

# Russian “Federalism”: Illiberal? Imperial? Exceptionalist?

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Relations between the center and regions in Russia, being always in the limelight of attention in political science literature, remain a battlefield of different scholarly interpretations. Several narratives shape the current debate on Russian subnational regionalism or, in very legalistic terms, “federalism.” One is bent on applying to Russia such normatively-loaded concepts as multi-level and networked governance, meta-governance, indigenous governance, civil society participation, and others with strong liberal and institutional pedigrees.<sup>1</sup> In this vein, Russia might be referred to—for example, along with Germany and France—as a “post-imperial democracy,” with an implicit anticipation of the prefix “post-” to signify Moscow’s commitment to a democratic, rather than imperial, future.<sup>2</sup> Seen from this perspective, with all its specificity Russia still conforms to basic standards of democratic rule and therefore can be approached, described, and analyzed in the language applicable to the liberal west, where institutions mitigate controversies over interests and create consensus over rules of the game.

Another group of authors is more skeptical towards the normative underpinnings of Russia’s domestic politics, including the center’s relations with the provinces, and sees this relationship as a never-ending tug-of-war with a zero-sum-game, where the most important question is how much power should be bestowed upon the regions by the federal center.<sup>3</sup> This logic attributes to the regions a role of real or potential challengers to the federal center, which explains the intention of the latter to deprive subnational authorities of their political roles and functions, and reduce their agency to technical / post-political governance. Many authors explain the necessity for redistribution of power in favor of the regions by their specificity (cultural, economic, or locational) and, therefore, by their better knowledge of how local needs should

1. Mikkel Berg-Nordlie, Jørn Holm-Hansen and Sabine Kropp, “The Russian State as Network Manager: A Theoretical Framework,” in Sabine Kropp, Aadne Aasland, Mikkel Berg-Nordlie, Jørn Holm-Hansen, and Johannes Schuhmann, eds., *Governance in Russian Regions: A Policy Comparison* (Cham, Switzerland, 2018), 7–42.

2. Stephen E. Hanson, *Post-Imperial Democracies: Ideology and Party Formation in Third Republic France, Weimar Germany and Post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, Eng., 2010).

3. “Kudrin predlozhit Putinu vernut’ regionam ikh prava,” *Gazeta.ru*, September 23, 2016, available at [https://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2016/09/23/n\\_9144251.shtml?utm\\_source=gazetafb&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign](https://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2016/09/23/n_9144251.shtml?utm_source=gazetafb&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign) (last accessed September 18, 2018).

be tackled when it comes to governance and stability.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, for instance, the issue of reshuffling the territorial borders of the existing regions and federal districts might be regarded not in terms of what Michel Foucault would have dubbed the “rationalities of governance,” but rather as part of the conflictual center—periphery power game.<sup>5</sup> Independent analysis argues that regions can generate tensions and protests over financial issues.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the most radical commentators anticipate an eventual crash of the whole system of the Kremlin’s regional policies in the foreseeable future.<sup>7</sup> The growing number of media articles discussing how Russia can gradually disintegrate, repeating the late Soviet trajectory, attests to the discursive legitimacy of this perspective and its acceptance among a certain part of Russian authors.<sup>8</sup>

Those narratives, being explicitly power-centric, only partially address the core issues pertaining to the foundational characteristics of center-periphery relations in Russia. An exclusive focus on the peculiarities of individual regions might divert attention from more structural problems that the whole system of Russian illiberal federalism faces. The debate on “more powers” versus “less powers” looks at the relationship between the center and its peripheral subalterns as a dichotomy presupposing redistribution of measurable and well-identifiable resources from one power holder to others, without digging deeper into the core of these relations.

The question of power and, hence, of the resilience of the whole system of Moscow’s control over the regions remains open to various interpretations. What lies on the surface is the skepticism of the federal authorities about democratic federalism as a system of checks and balances between the national capital and the local authorities, and the Kremlin’s self-inflicted perception as an omnipotent subject able to govern the whole country as it wishes.<sup>9</sup> The usual claim is that federal control over the regional elites is executed through economic coercion (namely, financial centralization) and manipulation with technical procedures (including administrative appointments, controllable elections, and criminal prosecutions of mayors and governors for corruption).<sup>10</sup> Many analysts presume that the Kremlin always keeps open

4. Konstantin Kazenin, “Kabardino-Balkaria: Skol’ko Stoit Tishina,” Moscow Carnegie Center, January 26, 2017, available at <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=67769> (last accessed September 18, 2018).

5. Evgeniy Khamaganov, “Komu vygodny vbrosy o ‘Baikal’skom krae’?” *ARD*, January 24, 2017, available at <http://asiarussia.ru/articles/14959/> (last accessed September 18, 2018).

