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RUSSIAN FEDERALISM AS A RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Despite the centralisation of government in the 2000s, the problems of Russian federalism still engage the minds of experts in and outside Russia. The tonality and areas of study have of course changed substantially. While in the 1990s they focused on the development and improvement of federalism and the introduction of innovations, including Western experience, in the 2000s the focus shifted to the processes and causes of federalism's curtailment, its relevance, its prospects in Russia being called into question and alternative models of territorial state structure being discussed. After a year of work, participants of this project have come up with a vision of the problems of Russian federalism in its various dimensions, i.e. political, legal, economic, etc. Regional participants have contributed their own vision of what is happening to Russian federalism.

In summing up the project results, the experts' discussions and the materials they amassed, one can conclude that Russian federalism is indeed a complicated and controversial phenomenon and that the formation of a stable system of relationships between «the centre» and «the regions» in Russia is unfeasible. Obviously, this is a special case in practicing both federal relations and centralisation, which, incidentally, combines features that can be found in many different countries. Herein, arguably, lies Russia's peculiarity, which often stems not so much from the development of autochthonous political institutions as from a fanciful combination of borrowings and their adaptation to Russian realities. Russian federalism is a research challenge because it is hard to find a priori effective methods of its study, and that puts questions of methodology in the foreground.

Russia's uniqueness springs from its vast space. The spatial factor determines regional policy's critical importance in developing optimal models of relations between the centre and the regions. The relevance of the theme of federalism as the distinct form of organising political space comes above all from its vast territorial reaches. The diversity of Russia's expanses, in terms of culture, economics, etc., dictates a medley of approaches that the

centre uses with different regions. Hence the abiding need for a flexible federal policy and the improvement of local self-government. In practice, federalism and local self-government make it possible to create a more flexible model of spatial-political organisation adapted to various territories' requirements. It has to be noted, however, that regional diversity in Russia is not as great as one might expect, considering its vast space and lags behind, for example, many large Asian and, to some extent, African and Latin American states. Therefore, while «the burden of space» in Russia's case is real and makes regional policy important, the moderate degree of regional diversity makes the need for a flexible policy and miscellaneous approaches less urgent, and indeed such a need may even be deliberately suppressed.

Thus, twenty years after the USSR disintegration and emergence of a new Russian Federation from its ashes, scholars are still not sure whether federalism is Russia's destiny. Nor does it provide a universal answer to the country's problems. Given the huge territory and considerable social diversity in it, two opposite models of power are theoretically possible, with one taking account of all the heterogeneity and the other seeking to squash and assimilate it. Federalism, being a flexible model, may be useful in that it alerts to and reflects regional problems, which paves the way for harmonisation interests and reducing the risk of making patently ineffective decisions.

It is important to bear in mind that federalism is not a unilateral focus on relations between the centre and the regions. The federal system is a political state that arises when there are certain stable social sentiments and well-calculated state policy. Russia has many obstacles in the way toward establishing such a federal system.

Russia's past shows that it has failed to devise an ideal model for a territorial state structure; the forms of federalism that were taking shape after the break-up of the USSR and appeared to offer a strategic option turned out to be flaccid and short-lived. In Russia, the federalist ideology that could have provided the basis for such a strategic choice is feeble and fragmentary. The country's leaders no longer refer to our state being a federation, although Russia is a

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federation de jure under its constitution. The centre does not seek to work out a model of Russian federalism at the conceptual level while it does seek to design and make a case for «special» forms of Russian democracy, such as «sovereign democracy». A federal mentality is slow in taking root in society and the ruling elite.

As a result, Russia does sense the importance of the principle of subsidiarity, which implies devolving decisions to the lowest practical level. On the contrary, there is a drive now to concentrate power and economic resources, as well as control the lower levels of government. This type of political system, which harks back to the times when Muscovy was emerging as a centralised state and when the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were built, is dominated by the principles bureaucratic hierarchy rule, a vertical power structure that downgrades the regional aspects of policy and curtails regional independence.

Discussions on federalism's legitimacy in Russia have a long history that goes back to the early 19th century. Their substance remains the same to this day after idiosyncratic Soviet federalism and then new Russian federalism vintage of 1990s discredited themselves. Federalist social-political thought in Russia is very heterogeneous. One of its strands, going all the way back to the Decembrists movement, can be described as liberal as it draws on the United States' experience and advocates devolution of power to the territories. It has preserved its relevance to this day, and indeed some of its ideas were introduced into political practice in the early 1990s. The other strand can be described as leftist. Over time, as far back as the 19th century, it broke from the liberal strand and eventually materialised into the historical experiment called Soviet federalism, which was based on the territorial division along ethnic lines. Federalism was an important part of anarchist thought, but that hardly matters today.

It is interesting to note, however, that within each of the main ideological trends in 19th century Russia and that are relevant to this day there are internal divisions over the issues of regional politics, federalism and centralisation. There were advocates for the unitary state among the Decembrists. The conservatives as a rule adhered to the principles of a «one and indivisible» Russia and advocated a

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policy of assimilation with regard to other peoples and religions. Yet within the conservative thought there were those who advocated federalism as a union of friendly Slavic and Orthodox peoples.

Meanwhile, Russia's political practices usually favored various modifications to the unitary model and sometimes limited decentralisation. All federalism advocates, whatever their ideology, sought to reform the existing order. This is true even of the ruling elite that introduced projects for changing Russia's state system. Not surprisingly, their projects were rejected by supreme power. Russian history has been largely one of a unitary state which suppressed regional communities and their diversity through the institutions of power, education, the church, etc. Remarkably enough, Soviet federalism, which was an attempt to radically change the imperial order, was quickly curtailed and molded into another version of what was essentially a unitary state.

