

# The Regionalization of Autocracy in Russia

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Despite the clear progress in Russian democratization at the federal level, the trend appears to be in the opposite direction at the regional level, a movement spearheaded by the Federation's constituent ethnic republics. This trend is likely to continue since Russian central power is weak and because local autocracy gives local leaders greater power on the federal stage since they have greater power to deliver votes in federal races. The implications for Russian political development are significant. First, the most promising Russian political parties are likely to emerge primarily as coalitions of key regional leaders. Second, since agricultural regions are easier to manipulate politically than urban ones, rural regions are likely to grow in their political clout. Third, since the ethnic republics are leading this trend, their influence is likely to be great enough to defeat attempts to limit their power in the short run. Western policy can work to counteract the shift in power to local autocrats, but only at the margins, with a series of initiatives targeted specifically at Russia's 89 regions. The regionalization of autocracy may not be all bad, however, since in the long run it may actually provide foundations for a stable, competitive democracy in Russia.

## **The Consolidation of Ethnocracy**

Since Communist rule collapsed in 1991, Russia has directly elected its president and (twice) its own parliament in competitive, multiparty elections. The outlook for democracy at the local level in Russia is more mixed, however. The Russian Federation consists of 89 constituent "members of the Federation," although unlike the states in the US federal system, these members (often called regions) are not created equal. The most important distinction is between the 32 members that are formally recognized to be the "homelands" of ethnic minorities and the 57 that do not have this distinction. The "non-ethnic" members include oblasts, the major cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, and a few krais; the distinction between oblasts and krais (always fuzzy) has largely been lost in the administrative reshuffling that followed the collapse of the USSR. The "ethnic" members are named after their ethnic group(s) and are subdivided into three categories. "Autonomous okrugs" and "autonomous oblasts" (the differences between the two are negligible) are the lowest-ranking categories; while they are recognized as members of the federation, they are located within and are subordinate to an oblast or a krai, although Russian legal scholars debate the degree of subordination involved. The "republics" are the highest-ranking ethnic units, fully independent of any oblast or krai. For the sake of simplicity, below I will refer primarily

to republics and oblasts, since these are the most important and most numerous ethnic and non-ethnic units. When I use the term "region," I am referring to the category that includes all members of the Russian Federation.

One major difference between oblasts and republics is that throughout the first half of the 1990s, the Russian President had the right to appoint the heads of executive power in the oblasts ("governors") but not the heads of executive power in the republics ("presidents"). With a few exceptions, then, governors tended to be appointed while presidents were elected.

Democratization appears to be spreading fast in the oblasts. In 1995, Yeltsin ordered that all governors must stand for election, although he delayed the bulk of the elections until after his own presidential reelection in Summer 1996. This injection of political competition caused many incumbent governors to lose their posts, as is the hallmark of a strong democratic system.

Russia's full-fledged republics (which make up 21 of the 89 members of the federation) have been moving in the opposite direction, however. Tatarstan, for example, has never held a competitive election for its own presidency, President Mintimer Shaimiev carefully ensuring that he faced no rival. Bashkortostan and Kalmykia represent an even more worrisome phenomenon; they began with relatively competitive presidential races, but instead of fostering an increasingly democratic environment, their leaders have actually reversed these "democratic" gains, cracking down on opponents and gutting local elections of any real choice.

In Bashkortostan's December 1993 presidential election, its incumbent leader, Murtaza Rakhimov, erected a series of formidable barriers to any opponent seeking to enter the race, only to watch in surprise as one scrappy banker, Rafis Kadyrov, managed to jump through all of the difficult hoops. Kadyrov had the willpower and the resources (including his bank's own newspaper) to make this a real race, although Rakhimov managed to rally his core constituency against him, in part by skillfully controlling the rest of the local media. From this experience, Rakhimov learned not that he could fight and win a truly competitive race, but that he should have been more careful in making sure that no serious candidate could oppose him in the first place. Thus, in 1998, Rakhimov achieved the removal not only of Kadyrov, but also two other major candidates from the ballot. He wound up facing only a loyal token candidate who actively campaigned for Rakhimov and was unsurprisingly trounced on voting day.

