podgotovku k prazdnovaniiu 800-letii goroda obsudili uchastniki nizhegorodskogo ekspert-kluba,” *NewsNN* Web Portal, July 1, 2016, at <https://newsnn.ru/news/politics/01-07-2016/podgotovku-k-prazdnovaniyu-800-letiya-goroda-obsudili-uchastniki-nizhegorodskogo-ekspert-kluba> (last accessed September 12, 2018). 800 years of Nizhnii Novgorod will be celebrated in 2021.

peculiarity through an identity policy based on solidarity with the Kremlin-driven strengthening of unification and centralization to the point of claiming Nizhnii Novgorod's patriotic authenticity. Discussions around the forthcoming celebration of Nizhnii Novgorod's 800th anniversary are indicative in this respect: local experts proposed to create the so called "Minin Center" as a locus of historical and "spiritual" education for the whole of Russia. Based on an alleged story about the first Russian flag raising ceremony in Nizhnii Novgorod in the seventeenth century, a part of the local historians proposed to continue this tradition: "Why don't we use this event as a new starting point? Why don't we propose an all-Russian ritual of national flag raising here, in our city, on a daily basis, with a performance of the national anthem and bells. And each evening, when the flag lowers, Nizhnii Novgorod's anthem can again be performed."³⁵ Therefore, Nizhnii Novgorod appears to construct its identity not through culturally distancing itself from Moscow, but through attempts to symbolically represent the "authentic," "spiritual," "patriotic" Russia. In this endeavor, Moscow is basically portrayed not as a geographic point of distinctive cultural profile, but rather as an economic mechanism of wealth redistribution and a set of bureaucratic institutions in which regional politicians have to lobby their interests. Self-identification with Moscow and simultaneous pretensions to possess veritable cultural capital becomes a complex semiotic game, a set of signs of cultural authenticity allowing the region to perform a representative function.

In the meantime, the dominant discourse on regional identity leaves some room for introducing a few elements of local authenticity (understood in cultural terms) into the homegrown narratives. It is within these narratives that it becomes possible to softly distance oneself from some of Moscow's policies: debates in the NEC in 2014–2017 have shown that Moscow's foreign and security policies (especially in Ukraine, including their repercussions in the form of economic sanctions) are perceived as unfortunate circumstances that complicate regional economic development and "drive the Russian economy to crisis." In particular, sanctions are seen as detrimental for the regional transportation and tourism industries, due to decreasing charter flights to foreign destinations and a falling number of passengers going abroad. Regional administrators seem to be aware that costs incurred by the FIFA World Cup in 2018 (which includes Nizhnii Novgorod along with a dozen other host cities) will cause substantial delays in developing infrastructural projects vital for Nizhnii Novgorod (transportation and health care, for example). Within this discursive framework, positive references to the west keep playing an important role in regional debates, be it constant mentions of the importance of foreign investments and technologies, or the cultural identification with Europe (Nizhnii as home to the largest circus and the longest ropeway in Europe).³⁶

35. "Nizhegorodskii ekspert klub," Youtube, June 29, 2016, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbUwhFyicy0 (last accessed September 12, 2018).

36. "Opublikovano video ocherednogo zasedaniia Nizhegorodskogo Expert-kluba," December 23, 2015, at <https://newsnn.ru/news/society/23-12-2015/opublikovano-video-ocherednogo-zasedaniya-nizhegorodskogo-ekspert-kluba-c1d54ea2-5010-4f22-9af1-bf0d6c7464e3> (last accessed October 16, 2018).

The Fall of Shantsev's Regime

Beginning in autumn 2017, several indirect indications pointed to the deterioration of Shantsev's political positions. In October 2017, twenty of the fifty-member regional legislature appealed to federal law-enforcement bodies demanding an investigation against Shantsev and his deputy, Roman Antonov, who, according to the signatories, used illegal methods to secure the election of Evgeniy Lebedev as the head of the legislature. Importantly, several members of United Russia signed their names under the appeal, which was reminiscent of an earlier open letter to Moscow calling upon the federal center's action against then-governor Khodyrev.³⁷ Against this background, Shantsev's appointment of Lyulin, a close associate of presidential administration deputy head Kirienko, to the post of vice governor, was widely interpreted as an attempt to refurbish the decaying relations with Moscow, although it ultimately did not help.³⁸