The history of the Russian and later Soviet unitary state brought about major changes in country's territorial structure by dramatically reducing regional ethnic and cultural diversity. For example, uniformity was imposed on the vast Russian ethnic territory as sub-ethnic differences disappeared and territorial identities were diluted. The Soviet period saw a new level of Russification of non-Russian peoples. Thus, in practice Russian and Soviet unitarism was a «self-sustaining» system that diminished inter-regional differences and contradictions which in turn weakened the case for the federal model. So powerful were its history and inertia that Russian federalism of the 1990s quickly petered out.

Thus, there is clearly a lack of consensus in society, among the elite and experts on Russian federalism, its historical and ideological roots. Over the decades the ideas of reforming Russia along federal lines have time and again been met with «material resistance», that is, the established political institutions resistance based on the principles of hierarchy and the concentration of power, bureaucratic control, cronyism, corrupt practices, etc.

Present-day Russian federalism is a bizarre phenomenon. On the one hand, it has been influenced by the borrowing of Western political institutions. On the other hand, post-Soviet federalism took shape through concessions to Soviet-era national

autonomies, where demands for greater independence were fueled by a surge of nationalism and growing ambitions from ethnic bureaucracies. The reform process in Russia failed to produce a consensus on the model for a new democratic federalism.

The study of Russian federalism should take into account its genesis. Regional policy in Russia is a function of the changing political system and should always be viewed in the broader political context. In other words, federal relations in this country are not an independent political institution that evolves in keeping with its inherent logic, but, on the contrary, are a dependent variable which can only be studied along with the study of overall systemic change. Federalism in Russia depends entirely on the evolution of the political regime (especially the processes of democratisation and the choice between majority and consensual government, the latter of which is more typical of federalism). It hinges on the model of the state and the bureaucracy, geopolitical strategy and the perception of national security (because in the conservative frame of reference the regions are often perceived as threats to national security).

It is essential to note that Russian federalism is partly a rudiment of the Soviet era, where the first federal experiment was made. Modern Russia has preserved virtually unchanged the territorial administrative structure and constituent entities. It has sustained the former ethnic-territorial entities, notably the republics which in the Soviet period had a higher status than a territory (*krai*) and a region (*oblast*) and lent Russian federalism an asymmetric character. Only now are the ruling elite being joined by a generation with no work experience within the Soviet system. Genetically linked to the ruling elite are the typical practices of centralised state control of society, the economy and subordinate territories as well as the supplanting of legitimate institutions by informal practices and cronyism, a trend that has become more pronounced in the post-Soviet period. All this contributes to the inertia of Russian federalism that links it to the Soviet era, its features and the limitations they impose on federal relations.

At the same time, Russian federalism is a project associated with the time when the USSR was disintegrating, i.e. extremely expedient. In the early 1990s the constitutional design was forged gradually (the

1992 Federal Treaty, 1993 Constitution, the treaties with Tatarstan and other regions) through horse-trading between the centre on the one hand and the elite in the republics and some politically active regions on the other. It was a formula for the preservation of the state's unity on condition of the centre's limited interference in the regions' affairs and the regional elite's loyalty to the centre. In other words, it was an interim pact among the elite rather than a long-term project. Furthermore, during the early 1990s federalism was perceived as a temporary political compromise and «the lesser of two evils» compared with the disintegration of the country, but nonetheless as an «evil» fraught with insidious risks for the country's territorial integrity. This makes the idea vulnerable as witnessed by the fact that when the threat of Russia's disintegration receded in the 2000s, the value and usefulness of federalism were automatically put into question, thus paving the way for a return to a unitary state structure.

Finally, Russian federalism is to a degree an innovative liberal-democratic project based on the use of Western, notably American and German, experience. To that extent Russian federalism functioned within the same logic as Russian democracy, i.e. it implied gubernatorial elections and the general development of regional self-government on the basis of elections. Furthermore, like other federations in the world, Russian federalism implied vesting the regions with all the powers that did not expressly belong to the centre or were not included in the sphere of joint jurisdiction and the existence of the «regional chamber» in the shape of the Federation Council within the national parliament.

Methodologically, the combination of Russian federalism's three elements — «inertia», «expediency» and «innovation» — precludes the use of standard methods of study, above all those perfected by political science with regard to the USA and other Western federations. While formally the political institutions may resemble Western ones, in reality they distort and transform them, change their essence so that it does not correspond to the name and the outer shell. From a historical point of view such federalism is unlikely to last long: inertia wears off, the situation changes and Western innovations are rejected by much of the population and the establishment. This accounts for the crisis of Russian federalism and the vagueness regarding its new foundations.

It has to be stressed that in such conditions federalism acquires an instrumental rather than an ideological character. Its functioning is increasingly determined by the current interplay of political actors. This is where the cardinal difference between the «expediency-based» federalism of the first half of the 1990s and the centralisation of the 2000s comes to light. It makes the real institutional characteristics in the relations between the centre and the regions in all dimensions (managerial, financial-economic, socio-cultural, etc.) highly sensitive to the shifting alignments of forces within the ruling elite. One may go on declaring the state's federal character, but the political institutions may be totally at odds with these declarations, which is why their study and the institutional approach to Russian federalism are far more important than the legalistic approach.