Kalmykia provides another example, where the dynamic businessman Kirsan Ilyumzhinov upset a prominent local bureaucrat to become the youngest head of a republic in Russia in April 1993. Instead of facing competition in a reelection bid, however, he ran unopposed in 1995, and has since ensured that no opposition candidates make it into his legislature.

What seems to be being consolidated in these republics, then, is not democracy but an ethnically exclusive autocratic system of machine politics that political opponents have called "ethnocracy."

### **Reasons for the Trend**

There are several reasons why the republics might be leading such a trend. First, there is the logic of ethnic machine politics. Soviet-era affirmative action programs left politicians from the titular (or supposedly "native") groups in power in most of these republics even where these titular groups make up a small minority of the population, as in Bashkortostan where Bashkirs constitute just 22 percent of the population according to the last Russian census, taken in 1989. These ethnic groups have extra reason to hold tightly to the reins of local power so as to minimize their chances of being exploited by other groups (notably Russians) in the future. In addition, even many ethnic Russians have come to accept the Soviet-sanctioned dictums that the titular ethnic groups have a special status in their "homelands," an acceptance that reduces the willingness of Russians and other groups to resist ethnocratizing regimes.

Second, republics have traditionally enjoyed more autonomy than have their non-ethnic counterparts. The most important republics, notably Bashkortostan, Tatarstan and Sakha (Yakutia), have received significantly greater formal federal tax exemptions, for example, than have other members of the federation. Their special legal status also gives them cause to believe they can "get away with" more than leaders of the oblasts.

Third, and most worrisomely, the republics might be leading the regionalization of autocracy because they have more experience with Russia's Yeltsin-era electoral institutions. While the vast majority of Russia's oblast governors were not popularly elected until 1996, almost all of the republics had directly elected presidents by the end of 1993. Thus many republics have now had two presidential elections, and prominent examples show that they have used the time in between to refine their skills as machine politicians, learning how best to manipulate the political process so that no opposition figure has a realistic chance to win office.

This third possibility is worrisome because it suggests that the key lies not in the "ethnic" nature of the republics, but simply in a learning process that is appealing to any region, be it a republic or an oblast. Leaders have not been learning how to contest elections more effectively, but how to thwart them. Societies have not been learning how to be more "civil," but have tended to remain passive.

The leadership skills that are acquired do not involve the outright abolition of democracy, but instead its denuding of meaningful content. This does not necessarily involve blatant fraud, but rather more subtle ways of influencing how people vote. They find excuses to shut down critical local media and even to minimize access to federal newspapers in the more remote areas. They apply special pressure on rural areas, where access to information is more easily controlled and where villages can be punished for "unwise"

votes by withholding critical services or products that are otherwise hard to get. They can manipulate local electoral rules and commissions so as to exclude a threatening candidate on the basis of a technicality in collecting the signatures needed to get on the ballot or by setting entry requirements so high that only someone with state backing could possibly clear all the hurdles. The better the incumbent is at manipulating the media and discouraging local opposition (or by simply doing a good job), the fewer of these techniques he or she will need to employ. Several oblasts have apparently learned these skills quickly, as their incumbent governors have won elections with votes of over 90 percent, as in Orel and Moscow.

### **Why Regional Autocratization is Likely to Accelerate**

This trend is certainly not universal, however, even among the republics. Individual governors certainly matter, and if they refuse to strong-arm their opposition, they can successfully promote local democratization. Indeed, some regions already appear to have developed democratic traditions, and some leaders have proven unable to cow their constituents into submission. For example, one of the most well known autocratic governors, Primorsky Krai's Yevgeny Nazdratenko, tried to strike an undesired candidate from the Vladivostok mayoralty ballot earlier this year, only to find that over half of the voters responded by choosing "none of the above" when they went to the polls, thereby invalidating the election. Even some republics have held relatively democratic elections. In fact, Chechnya continues to be one of the most democratic Russian regions, although it has for most practical purposes seceded from the federation. At this point, then, one can certainly not say that all regions have followed the trend towards local autocratization. In addition, the same political forces that have caused democracy to advance in Russia in the first place (including people's widespread belief that they deserve the right to choose their own rulers) will continue to push for democratization at the local level.

Nevertheless, the regionalization of autocracy is likely to accelerate in Russia for three critical reasons.