In September 2017, Shantsev submitted his resignation to the President, though on many previous occasions his press service had denied that he was resigning. The removal of the governor only months prior to the presidential election and less than a year before the FIFA World Cup attested to the urgency of the issue and Kremlin's dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the region. Apart from his age (Shantsev had turned seventy by that time), the main reason for his de-facto dismissal was his conflicts with a group of local power brokers and tensions with the presidential representative. Putin's choice for a new acting governor—forty-year-old Gleb Nikitin, recruited from his position as deputy federal minister of trade and industry—was a clear indication of President's disdain for the Nizhnii Novgorod political class that in the eyes of the Kremlin discredited itself as much as it did at the end of Khodyrev's rule. The deep reasons for Putin's decision became obvious in December 2017 with the arrest of Oleg Sorokin, who by that time was elected deputy head of the regional legislative assembly. He was charged with using his public job for creating preferential positions for his business associates while attacking competitors, as well as nepotism, embezzlement, extortion, bribery, and even kidnapping.³⁹ Detention of Sorokin was accompanied by an eye-opening investigative documentary titled "The Devourer" that featured public evidence by many local businessmen and politicians of Sorokin's

37. "Oppozitsionnye deputaty ob'edinilis' edinorossami protiv Shantseva," *Klub Regionov* Web Portal, October 3, 2016, at club-rf.ru/52/news/43466 (last accessed September 12, 2018).

38. Sergei Anisimov, "Naznachenie Liulina vitse-gubernatorom—prodolzhenie Valeriem Shantsevym vystraivaniia konstruktivnykh otnoshenii s fedtsentrom," *Vremia* Web Portal, March 30, 2017, at www.vremyan.ru/comments/naznachenie_ljulina_vice-gubernatorom__prodolzhenie_valeriem_shancevym_vystraivaniia_konstruktivnyh_otnoshenij_s_fedcentrom__sergej_anisimov.html (last accessed September 12, 2018).

39. "Biznes-imperiia eks-mera Nizhnego Novgoroda: Chem zanimalisia do aresta Sorokin," *Nastoiashchee Vremia* TV Channel, January 18, 2018, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzsnpjNp1e8 (last accessed September 12, 2018).

mafia-style leadership.⁴⁰ The Sorokin case was a subject of close attention of the national media, which portrayed him as an informal possessor of Nizhnii Novgorod, including its commercial infrastructure and land resources, and an owner of luxury property in Nice.⁴¹ In March 2018, on behalf of Sorokin, another documentary with the self-explanatory title “Rebuttal” was released and presented in Moscow.⁴² Its narrative portrays Sorokin as a patriotic businessman and benefactor, and accuses local law-enforcement agencies of acting in favor of an unnamed group of his detractors.

The story of Shantsev’s resignation and Sorokin’s arrest is highly illustrative. It made clear that Putin’s “re-centralization reform” failed in its core policy areas—in consolidating ruling elites, in fighting regional corruption, and in establishing a functional system of governance within the triangle of federal–regional–municipal authorities. In fact, with all possible resources of federal support behind them, neither governor Shantsev nor polpred Babich could prevent Sorokin’s group from gradually capturing key public positions in the city and in the region via a system of favoritism and informal connections. In his rare public interventions, Babich looked more like a by-stander than a powerful presidential representative, and was more unhappy with Shantsev than with Sorokin: “The Nizhnii Novgorod oblast is perhaps the only region in Russia where the long tenure of the regional administration does not change anything. Moreover, the situation is getting even worse . . . There is a constant war here . . . We don’t understand what type of city management the regional authorities would like to see.”⁴³ This statement only confirmed the failure to build working relations between the regional and city administrations.