In fact, from the theoretical point of view, the instrumental character of Russian federalism does not rule out its invigoration and the strengthening of its institutions. It could fit the description of the managerial approach to federalism, whereby ideological principles are secondary and may not matter at all, while the organisation of power and delimitation of powers between its levels, theoretically the main feature of federalism, come to the fore. By trial and error, the Russian state in the 2000s, casting away federalist rhetoric, is now mulling over how to make the bureaucratic machine's organisation at all levels more effective. A massive effort has been mounted to assess regional and municipal authorities' effectiveness. In determining what is and what is not effective, the Russian bureaucracy is beginning, albeit to a minimal degree, to follow the subsidiarity principle and abandon the unilateral approach to centralisation allowing the devolution and even restitution of some powers to the regions. To put it another way, the central authorities have soon become aware that total centralisation does not work and hence, though they find the ideas of federalism alien, they are not entirely «hopeless» in terms of the managerial approach to federalism.

On the whole one gets the impression that in the near term the future of Russian federalism is associated not with democratic regional self-government and gubernatorial elections, but with more effective delimitation of power between the centre and the

regions and social and economic management. «Managerialism», however, has substantial limitations that are not all connected with preserving the bureaucratic hierarchy in relations between the centre and the regions — a mandatory and even ritual requirement — which will in any case restrict regional autonomy. For the federal centre the devolution of power means above all «relieving» itself of «superfluous» (i.e. unduly burdensome), less significant and possibly «socially dangerous» functions (i.e. those that may trigger social protest when mishandled). In other words, the centre seeks to shift social responsibility to the regional authorities and preserve the current situation when the local authorities are typically less popular than the central authorities. On the other hand, by resorting to «manual control» and keeping strategically important functions in its hands, the centre will always retain the powers that are financially more important and shore up their legitimacy.

From the methodological point of view the managerial approach to Russian federalism puts within its purview an assessment of the effectiveness of power, analysis of federal and municipal governance, and a three-level (centre-region-municipality) rather than two-level system, i.e. takes into account the problems of local government. The quality of regional government is clearly lacking, as witnessed by the assessment of its effectiveness and the public's attitude toward regional governors. Abandoning gubernatorial elections has not improved the quality of regional governance. Moreover, the centre is to some extent interested in having weak governors because they facilitate centralisation.

It should be noted that the range of powers vested with the Russian regions is «normal» for a federal state. Practice has shown, however, that the delimitation of powers between the centre and the regions under the constitution is too general and is not detailed enough. The law has loopholes that allow for substantial centralisation of power, especially for vesting the centre with key strategic functions. It is true that the centre is interested in delegating secondary powers to the regions in order to make the whole system of authority more efficient, but then this is normal for federalism, especially for its centralised varieties in other countries.

What is holding back the regions much more is the concentration of the Russian economy and financial-industrial groups, both in terms of how this concentration is organised and how taxes are appropriated. Most regions are unable to fulfill their mandates and pursue pro-active social and economic policies at their own cost, so they increasingly depend on the centre and have no incentive for independent development. As a result, though the range of powers may be «normal» for a federated state, the regions are unable to exercise these powers. The municipal entities are in an even worse case. Thus, the concentration of financial and economic resources at the higher levels of government and in a few territories precludes effective and relatively independent functioning of local government in the vast periphery occupying the greater part of the country, making federalisation hardly possible without an economic upsurge in the provinces.

Generally speaking, one must admit that centralisation has reached its limit in terms of regions' mandates and their financial support. A radical change cannot be achieved without genuinely closing the gaps in the regions' social and economic development, and that can only happen in the long-term historical perspective. At the current stage, the transfer of powers and resources to the regions «in general» will not diminish polarisation and will further strengthen the «rich» regions, which hardly makes sense. Instead, there is a growing need for a more flexible and differentiated economic policy of the centre, one distinct from recent years, which saw policy directed at imposing a one-size-fits-all pattern of relations with the budgets of all the federation's constituent entities.

General discussions as to whether federalism in Russia is real or exists only on paper are apparently of little use; such discussions tend to be scholastic. Like in the case of democracy, where it makes more sense to speak about a continuum stretching between two poles, i.e. the ideal types, and mention the different dimensions of the phenomenon, each allowing for a different situation. For example, centralisation in Russia is higher in the political-administrative dimension than in the financial-economic dimension linked to the regional authorities and budgets. Obviously, Russia is not a classic federation and is fundamentally different from Western federations. Neither, however, can it be called a typical

unitary state which is more common in compact and homogeneous countries. Russia is somewhere in-between, combining elements of federalism and unitarism in proportions that vary depending on the political situation, including the relationships between the individuals in power and public opinion.

The degree of federalism's development in Russia and its measurement is a complicated and debatable matter. First, it depends on how independent the regional authorities are and that in turn means the range of its powers, the potential for exercising them independently and whether top regional officials are elected or appointed from above. Second, the character of relations between the centre and the regions, i.e. the practices and how they relate to the institutions of federalism known from theory, is important. In other words, the actual practices of concentrating and transferring power (subsidiarity), the vertical hierarchy and equality of different levels, the relationship between diktat and dialogue, etc. The assessment process must take into account at least two dimensions: the political-administrative and the financial-economic. Obviously, the 2000s saw Russia shift significantly towards a unitary state, but elements of political federalism survive and may grow stronger in the future.