*Demonstration effects.* Republics like Bashkortostan, Kalmykia and Tatarstan, as well as non-ethnic regions like Orel, have shown that subverting local democracy is possible and have developed techniques that other regional leaders can learn to improve their own chances of success.

Weak central government. Not only have the leaders of Bashkortostan, Tatarstan and Kalmykia shown others that electoral engineering is possible, but they have also demonstrated that they can get away with it without interference from federal authorities. Kalmykia violated federal law by holding an uncontested presidential election, yet authorities let the election stand. The Russian Supreme Court did rule that Bashkortostan had unfairly excluded two opposition candidates, yet the government has taken no action to enforce this decision. Indeed, showing that he knows where real power lies in Russia, President Boris Yeltsin congratulated Rakhimov on his victory after it took place. In general, this federal inaction is likely to encourage other governors who might have

worried about violating Russian law. So long as Russia's central government lacks the capacity to enforce its own laws, therefore, the autocratization of the regions is likely to continue.

*Passive populations.* The Russian people have shown little propensity to take to the streets to protest the denial of democracy, a passivity that can be reinforced by skillful machine politicians.

*The desire for power on the national stage.* Regional governors not only derive local political benefits by consolidating their own positions, but they also make themselves much more important players on the federal scene since they can sell themselves as the most efficient deliverers of votes in races for national office. If a presidential candidate has limited resources to apply to gaining votes, it makes sense to invest them in those regions where the returns to ruble invested are highest. In turn, the potential rewards from being part of the winning presidential coalition are likely to spur regional leaders to compete with one another for the reputation of being the best able to deliver the presidential vote, that is, the reputation of being the most authoritarian.

### **The Impact on Local and Federal Elections**

Regional leaders are unlikely to abolish democratic institutions outright, since they derive some benefit from presenting a democratic veneer and since they don't want to risk going so far that the federal government feels it has no choice but to intervene somehow. Some local leaders may have reason to fear a local popular backlash if they cracked down too hard. But since methods far short of abolishing elections are sufficient to ensure their control, regional leaders will likely hone their skills in the manipulation of them instead.

They are likely to apply their greatest efforts at regional gubernatorial and presidential elections, since these are the elections on which their personal power most depends. To the extent local legislatures can thwart executive initiatives, regional autocrats are also likely to strengthen their grip on these organs, although allowing a token (and largely media-mute) opposition may serve the purpose of enhancing the veneer of democracy at little political cost. Federal races will prove harder for the new "little Stalins" to manipulate since much of the competition will take place in national media that are harder to regulate locally.

*The Duma Elections.* Half of the Russian Duma's members are elected on party lists in a system of proportional representation while the other half are elected in territorial districts where candidates do not have to belong to political parties. Regional leaders are likely to have the hardest time controlling results of the "party list" half of the parliamentary voting, since party totals are calculated nationally and much of this competition takes place in the national media. Local machine politicians may prove able to raise the vote totals for friendly electoral blocs by pressuring rural regions and employing a major local media splash, but it will be difficult short of outright fraud to produce overwhelming results.

In the territorial district half of the Duma voting, regional leaders have proven best able to influence the most rural constituencies. Thus in Bashkortostan in 1993, Rakhimov-approved candidates won in the five (out of the republic's six) electoral districts with the greatest rural populations. The remaining district, in the capital Ufa, elected Aleksandr Arinin, the leader of the local anti-autonomy and ethnic Russian movement (and one of the candidates illegally excluded from the 1998 presidential race). Whereas in 1993 Rakhimov's team was resigned to letting Arinin win, it campaigned hard against him when he ran for reelection in 1995. Despite these efforts, however, Arinin managed to win reelection in this urban constituency where he had had time to build up a localized power base. While their control is not perfect, therefore, autocratic regional leaders will be in great demand as "gatekeepers" for political parties wanting to score electoral successes in the parliamentary balloting slated for 1999.

*The Presidential Elections.* Boris Yeltsin clearly recognized the power of regional executives to deliver the vote in his 1996 reelection effort, and increased autocratization of the regions is likely only to strengthen the power of the regions to deliver the presidential vote locally. Control will not be complete, of course, since the federal media will be able to circumvent much local influence and since important opponents are likely to find at least some supporters in most regions. Nevertheless, the strongest regional leaders will be able to counteract many of these efforts, especially in the rural regions. If these strong regional leaders are allied with an incumbent federal leadership that successfully controls major media outlets, this counteraction may not be needed in the first place.