6. Alexandr Zhelenin, “V regionakh rasti ot napriazhenie,” *RosBalt*, March 3, 2017, at [www.rosbalt.ru/russia/2017/03/03/1596131.html](http://www.rosbalt.ru/russia/2017/03/03/1596131.html) (last accessed September 18, 2018).

7. Igor Yakovenko, “Monolit nakanune raspada,” “*Posle Imperii*” web portal, November 13, 2017, at <http://afterempire.info/2017/11/13/monolit/> (last accessed September 18, 2018).

8. Vadim Gorshenin, “Kak mozhet raspastsya Rossiya,” *Pravda.ru*, November 22, 2017, at <http://csef.ru/ru/politica-i-geopolitica/326/kak-mozhet-raspastsya-rossiya-8168> (last accessed October 12, 2018).

9. Natalia Zubarevich, “Gubernatoropad. K chemu privediot nyneshnyaya volna otstavok glav regionov,” Moscow Carnegie Center, October 4, 2017, available at <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/73299> (last accessed September 18, 2018).

10. Fabian Burkhardt and Janis Kluge, “Dress Rehearsal for Russia’s Presidential Election.” Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs. SWP Comment 37,

various options aimed at “expanding its contract” with the regions, but is what this contract about exactly?<sup>11</sup>

One way to approach this pivotal question would be to apply the Schmittian understanding of sovereignty as a power of exceptions for studying Putin’s regime. As seen from this perspective, the major resource of the Kremlin’s rule is a legal competence to undertake exceptional measures beyond the existing normative order. In other words, exceptions are a kind of political merchandise that the sovereign trades in the political market, buying loyalties and allegiances of the ruling class, and building on this basis the hierarchy of Russian statehood. The politics of exceptional bargaining over specific privileges is grounded in obvious contradictions embedded in the Constitution: on the one hand, all subjects of the federation are legally equal, but, on the other hand, republics have more rights in particular spheres—for example, they may have their Constitutions and languages (art. 68). Yet, as Natalia Zubarevich has claimed, it would be erroneous to deem that all the so-called ethnic republics get more from the federal center than the non-ethnic units: it is only Crimea, Chechnia, and Ingushetia that have secured for themselves special—and opaque even for experts in financial management—channels of exceptional funding from Moscow.<sup>12</sup>

The Schmittian reasoning presumes that norms are more or less stable and established principles and rules, however, and can be clearly differentiated from their opposites—exceptions. Yet a more scrupulous analysis of Russian domestic politics casts some doubt on the validity of this distinction. What we posit in this small introductory piece is that sovereign power in Russia operates as the supreme ruler’s hegemony over the definition, content, and substance of both norms and exceptions, and thus as a right to decide on where the boundary between them lies. In other words, Putin hegemonized first of all the establishment of a borderline between political and non-political spheres, which is never given, but constantly constructed and reshaped by the will and on behalf of the sovereign power. Within this system of power relations that intentionally blurs and relativizes distinctions between the norm and the exception, subaltern politicians—including regional rulers—have no source of authority to appeal to except the President himself. This is more so as most of Putin’s new appointments in the regions are “technocrats” that the Kremlin started promoting to the highest positions in the regions since 2017.<sup>13</sup> The very model of governorship as administrative and managerial, but not political in any possible sense,

October 2017, at [www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2017C37\\_bkd\\_klg.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2017C37_bkd_klg.pdf) (last accessed September 18, 2018).

11. Maksim Goriunov, “Kak sokhranit’ Rossiyu v eyo nyneshnikh granitsakh?,” *Plan Peremen* web portal, available at <https://planperemen.org/opinion/gorunov/17102017> (last accessed September 18, 2018).

12. Stanislav Zakharkin, “Pochemu dlia regionov plokho chto Chechnia poluchila 12 mlrd spetsdotatsiy,” *URA* Information Agency, January 4, 2018, at <https://ura.news/articles/1036273476> (last accessed September 18, 2018).

13. Andrey Pertsev, “Novaya-staraya volna. Pochemu novye gubernatory-tekhnokraty ne pomogut Kremliu,” Moscow Carnegie Center, February 20, 2017, at <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=68027> (last accessed September 18, 2018).

sustains the political hegemony of the Kremlin and reproduces it at different tiers of the power hierarchy.