The specificity of the Russian model of territorial-state structure also presents a methodological problem, namely, to what extent, if at all, can foreign experience be used. The massive borrowing of federalism's legal institutions from the West that influenced the Russian Constitution of 1993 and the laws passed in the first half of the 1990s laid the foundations for the potential new model of Russian federalism. Limitations stemming from the centre's desire to control the regions, however, were there from the beginning. For example, the introduction of gubernatorial elections had been postponed over several years and regional administrations in the territories, regions, the autonomous region and autonomous districts created an elite that was loyal to the centre and was one of the pillars of the new ruling class. In the wake of the 1993 elections, many of the Federation Council members were appointed bureaucrats and the Council from the outset represented the political and business elite first and the regions second. This was doubly so considering the prevalence of informal practices,

cronyism, corruption, manipulation of laws and double standards, all of which invested the borrowed institutions of federalism with new content. Above all, they came to be used in the formation and structuring of the Russian elite to ensure its representation, behind-the-scenes approval of its group interests, to gain and hold on to power and property. For all these reasons it would be a mistake to study Russian federalism proceeding from legal documents, although it is easy to do by using Western scientific methods.

By contrast, there is a greater need for comparative study of Russian and other types of «non-Western» federalism, in particular in Asia (for example India), Latin America (considering some similarities in the evolution of political regimes) and Africa. A study of the experience of federative relations in non-liberal countries, for example, in present-day Venezuela, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates and so on would be interesting. So far, however, such comparative analysis has not been pursued, although there is much greater need for it than for a comparison between Russia and Western federations. In the future such comparative analysis is likely to produce and foster other methods for studying federalism.

The experience of the «rise and fall» of new Russian federalism also prompts the need to study the reasons for the feebleness of regional and federative elements in Russian politics. As mentioned above, historical processes in Russia tended to promote the formation of political institutions that were essentially the opposites of federalism. Formally, Russia is divided into 83 constituent entities. In reality, the question as to what exactly are the constituent entities of federalism remains unclear. There is some justification to the view that the real constituent entity of federalism is part of the expert community, ethnic and liberal elite, i.e. it is clear that such a constituent entity is heterogeneous and politically weak. The true subjects (constituent entities) of the Federation that are willing and able to press their interests are few and far between. They include Tatarstan, the Chechen Republic, and, perhaps, that is all. Their federalism, like in the Soviet era, is based on the quest for ethnic autonomy.

Simultaneously, limitations of various kinds and provenance are very much in evidence. They include the rudimentary state of social federalism (in general federalism in society, i.e. the develop-

ment of horizontal links and contractual social relations have hardly been studied in Russia at all). The evolution of post-perestroika society clearly led to its atomisation, the dominance of individual principles and small groups, and the low degree of social consolidation for political action. By contrast, subordination and hierarchy, i.e. vertical political practices, are better understood and more habitual for such a society and the authorities at all levels, and not only at the centre, owing to the shared political characteristics of the ruling class that seek to reproduce and demonstrate these practices, partly for intimidation and sometimes resorting to force. Social federalism that could spring from local self-government and the organisation of social movements is fragmentary and deliberately suppressed by the authorities.

At the social level one also notes the dilution of territorial identities which could have provided the basis for the subjects of federalism leading to the emergence of politically active subjects of the Federation as territories. Experience shows that territorial identities may be formed even under present-day conditions, albeit more often than not the regions are under pressure that neglects their identity, or through the central authorities' propaganda efforts. At the same time, territorial identities are not politicised enough to provide a basis for stable political consolidation, for action.

If one follows the rationalist interpretation of political relations, which assumes a conscious interest on the part of the subjects of the Federation, there too one finds «gaps» and «drawbacks». Regional interests, like identities, do exist and cannot be discounted. For the most part, they have a social and economic character and are connected with certain outstanding local problems. The challenge here is to translate regional interests into political action. For example, a similarity of interests may lead certain regions not to unite, but to vie with each other for resources required to promote these interests. For various reasons the regional authorities are not prepared to promote all these interests in relations with the centre or in their own autonomous activities because they are afraid of the centre, are short of resources, dominated by selfish interests, etc. Society for its part does not have sufficient opportunities to influence the authorities at all levels and is incapable of

creating pressure groups that are able and ready to exert systematic pressure on the authorities.

Both these socially characteristic problems are connected with regional identities and regional interests that make it necessary to study Russian federalism in the context of society's political culture. Such features of political culture as social apathy, undeveloped horizontal links, the inclination to accept official paternalism and to bow to the authorities prevent the regional communities from being politicised, without which federalism is impossible.

Meanwhile, the relations between different levels of power are marked by the weakness and lack of confidence in putting forward regional initiatives. «Vertical» politics makes regional initiative more dangerous than following the directives of the higher levels of authority. Effective governance comes to be understood as effectively fulfilling assignments set by one's superiors. Therefore regional authorities prefer to fulfill the centre's directives and copy its actions within the territory by creating their own vertical power structures and strengthening control over society.

Both society and the power elite are short of horizontal interaction that bypasses the centre. The shortage stems in many ways from the spatial characteristics that in theory could provide the basis for federalisation. The large spaces that are sparsely and unevenly populated, the endemic problems of communications and roads, however, are not conducive to local unification between communities and regions. Even the regions are very unevenly populated and their internal transport and communications infrastructure is far from ideal. Perhaps, in the historical perspective the introduction of the Internet will go some way to solve this problem by changing the technology and structure of interaction across Russia, and consolidating society at the group level regardless of the physical distances. But that is still a long way away. Hence the importance of the centre as the unifying element which cannot but yield to the temptation of centralised control over the territories, regarding this as its historical mission of preserving Russian statehood.

Contractual relations hardly exist at the regional level, as has been witnessed with regional and urban associations formed in the 1990s. As for the other type of horizontal relations — competition

— it, of course, exists because regions vie with each other for depleted resources. At the present stage it is hard to say whether such competition is good for federalism in the historical perspective. At present, competition depends on the centre, which makes the chief decisions for distribution the main financial resources made available to the regions for certain programmes and projects or as subsidies, and decides which territories should be given special status, such as special economic zones. The free competition model between regions does not work because the regions themselves do not have enough resources and initiative for independent development.