Moreover, evidently Shantsev could not be ignorant of Sorokin’s record of illicit activities, and after the latter was arrested, had appealed to law enforcers with a plea for his release, which only raised question of the extent to which the interests of the former governor and the former mayor overlapped, despite their administrative conflict. Against this backdrop, the end of Shantsev’s rule attested to the resilience of institutional deficiencies in the system of regional governance that have not been resolved by Putin’s vertical of power and the policy of administrative centralization. The Sorokin case is the epitome of a “shadow cabinet” that for years ruled the city at its whim and discretion, which ultimately led to the loss of governance in the whole region. Regional elites now have to face exactly the same problems as a decade or two ago: the self-reproducing administrative conflict between two levels of government, the clandestine and largely non-transparent struggle between interest groups with scarcely articulated public agendas, and the

40. “Fil’ m “Pozhiratel” ob Olege Sorokine poiavilsia v internete,” *V gorode N* Web Portal, December 25, 2017, at www.vgoroden.ru/novosti/film-pozhiratel-ob-olege-sorokine-poyavilsya-v-internete-id286245 (last accessed September 12, 2018).

41. “Federal’nyi kanal vypustil fil’ m-rassledovanie ob Olege Sorokine,” *V gorode N* Web Portal, December 24, 2017, at www.vgoroden.ru/novosti/federalnyy-kanal-vypustil-film-rassledovanie-ob-olege-sorokine-id286211 (last accessed September 12, 2018).

42. “Prezentatsiia. Oleg Sorokin. Oproverzhenie,” Youtube, March 23, 2018, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBk6jUwUhgY (last accessed September 12, 2018).

43. “Zdes’ postoiannaia voina,” *Regnum* Information Agency, December 6, 2016, at <https://regnum.ru/news/2214361.html> (last accessed September 12, 2018).

rampant corruption and mismanagement in regional and municipal decision making bodies. Apart from Sorokin, other high-profile legal cases in Nizhnii Novgorod in 2017 included the placement under house arrest of Just Russia Party head Aleksandr Bochkariov and the legal suit against former municipal administration head Sergey Belov. The most widespread refrain in local comments after the advent of Nikitin is that he is expected to return things back under control, which attests to the systemic political crisis not only in this individual region, but in Putin's regional policy at large. All these factors will, in one way or another, be part of the debate on Putin's regime and its regional components in the years to come.

Conclusion: Running in a Circle

Some academic colleagues characterized Putin's regime as one of declining pro-western liberalism.⁴⁴ The study of Nizhnii Novgorod, however, shows that the liberal phase of transition, exemplified by Nemtsov's governorship, was to a large extent grounded in—and contaminated by—authoritarian practices that have qualitatively progressed during Putin's presidency. In Nizhnii Novgorod, political competition did not lead to raising the quality of democratic institutions, and the region was trapped in a series of authoritarian models of governance: from liberally populist (Nemtsov) to patriarchal (Skliarov and Khodyrev) and then to administrative (Shantsev).

One of the conclusions one can draw from this case study is that we should not understand the Kremlin's power vertical too literally, since in such regions as Nizhnii Novgorod it hides a rather competitive if opaque policy milieu. Neither the membership in the ruling party, nor the hierarchical management style of the Kremlin alleviate or mitigate multiple clashes and collisions among the regional elite that are driven by non-institutionalized interest groups rather than political parties. The confrontation between them revolves not around different representations of citizens' interests, but rather around local spheres of exclusive influence and control over federal funds. In addition to that, the competition between the governor and the mayor led to the crisis of governance and paralyzed decision-making.

More specifically, this study illuminated five elements of the regional political regime in Nizhnii Novgorod that might resonate far beyond this region. First, the presidential representative, designed to function as an integrative figure, in many cases was capable and willing to play a role of his own, turning into an additional power broker with his own clientele and political ambitions. This predetermined the unsolvable ambiguity of the figure of polpred: being formally assigned to supervise the application of federal legislation in the regions, he de-facto was conducting a policy of his own, interpreting the so called "federal interests" and having to team up with one group of local elites against another. Secondly, the top-down system of power does not mitigate tense relations between the regional and city-level authorities, which implies

44. Henry Hale, "The Nemtsov Vote: Public Opinion and Pro-Western Liberalism's Decline in Russia," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 69–87.

that administratively the latter are not well integrated into Putin's vertical. Until the present, the legal procedures have been more effective in sidelining and eliminating unwelcome municipal leaders (Bednyakov, Klimentiev, Sorokin) than public instruments, including elections. Third, United Russia is a weak institution to play a consolidating role in regional politics, and party membership does not preclude schisms and ruptures within the ruling elite. Fourth, the appointments of "Varangians" (non-locals) to top positions in the region (Shantsev, Nikitin) feed tensions between "ours" and "Muscovites"; these tensions do not amount to political cleavages, but still are often accentuated in political debates. However, the positions of those who would prefer the region to be run by local cadres are challenged by the inability of the local elite to engender a socially-appealing and functional model of leadership, which the case of Oleg Sorokin nicely illustrated. Fifth, politics in Nizhnii Novgorod—as well as all regional politics in Russia—bears all traits of the trans-ideological collision of personalistic networks. It is not ideological preferences but depoliticized business interests that shape the contours of power coalitions and rivalries between them.