It would be erroneous to assume, however, that the hegemony over the regions is grounded in a well-thought out strategic design. It is largely intuitive and based on ad-hoc decisions. Thus, during Putin’s years in power the federal center has changed its policies towards regional elites four times. In Putin’s first presidential term, governors were elected, which was a legacy of the 1990s. Then, from 2005 until 2012, Putin banned gubernatorial elections all across the country, and thus became legally entitled to personally appoint regional higher-ups. From May 2012 through April 2013, the elections were restored. However, in April 2015 Putin amended the legislation to allow regional legislatures to ban elections at their own discretion.<sup>14</sup> This notorious volatility of institutional practices attests to a lack of consistency in one of the core areas of center-periphery relations, and Moscow’s tactics of situational maneuvering rather than a solid rule-based strategy.

In the framework of this academic discussion, all three cases collected in this cluster in one way or another deal with the politics of exceptions as the core of center-periphery relations in Russia. Chechnia is a clear case of multiple political bonuses and privileges granted by the Kremlin to Ramzan Kadyrov’s clan. There are two major issues that the case of Chechnia raises. First, from a legal perspective, it is hard to justify the reasons that would explain why Grozny gets more from the federal center than dozens of other regions.<sup>15</sup> Second, in Chechnia, along with other regions in the Northern Caucasus, such as Ingushetia, local traditions are in conflict with the legal norms of Russia as a (formally) secular state.<sup>16</sup> This is what Julie Whilmheisen explains from the viewpoint of the clan-like structure of kinship rule that constitutes power relations in Chechnia and has been adopted by Russia’s neo-imperial project. She particularly underlines the importance of personal recruitment, direct appointment and informal communication for legitimizing power holders. Therefore, instead of the “vertical of power” announced by Putin, Kadyrov could secure the broadest possible autonomy within Russia, including the possession of his de-facto private army that operates both within and outside of Chechnia. Kadyrov’s relations with Putin have nothing to do with formal rules, and are grounded in personal/family-like loyalty, proximity, and interdependence, which makes the Chechen ruler de-facto immune from federal laws.

Kaliningrad’s story is one of unfulfilled exceptionality that was intensely discussed in the 1990s with an intellectual input from Europe (“the pilot region” idea), but then substituted by the militarization and securitization

14. Sufian Zhemukhov, “Outsiders and Locals: The Kremlin’s Policy of Appointing Governors in the North Caucasus,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, N 222, June 18, 2018: 5.

15. Viktoria Poltoratskaya, “Biudzhetye proboiny,” *Intersections*, February 13, 2017, at <http://intersectionproject.eu/ru/article/politics/byudzhetye-proboiny> (last accessed September 18, 2018).

16. Ramazan Alpaut, “Ingushetiya pokidaet Rossiyu,” *Kavkaz. Reali*, January 6, 2017, at <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/ingushetiya-pokidayet-rossiyu/28217182.html> (last accessed September 18, 2018).

of the enclave.<sup>17</sup> As Miłosz J. Zieliński claims in his article, Kaliningrad is in many respects a distinct region of Russia. Yet discussions of a “supposedly unique German-Russian identity” in this region, or even a “fourth Baltic republic,” look obsolete and outdated nowadays, since Moscow is determined to develop Kaliningrad as its westernmost military outpost and stronghold of Russia’s hard power. A similar trajectory can be also seen in the transformation of the Pskov region from a pioneer in trans-border cooperation to one of the most militarized EU-Russia/NATO-Russia borderlands.

The political trajectory of Nizhnii Novgorod, in its turn, included a significant amount of exceptional treatment of the regional elite by Boris El’tsin’s administration in the 1990s. In his contribution, Andrey Makarychev shows that in his capacity as the governor in Nizhnii Novgorod, Boris Nemtsov enjoyed preferential treatment from Moscow—from what was later acknowledged as the de-facto illegal cancellation of the mayoral election (where Nemtsov’s opponent won the ballot), to boosting Nemtsov’s reputation as El’tsin’s probable successor (which had little to do with procedural principles of democracy, especially in light of the multiple irregularities in the 1996 presidential campaign).

All three cases also demonstrate the complexities of Moscow’s dominance over the regions and the varied degrees of bargained autonomy that the Kremlin leaves to subnational units. This collection of articles is illustrative of different policies that the federal center uses as tools for keeping the regions on a short leash and securing their allegiances. One such instrument is the widespread practice of appointing non-local/extra-regional administrators to gubernatorial positions, who then operate as federal lobbyists for “their” regions (be it Nizhnii Novgorod or Kaliningrad), rather than as public leaders of regional communities. Lavish financial flows to the provinces is another tool in Kremlin’s hands. Chechnia is not the only example of this sort; the promotion of regional specificity for the sake of receiving material advantages from the federal center works well in Tatarstan, a region that preferred to bargain with Moscow for economic, cultural, and political benefits in exchange for performative loyalty, over the option of building an ethnic nation.<sup>18</sup> Large-scale nation-wide projects, including Innopolis (Russian replica of Silicon Valley), the Moscow-Kazan high-speed railway, and the special economic zone in Alabuga may attest to the efficiency of Kazan-Moscow pragmatic symbiosis for the region’s financial sustainability and economic development. And, of course, as the FIFA 2018 World Cup demonstrated, Moscow is instrumental in promoting and advertising regions on a global scale. Again, Tatarstan seems to be an illustrative case of taking advantage of hosting a series of sportive mega events of high international visibility, including the Universiade in 2013, the World Aquatic Championship in 2015, and the FIFA Cup in 2018.