Given the current situation, it is not surprising that neither society nor the elite have an image of a new Russian Federation. The interest of most of the elite in preserving the status quo goes hand-in-hand with the problem of the Russian regions' political identity. Consciousness within regional societies of their own interests is a serious problem. Regional identity that unites territorial communities at the social level is weak, diluted and not sufficiently politicised. Under these conditions the development of the phenomenon that is political regions is characteristic of a minority of constituent entities in the Federation. The above reasons make the Russian regions amenable to regimentation and uniformity for which the impulses come from the centre. Demands on the part of ethnic regions are more politicised, but they are determined by nationalism and may run counter to strengthening the central state and forming a civil nation. That is why rudimentary ethnic federalism cannot provide an answer to the current problems.

Territorial asymmetry is important in assessing the state of Russian federalism. From a legal point of view, a symmetric federation has by and large been formed. It is unclear, however, whether this process should be considered to be an end in itself. Be that as it may, while the Soviet-era map of Russia's administrative and territorial division has remained, the status of republics and other regions has been evened out, compared with the former RSFSR, while the republics, as sources of ethnic federalism that carry certain risks, were stripped of their exclusive position within the Federation. At the same time, if one looks at the range of regional powers, formal asymmetry has, on the contrary, increased in the

21st century in heterogeneous constituent entities of the Federation, because the powers of the autonomous areas within them were cut in favour of the regions (*oblasts*). Therefore, the centre's policy can be regarded as consistent only inasmuch as it concerns the equalisation of the status of regions that had greater powers, which is in line with the centralisation principle.

Russia has made considerable progress on the way towards implementing the principle of equality among the subjects of the Federation. The commitment, however, to achieving a higher level of symmetry within the Federation, which in practice boiled down to reducing the republics' status to ordinary regions, created the need to adjust or abolish the «non-standard» negotiated delimitation of powers between the centre and the regions that confers a special status on certain regions.

The new uniformity of the subjects of the Federation downgraded the former national territorial autonomies, marking a gradual departure from Soviet ethnic federalism. By the same token it made the centre's policy less flexible. Formally, the Constitution does not preclude the practice of individual agreements between the centre and the regions on delimitation of powers, but it is hardly ever used (the only exception is the treaty with Tatarstan, which is largely symbolic). The problem, nevertheless, is not the treaties but the departure from standard practices in relations between the centre and the regions in favor of legislative guarantees for practices that take into account the specificities of the regions and groups identified on ethnic, economic or geographical grounds. Even under present-day conditions, the central government has to use a differentiated approach to the regions by deciding, for example, where to create special economic zones, on what cities to confer the status of a science city» or company town, how and for what purpose to finance various territories. These practices, however, are disorganised and somewhat chaotic. In the future it may become useful to consciously identify different groups of territories, both regions and municipal entities, on the basis of various characteristics to organise interaction and vest the territories with specific powers that correspond to these specificities. Such a flexible policy may apply to regions created in the Soviet times on the basis of ethnicity in order to determine their potential and limita-

tions in education and culture. What is also very important is that such policy will be more transparent.

In the meantime the main problem in the relations between the centre and the regions that creates actual asymmetry is informal privileges that enable certain regions to wield political influence and have economic opportunities much greater than other regions. Actual asymmetry within the Federation is inevitable because of the cronyism between central and local elite; their activity and the amount of resources they dispose of effectively confer a special status on certain territories. Such practices form an interesting subject of study and can hardly be eliminated. Of course they need to be balanced out by more transparent practices for allocating resources and authorities to territories on the basis of their «objective» characteristics. Under the current conditions this merely increases polarisation, because the rich regions and St Petersburg, the latter of which is home to most members of the Russian elite, are in a privileged position. The policy with regard to the periphery is not structured and remains secondary, although the provinces have resources and, if openly ignored, may present risk of social protest.

Relations between the centre and the regions, and the proper combination of symmetry and flexibility, as referred to above, are far more important for Russian federalism at the present stage than the question of changing the political and administrative map. It is not accidental that high-ranking bureaucrats, on the contrary, pay more attention to «fiddling» with administrative entities than to changing the procedure of «top-down» relations. In essence, that makes it possible to divert attention from more serious problems by putting the insignificant issue of the number of regions and their enlargement on the agenda. All the same, the Russian Federation's composition is changing slightly. An important challenge is the meaning and rationale for changing the Federation's composition, which takes us back to the problem of the image of the new Federation. The laws passed in recent years addressed the «mechanical» task of reducing the number of constituent entities of the Federation and liquidating the weaker national-territorial entities, i.e. autonomous areas, and the problem of heterogeneous regions of the Federation created under the 1993 Constitution.

Unfortunately, these laws did it slowly in a way that sparked conflicts. Dramatically enlarging the regions or any other drastic change to the country's administrative map contradicts the interests of the ruling class not only in the regions but in the centre, because the central elite need to rely on regional elite. The elite that have taken shape in Russia are fairly conservative when it comes to the composition of the subjects of the Federation, even though they appear to take steps to optimise this composition. In reality, the question of a new political and administrative map for Russia can only be raised and solved in conjunction with a new definition of Russian federalism.