### **Implications for Western Policy**

The West can do several things to prevent the regionalization of autocracy in Russia.

- Strengthen central power and the rule of law in Russia. This is easy to say but impossible for the West alone to do. Nevertheless, programs aimed in this direction may help on the margins.
- Actively promote the media infiltration of the regions. The West can step up and support initiatives promoting objective local media. Most effective would be a set of Radio Liberties with regionally specific coverage broadcasting from outside the region. A similar television initiative would help greatly, but would be very difficult to realize.
- Add "degree of democratization" as a criterion for targeting Western region-oriented aid. We have 89 regions to choose from, and some competition along these lines might sway leaders that are wavering between their democratic instincts and other political pressures.
- Support the efforts of Russian political parties to build strong regional organizations. If Russian parties can build strong organizations in virtually all regions faster than governors and republic presidents can consolidate control over

their regions, the roots of local political competition will have already taken hold and will be harder for regional autocrats to remove. Western advisors should work to discourage Russian party leaders from the all-too-common tendency to neglect the building of local party organizations.

- Encourage more rigorous international election observing. Observers should spend time getting to know the region they are covering or should be experts on the region. This may help at the margins by giving local autocrats bad press by providing at least some public criteria for assessing levels of regional democratization, criteria which would then be used to determine where to direct investment support or pro-democracy initiatives.
- Target international aid to the regions generally. This is desirable since the most immediate threat to Russian democracy today lies at the local level. In this regard, support for regional civil society is very important.

### **Implications for Russian Political Development**

While the autocratization of the regions should be resisted since it will be to the detriment of the people in these regions who are denied the right to oust bad leaders and who are likely to suffer other human rights abuses, the longer-run implications may not be so bad.

#### *Parties as coalitions of regional leaders.*

The greatest danger of regional autocratization is that the local political machines will all jump onto the bandwagon of a single national-level presidential candidate or party, effectively ending meaningful electoral competition in Russia. Rivalries between ambitious regional leaders, divergences in the economic interests of regions, differences in the political outlooks of their governors and presidents and the ongoing weakness of central authority in Russia, however, all mean that there will still likely be political competition at a national level even if all local leaders succeed in becoming little autocrats. Strong political parties may then coalesce as coalitions of primarily regional leaders tied together by either a common political orientation or common ties to one influential candidate or government official. Parties, then, may come to Russia from the "top" down rather than from the "bottom" up. Regional interests rather than individual level interests or pure ideological appeal may become the foundation of the emerging Russian political party system.

#### *Enhanced republic influence in the short term.*

Since the republics are leading the way to autocracy, not the oblasts, and since the republics have extra incentive to do so due to their ethnic character, they may become leading vote brokers in the next presidential race, if it is a close one. The republics are thus likely to be in a very strong position to thwart plans currently circulating among the Moscow elite to curtail the power of the ethnic republics, either subsuming them under new non-ethnic macroregions or simply downgrading their status. Republic leaders can also be expected to ensure that their Duma delegations are loyal to republic autonomy, meaning that the next Duma is likely to contain a stronger pro-republic lobby. In the

shorter term, one should look for Prime Minister Primakov to reverse his decision to include only governors of the non-ethnic regions in the Council of Ministers Presidium, especially if Primakov himself decides to run for president.

*More clout for agricultural regions.*

Since leaders tend to find it easier to manipulate the vote of agricultural communities than urban ones, we should expect agricultural regions to gain more influence in federal politics than they now have. While urban centers will remain critical due to their larger populations, the autocratization of the regions will work to redress this imbalance somewhat since agricultural regions will be more efficient in delivering votes.

*Long-run stable democracy?*

The regionalization of autocracy may actually strengthen Russian democracy in the very long run (i.e. after several decades). Coalitions of like-minded regions are likely to form parties which will eventually gain enough strength to try to expand into other parties' core regions, which will mean renewed competition at the local level. The recent shift of the US Democratic Party's formerly "Solid South" to the Republican Party and the erosion of machine politics in Chicago and New York show that this is possible after a long period consolidating regional power bases. Democracy, therefore, may just come to Russia through the "back door" of competition between sets of authoritarian regions.