17. Artiom Filatov, “Okno v Evropu prikryvaetsa,” *Intersections*, August 29, 2016, at <http://intersectionproject.eu/ru/article/russia-europe/okno-v-evropu-prikryvaetsya> (last accessed September 18, 2018).

18. Jurii Alaeu, “Tatary vseгда umeli razgovarivat’s Kremlem,” *Ura.ru*, July 24, 2015, at <http://ura.ru/articles/1036265420?from=incut> (last accessed September 18, 2018).



For their part, regions come up with a diverse toolkit allowing them to maneuver within the general policy framework established by the federal center. Some of these maneuvers failed to pave a way toward some kind of regional autonomy—such as in the case of Kaliningrad oblast, which in the 1990s played intense identity games with Europe—ultimately being fully subordinated to the Kremlin’s recentralization policy. In other cases—such as in Nizhnii Novgorod oblast—attempts to positively distinguish the region from a group of “typically Russian regions” were mostly symbolic, ultimately ending upon a narrative of Nizhnii as a net contributor to Russian collective security and survival. This was achieved through the high symbolization of the historical merits of Kuz’ma Minin and Dmitrii Pozharsky, the key figures in repelling the Polish aggression during the Time of Troubles in the early seventeenth century, and through its economy, especially the famous Makarievo Fair that earned the region a reputation as “Russia’s pocket” to Nizhnii. In other cases, such as Chechnia, the narrative of salvaging Russia takes much more radical form and is explicitly actualized through Kadyrov’s iterations of his resolve to militarily protect Putin from domestic and external foes.

The examples of Nizhnii Novgorod and Chechnia, with all the drastic dissimilarities between them, seem to highlight an interesting phenomenon: some regions, being either unable or unwilling to challenge the Kremlin’s hegemony, venture to portray themselves as indispensable pillars of all-Russian conservative identity and as co-sponsors—if not progenitors—of the crux of Putin’s imperial and anti-western rule. By so doing, they sustain the self-reproducing illiberal momentum that has become a universal signifier of today’s Russia despite, again, the obvious cultural, ethnic, and religious gaps between the regions. The case of Chechnia is particularly paradoxical in this regard: the local government in Grozny intentionally translates the Islamic/Muslim authenticity of this region into a huge boost to Putin’s project of social conservatism and traditionalism. Being in some respects, “more Catholic than the Pope,” Kadyrov has developed a two-track policy: he legitimizes the particularity of his fief by tightly connecting it to the overall illiberal frame of Putin’s regime. This two-pronged policy is conducive to transforming Chechnia from the status of the peripheral troublemaker of the 1990s to a central component for the Kremlin’s power.

The rich empirical material collected in this cluster gives us good food for thought for discerning the subtle forms and mechanisms of hegemony embedded in Russian subnational regionalism as a field of paradoxical combinations of centralization and autonomy, unification and diversity, ideology and post-political administration. The proverbial “vertical of power” obviously does not embrace the entirety of meanings enshrined in relations of unity and alienation constitutive of Russia’s illiberal federalism. When it comes to rebranding Russia through such mega events as the FIFA World Cup, cultural diversity is a selling point; yet in terms of governance (including cultural politics) Moscow is by and large more reliant on quelling the most politically-consequential sprouts of the regions’ individuality. The whole experience of the post-1991 transformations in Russia clearly attests, however, to the policy of exceptional deals and bargains as an indispensable instrument for governing the provinces. The problem is that the hybridity that the edifice of

center-periphery relations in built on—with both formal and informal instruments playing equally important roles—might be sustainable in the case of, metaphorically speaking, “good weather.” Any weakening of Kremlin’s power and grip over the regions, as well as any symptoms of conflicts and, moreover, crisis within the ruling regime will immediately reverberate in the regions and re-actualize all the trouble points in the construct of Russian regionalism. In that case, it might happen that the center will become more dependent on regions than currently, and that the definition of the norm will be decided beyond Moscow.