Let us now consider the political and administrative dimension of Russian federalism by first focusing on the formal institutions of power. The prevailing organization of power in the regions and the centre at present is more in line with the model of a unitary state. The institution of regional governors poses a problem in the system of federative relations, since an optimal format has yet to be found. The political strife over whether governors should be appointed or elected stems from the institution of governors being critically important within the regional political systems; abolishing gubernatorial elections dealt the hardest blow to Russian federalism. It violated the basic principle of federalism, namely, a developed and effective regional government. Today, we are witnessing a new trend having to do with a certain «liberalisation» of the procedure for appointing governors compared with the previous period of 2005-2009. The regional legislature, however, still has a limited say in appointing governors. Political parties have come to play a bigger role in gubernatorial appointments, but this role is curbed because there is no true multiparty system, but rather a single-party state where United Russia plays the dominant role. Special attention should be paid to inter-party relations and the centralisation of the process for nominating candidates within the each party. It is a measure of the centralised way in which governors are appointed that candidates for governor often have no connection to the regions where they serve or have long left them to work in Moscow. Accordingly, the system for fostering professional cadres who know the situation on the ground is defunct.

The prospects for transforming the institution of governor in line with federalism standards are very rocky and so far the most likely option is to adjust the existing procedure or continue adhering to it over a long period of time with, at some point, a review of the results. The federal centre and the head of state would not gain anything from reverting back to gubernatorial elections, because it would make it more difficult to have loyal governors and create a clientele, processes that are critically important for organisation elections in the interests of the ruling class.

With a transition to gubernatorial elections unlikely, other branches of power, as well as the evolution of the party system, take on particular significance for Russian federalism's well-being. The legislative branch today is the only branch in the regions that is popularly elected; it plays an important role in ensuring regional representation at the federal level. In practice, the State Duma has become more important for that purpose than the Federation Council. The independence of the legislative branch in Russia, nonetheless, is very limited both functionally and due to the dominance of United Russia. The strengthening of Russia's parliamentary government and its autonomy could be very important for federalism's revival, but it is unlikely under the present political regime.

The party system, dominated by United Russia, is an important constraint on federalism. The consolidation of the elite within one party and centralised party control that are in some ways reminiscent of the Soviet times contribute to centralisation. Having said that, the situation within the dominant party is in many ways similar to the situation within the Federation, i.e. there may be conflicts between the central leadership and the regional branches, competition between various groups, etc. Even so, real movement toward decentralisation is possible only if competition between parties increases, which in turn is impossible without a rise in protest sentiments in society and a loosening of administrative pressure during the course of election campaigns and vote counting. Most recently there have been signs of these trends appearing and the Russian President initiated some decisions that mark a small step toward greater party pluralism. These changes, however, are not significant enough to shake United Russia's dominance in federal and regional legislatures. Still, one cannot rule out the emergence

in the future of some regions where United Russia does not fully control the way deputies vote. This, however, will not change the status quo unless a genuine system of checks and balances is formed between the branches of power.

Within the federal legislative branch the Federation Council has never attained the status of «regional chamber». The Federation Council's founding in 1993 was an important novel development in Russian federalism. But in practice it turned out to be an unstable body, since the principles shaping it have repeatedly changed and continue to be changed. The Federation Council has been the subject of massive, informal centralisation, as shortly after its reform the representatives of Moscow's political and business elite gained the majority. The formation and structure of the upper house is less dependent on the regions than on the policy of the presidential administration, the government, the capital's financial and industrial groups and the leadership of the Federation Council. A senator's responsibility to a region is still a chief question which is more important in practice than having regional roots. The result is that there is no authentic regional representation in the federal parliament and that the Federation Council does little for the regions. Both the State Council and the Council of Legislators are strictly advisory and formal bodies that need their powers to be extended and their status to be more clearly defined.

The prospects of Russian federalism depend on still unsolved issues involving the autonomy of legislative and judiciary branches. In Russia the single federal judiciary is heavily dependent on the executive branch. It is hard to imagine the decentralisation of the judiciary system patterned on that of some foreign federations that would create a special regional level of the judiciary system. There is also the risk that regional courts would be even more dependent on the executive branch and become subservient to governors. Therefore, a concerted effort at creating the regional judiciary is less important today than making it more independent of the executive branch as a whole. The Constitutional Court, an important instrument of federalism, is not contributing to promoting federative principles in Russian politics.

Thus, the formal power institutions in Russia in their present shape are not conducive to the development of federalism. The institution of elected governors ensured a measure of regional independence, but now that governors are appointed and not elected, that is no longer the case. The legislative and judiciary branches' dependence on the executive branch merely strengthens the vertical power structure, as does the party system with one dominant party.

Under these conditions federative relations depend to a critical degree on the actions of informal political institutions. On the one hand, centralisation is deeply embedded in the Russian state system. On the other hand, the inevitable multiplicity of political actors in Russia prevents rigid and complete centralisation. Political institutions interpreted as conscious practices of interaction among actors may limit or prevent centralisation in the Russian context.

Leaving aside legal federalism that makes it obligatory to view Russia as a federation, the main research focus is shifting toward relations between actors and the structure of these relations. What is crucial in Russia is harmonising interests and hammering out decisions considering the inevitable multiplicity of political actors in such a large geographical space. The institutionalisation of relations between actors may evolve toward more or less mono-centrism, i.e. towards various limitations in the number of dominant actors at all levels. Absolute mono-centrism, however, is impossible. As a result, the centre, even if it seeks total and all-out control, is in practice obliged to coordinate its positions with regional actors and in many cases make decisions under their pressure. The most powerful regional actors may gain control over certain decisions of the centre and its structures by using corrupt methods to put these decisions through and otherwise leaving their footprint. This is borne out by the centre's experience with Chechnya, Tatarstan, St Petersburg, Moscow and so on. This is also evidenced by many gubernatorial appointments made from the centre.