Against this background, it would be fair to claim that the most controversial protagonists of Nizhnii Novgorod politics, from Klimentiev to Sorokin, were not unfortunate exceptions, but represented the essence of the system of governance in the region. As ruthless power brokers, they simply used the opportunities that the system offered in vast zones of indistinction between the public and private, the legal and illicit. This system is resilient to changes in federal politics and self-reproducing: "I am afraid that Nikitin will get a new Sorokin in his inner circle soon," the film director of the "Devourer" documentary said after the ex-mayor was arrested.⁴⁵

It is at this point that regional identity becomes an important factor of the local political milieu. In light of degenerating political management, Nizhnii Novgorod's prospects are increasingly perceived with strong skepticism by a significant part of local political community. The city is often depicted as a de-industrialized urban area with an uncomfortable living environment and bad ecology.⁴⁶ It is also seen as having diminishing traction for its citizens, and is politically bereft of democratic procedures of public participation.⁴⁷ The perception of Nizhnii as losing its authenticity is becoming increasingly vocal in local debates.⁴⁸ The events at the end of 2017 only sharpened a feeling of depression widely felt among local opinion makers and public figures. The following statement made at a NEC session is illustrative:

45. "Gennadii Grigor'ev ob areste Olega Sorokina," Youtube, December 26, 2017, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyrC41aEpE (last accessed September 12, 2018).

46. Georgii Molokin, "Gorod prevrashchen v promyshlennuiu zonu," *PolitNN* Web Portal, August 29, 2013, at www.polit-nn.ru/?pt=comments&view=single&id=3738 (last accessed October 12, 2018).

47. Aleksandr Mazin, "V Rossii s demokratiei pokoncheno," *PolitNN* Web Portal, June 18, 2014, at www.polit-nn.ru/?pt=comments&view=single&id=4259 (last accessed September 12, 2018).

48. Anna Izmailova, "Ukhodiashchii Nizhnii," *PolitNN* Web Portal, July 19, 2013, at www.polit-nn.ru/?pt=trend&view=single&id=3680 (last accessed September 12, 2018).

The contemporary period of Nizhnii Novgorod history is coming to its end. Nizhnii Novgorod is leaving the scene, and at a certain point of the historical spiral, Gor'kii is coming back, a closed, gloomy city with troubled people who tend to forget the past and don't see farther than their noses. The only difference is that the old Gor'kii did understand that it is home to so many strategic enterprises that Moscow would never turn its back on it. Today, unfortunately, this is not the case. Today's Gor'kii can easily be discarded as any other city losing its former glory."⁴⁹

This is the type of political melancholy that became ubiquitous, reflecting the double disappointment of the local political community—with both the democratic experimentations of the 1990s and Putin's re-centralization policies. Direct subordination of the regional authorities to the presidential administration unleashed a narrative of "Muscovites" as a group of external managers who, however, were unable to secure good governance in the region. By the same token, the local political elites were equally incapable of contributing to creating synergies between different administrative institutions, and in many cases produced corrupt and malfunctioning regional practices. The spectrum of federal centers' responses to this troublesome environment is rather limited and includes two instruments—appointing the "right cadre" and selectively using law enforcement tools against those who for one reason or another do not fit in the edifice of power patronized by the Kremlin. The major problem is that this edifice lacks due institutional coherence, and leaves ample spaces for interest groups to systematically exploit its imperfections. This is exactly what makes running in circles an appropriate metaphor to characterize the self-reproducing and never-ending power battles leading to steadily decreasing self-confidence within regional society.

49. "Neupravliaemyi Nizhnii Novgorod," *PolitNN: APN Nizhnii Novgorod*, February 15, 2017, at www.polit-nn.ru/?pt=analytics&view=single&id=4750 (last accessed September 12, 2018).