On the strength of the above, it would be methodologically not quite correct to consider Russian federalism only in accordance with the «managerial» model that looks at parallel levels of power and the relations between them, including the delimitation of pow-

ers and organisation of government at every level. Such methodology appears to be suited to Russia, which sees attempts to create a bureaucratic hierarchy and in recent years has been steadily working on legislation and polishing legal norms. But reality often takes the shape of polycentric interaction between a multitude of actors who formally belong to different levels but are not necessarily in relations of subordination because of that. Such «polyarchy» appears to be more characteristic of Western societies where the pluralistic theory of democracy (Robert Dahl et al) and the concept of «non-centralisation» as applied to federalism (Eliezer) were developed. In reality, hierarchy in Russia is combined with the relatively equal harmonisation of interests and in some cases with regional actors determining the centre's policy. These features manifested themselves under far more authoritarian and centralised regimes, for example, in the Russian Empire and in the USSR, which lend themselves to an alternative interpretation of the specifics of the relations between the centre and the regions that does not fit into a rigid hierarchy.

Thus, the evolution of formal federalism toward a significant degree of centralisation in Russia may be combined with actual informal federalism based on institutionalised practices of interaction between the elite. The centre's commitment to imposing an a priori hierarchy on these practices is obvious, but it can never be fully implemented. One should also keep in mind that, owing to their origin, the central elite simultaneously are proponents of certain regional interests.

The study of informal federalism prompts a full investigation of the role of the elite in Russian federalism and the changeable system of patron-client relations. If anything, it is the most important area of study because, while not making other areas irrelevant, it gives greater insight into what is happening to Russian federalism. Although the process of decision-making in Russia follows the laws of hierarchy, public and shadow coordination of interests between different groups of the elite and personalities at all levels and between levels is extremely important. In some cases the interests are coordinated through subordination, while in other cases alliances spring up among actors in various points of the Russian space who hold various political positions and those who are shad-

ow actors. Conflicts of interest often arise with actors both at the centre and in the regions expressing open resentment and often succeeding in having their way. In many cases, regional actors have been able to uphold their positions despite pressure from the federal officials. Even the edicts of the country's president and the government may be disobeyed in the regions without any negative consequences for their leaders.

The study of Russian federalism must take into account the relations between business and government, both public and shadow, including corrupt practices. It would be wrong to presume that business is subordinate to government. On the contrary, business elite are able to promote their interests at all levels, though, of course, to various degrees and in accordance with various procedures. It is not enough to consider only the «centre-regions» relationship, rather one should always be aware of the triangle «power elite of the centre — power elite of the regions — business elite».

In addition, the system of relations among actors implies the formation and functioning of political lifts when, for example, certain regions become incubators for members of the elite at the centre and in the regions. There is a certain rotation within the elite when its various members move from the regions to the centre and back. This practice has lately become more orderly due to the creation of personnel pools, the appointment of governors, etc.

The regions' representation at the federal level, which is crucial for any kind of federalism, is largely informal in character. Ultimately the effectiveness of regional representation at the federal level depends to a large degree on the effectiveness of informal inter-group and interpersonal relations between political leaders at the centre and in the provinces, mainly within the executive branch. The problem is that such relations usually favour the largest regions or unique problem territories, such as Chechnya, whereas the interests of «weak» regions and the periphery are not represented and are not protected. Given such practices, some regions tend to enjoy ever greater privileges, thus deepening the polarisation of Russian space. On the whole, regional influence has clearly diminished, while the formal structures of regional representation,

as distinct from pressure groups, are passive and at best can amend some of the centre's decisions.

Thus, the federal system exists at the informal level and needs further study. Its analysis overturns the simplistic idea of a hierarchy between the bureaucracies at different levels. To sum up, what we are observing in Russia is partial adaptation and a significant distortion of the institutions of federalism that, as a rule, had been created within other political and historical contexts and in other countries. The question as to whether a national Russian model of federalism can and needs to be created remains moot. So far we can talk merely about a specific version of federalism that combines its formal features with informal practices and rigid centralised control. One has to admit that the prerequisites for federalisation in modern Russia are fairly limited, and not because of the building of the vertical power structure and other temporary developments. It is true that Russia's uniquely large size makes effective and fully centralised government impossible and dictates the devolution of power and the development of self-government. At the same time, an awareness of regional interests, the extent of interregional differences and the level of civic activity are low or average, making it possible to pursue a centralist policy that is met with little resistance.

There are other serious limitations that tend to reinforce the centralisation trend. The need to implement more profound social and political reforms usually calls for a higher level of centralisation. Another pressing need is in evening out social and economic disproportions that can also only be accomplished with the centre playing the key role. Nor should one ignore the problems of national security. The limited competence, conservatism and abuses by the local governing elite are a real problem.

It is necessary to finally determine the definition of Russian federalism. In Soviet history federalism had a definite meaning that provided a territorial and political form for the synthesis of national and social revolution while preserving statehood within roughly the same borders as those of the Russian Empire. Post-Soviet federalism did not have such a profound historical meaning and was above all a form of democratisation within the same territorial system consisting of the same regions. Federalism interpreted as a

historical unification of territories was more important for a USSR created on the ruins of the former Russian Empire. Federalism interpreted as the unification of national-territorial entities steeped in Soviet tradition hardly has a future too. It cannot be scrapped, however, without the risk of ethnic and political conflicts and an upsurge of nationalistic movements. Russia has departed from that form of federalism, because, for the majority of inhabitants in the republics, that status has no meaning. Russian laws do not envisage any socially significant rights for regions that are determined by the population's ethnic structure. Actually, such rights and the concomitant asymmetry could be sealed in legislation, albeit not as the basis of Russian federalism.

The new Russian federalism, like local government, can become part of the process of democratising the political regime and effective decentralisation of power. So far it has been hampered by the process of the formation of the new ruling class that the central authorities seek to control and thus ensure its unity and subordination.

Transition to socially effective federalism that implies unification of territories for more effective tackling of common problems with a higher level of self-government in addressing internal tasks is unlikely to be swift.

What is important at the present stage is to determine the minimum requirements for Russian federalism that make it possible for institutions of federalism to be used properly and to bridge the gap between theory and legal norms, on the one hand, and practice on the other. For example, the minimum requirements may include:

- «making regional authorities more immune to abuses and manipulation on the part of the centre, which cannot be achieved without restoring the institution of gubernatorial elections. It implies a clear definition of the criteria and limits of federal interference and sanctions, an enhanced role and independence of the regional legislator in electing governors.
- «making members of the Federation Council responsible to their regions, which is more important in practice than having been born or worked in the corresponding region.

- «the spread of more flexible contractual practices for vesting regions with powers depending on their specificities.
- «eliminating duplication of the functions of regional authorities and territorial branches of federal executive bodies, with the former given priority over the latter during staff cuts.

The diagnosis of the state of Russian federalism as a whole is not comforting. Its social, historical and ideological foundations are weak. The regional level is underdeveloped politically. Unitarian practices are easily and quickly revived as a result of purposeful efforts, as witnessed by the developments in the 2000s. At the same time, informal practices are not necessarily centralised or organised in accordance with the norms of the power hierarchy. That paves the way for informal federalism based on the interaction of members of the elite but incapable of balancing the relations between the centre and the regions and benefiting a very limited number of territories.

Under these circumstances, one can endlessly criticise the centre for curtailing federalism, but that diverts one from the study of the problem, in our opinion. It is far more important to understand the structure of the centre in the Russian system and the way it functions. The Russian centre has a fairly rational structure that tackles simple tasks of forming a governable system of relations, but acting mainly ad hoc and reacting to the changing situation. The curtailment of federalism was a rational political decision. As shown above, federalism was not destroyed totally, a decision that was prompted by fairly rational considerations because it has political flexibility that makes the vertical power structure more effective and because informal relations among elite are partly of a federative character based as they are on coalitions and contracts and not being strictly mono-centric.

The solution of some important current political questions in Russia through reform does not require a «full-blown» federalism that complies with the theory and models of other countries that have been more successful in building federalism. In the Russian context federalisation is most closely related to democratisation, because in the 1990s federalism Russia became part of the democratic project and later a victim of its failure. Even more important for Russia's democratisation, however, is the development of local self-

government and the multi-party system, while federalism, as history attests, can lead to the creation of hermit authoritarian regimes. Therefore, democratisation and federalisation in Russia must go hand-in-hand, something that was not the case in the 1990s.

Federalism is not a necessary precondition for modernisation and may indeed be an obstacle. Setting aside the arguments over the meaning of the concept of modernisation, let us say that any large-scale reforms can be implemented faster and more effectively in a centralised state. That is why the theory of federalism often stresses that the need for reforms may prompt centralisation, whereas regional government is usually perceived as more conservative and hide-bound so that regional autonomy may prevent progressive change. This was the reason why the centre abandoned the practice of electing governors in the early 1990s for fear that such elections would bring opponents of reform to power.

Similarly, managing remote regions, given the vast space of the country, may be based on central control or on self-government. Remote regions usually need the support of the centre in development that can only be organised from the centre.

Finally, Russia's territorial integrity can be achieved through various methods. Federalism offers a more flexible approach, while centralisation offers a more rigid one. But the meaning of that process lies outside the framework of the choice between federalism and centralisation. The fundamental goal is to form the Russian civil nation.

Thus, federalism in Russia is one of several possible instruments for solving certain political tasks. It can hardly be regarded as an end in itself and a «sacred» value, as something inevitable and critical for Russia, certainly not in its classical form. This study has tried to show that elements of federalism were present in Russia at various stages in its history, that they exist today and will manifest themselves in the foreseeable future. But the same holds for elements of the unitary state.

The fate of federalism in Russia, if not in form then in essence, is closely linked with other political institutions, trends and currents. They include local self-government, parliament, the multi-

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party system, civil society, tax policy, strategy for spatial social and economic development, reform of the judiciary, etc. The future of federalism in Russia depends on the evolution of the political system and the political regime as a whole. It depends not only on internal processes, but also on Russia becoming involved in globalisation. In that case Russian territory will become a multitude of subjects of multi-level management and political interaction not concentrated at the federal level and not limited to the authorities.

Speaking about the state of federalism in Russia, it is important to bear in mind the situation with local self-government. Russian legislation does not prevent the building of inter-regional vertical power structures, because the autonomy of local government does not exist in practice. Meanwhile, given the general characteristics of the political regime in Russia, local self-government follows the same rules of the game and is anything but «an island of democracy». This has been true of local self-government in Russia ever since its inception. A change of that situation, however, could have a positive impact on the state of federative relations in Russia. First, it would ensure a transition from the two-level system of relations (centre-region) to a more complicated and flexible system of «centre-region-municipal entities» (with the latter on two levels, and indeed the centre also having two levels, considering the existence of federal districts). Second, it would make civil society more active and stimulate democracy.

Arguably, federalism is not the organising link in the Russian political system, its foundation or reference point. Most likely, the principles of federalism should be introduced to ensure greater flexibility of the political system in the political and economic reforms that the country needs. Perhaps in the long historical perspective it would mean a return from «selective» to large-scale and all-embracing federalism that would be consciously accepted by society.

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