

# Putin's presidential representatives: one year later

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**In** May 2000, President Vladimir Putin made significant changes to the federal system in Russia.

He established seven federal districts to encompass all of the 89 constituent units of the federation. He then appointed seven "Plenipotentiary Presidential Representatives" to be accountable to the President for the interests of the central government in each of the districts.

Many observers—in Russia and abroad—were concerned about the nature of these reforms. They feared that the changes would weaken the federal character of Russia, centralizing power in the hands of the President and his appointees.

Many argued that it was not by chance that the majority of Presidential Representatives previously served in the army or other military forces—where they would be accustomed to obeying the orders of their superiors and issuing commands to their subordinates.

Although President Putin's decree did not empower Presidential Representatives to give orders to elected officials and governments of constituent entities, it was feared that they would nonetheless treat local leaders as subordinates. And in the past year, certain representatives did attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of some constituent entities.

It is too early to write a comprehensive evaluation of this new component of Russian federalism. But the record of the Representatives' first year in office is much more nuanced than the early predictions, and it has allayed some of the initial fears.

## ***The need for federal coordination***

First of all, Russia clearly requires federal coordination and monitoring at the regional level.

Before Putin's reforms, no federal body existed in the regions to coordinate the activities of the local branches of the various federal ministries and agencies. It is impossible to coordinate these activities at the central-government level only. Coordination of federal bodies needs to happen at the regional-branch level as well. Furthermore, the lack of efficient management of federal property at the local level has posed a substantial problem for Russia.

One of the serious problems of Russian federalism is the inconsistency between constituent entities' laws and federal laws. In many cases this results from a lack of coordination between the federal centre and regions in the drafting of regional laws.

As well, the proper use of federal budget money, transferred to constituent entities to cover certain expenses, needs to be ensured by a federal body. For example, federal transfers to constituent units to cover certain specific expenses (such as teachers' salaries) ceased in the 1990s. Some constituent-unit governments used funds transferred for other reasons to fill this gap. There was no federal body in the regions which could ensure proper use of federal funding.

The Presidential Representatives could act to fill those needs.

## ***Tasks of the presidential representatives***

Among the principal tasks assigned to the Presidential Representatives are:

- organizing activities in their respective federal districts to ensure that domestic and foreign policies are implemented by the local branches of federal departments;
- monitoring the local implementation of federal-level decisions;

- ensuring that the President's personnel policy is respected;
- reporting regularly to the President on national security issues as well as the political and economic situation in the federal districts;
- recommending measures to be taken by the President concerning local matters.

The Representatives have already shown their priorities for the federal districts' social and economic development:

- the North Western federal district: seeking external investment and executing infrastructure projects;
- the Southern and Far Eastern federal districts: executing social and economic development projects;
- the Central federal district: improving citizens' economic security and fighting economic crime, as well as supporting entrepreneurial development;
- the Ural federal district: the same priorities as the Central district, but in the Urals the Representative's staff also deals with the development of specific economic sectors and regional financial-industrial groups;
- the Volga federal district: the Representative is trying to make this district a "laboratory of innovation" with new technologies.

## ***The past year***

All the Presidential Representatives have taken part in bringing the constituent entities' legislation into accord with federal legislation. They have been helped by special prosecutors (prokurory), appointed by the Prosecutor General, who are empowered to verify the conformity of constituent entities' laws with federal laws.

In the middle of November a special working group, organised by V. Kazantsev, the Presidential Representative in the Southern Federal District, convened to discuss measures to improve the situation in the Russian ports on the Black and Azov seas.

According to the Deputy Presidential Representative responsible for economic issues, the Russian budget loses about \$400 million US per year because of bad management of sea ports. Kazantsev's "new deal" in the southern Russian sea ports includes a special personnel policy and actions to increase federal control over sea ports by purchasing shares.

In the Ural Federal District the presidential representative P. Latyshev has paid serious attention to the elaboration of a unified economic policy. Latyshev set up the Centre for Economic Forecasting and Planning at the end of 2000 to deal with the issues of economic integration and development in this district.

The Presidential Representative in the Volga Federal District, S. Kireyenko, has the image of a promoter of new innovations. He announced a competition via the Internet to fill vacancies in his staff. Of the 5338 people who took part, 25 winners received certificates stating that they could be admitted to the Presidential Representative's staff. (However, senior offices in Kireyenko's staff were distributed according to political and personal criteria, not according to the results of the competition.)

By the end of 2000, Kireyenko had organized two events: the All-Russia Bank Forum in Nizhny Novgorod and the Fair of Social Projects (a competition to distribute governmental grants among NGOs publicly and transparently).

### **Problems and concerns**

At the same time, Kireyenko is the most active among all the Presidential Representatives in trying to influence the results of constituent entities' elections. In the mass media, Kireyenko openly supported one of the candidates in the Udmurt Republic Presidential election (A. Volkov, who finally won).

Four candidates at the Mari El republic Presidential election, who were competing with the incumbent President V. Kislitsin, claimed to have the support of

the Russian President (and, of course, his Representative). At the same time—"coincidentally"—the Deputy Presidential Representative spent many days on the eve of the Mari El presidential election in the capital of this republic, coordinating the investigation of corruption in President Kislitsin's staff.


These are only two examples. There are many more instances of Presidential Representatives trying to influence elections.

Also on the negative side, certain Presidential Representatives could not cope with difficult economic situations. For example, the Presidential Representative in the Far Eastern federal district failed to prevent or to help overcome an energy crisis in the Primorski province. Hundreds of thousands of people and many businesses were without electricity and central heating for several weeks.

More broadly, some critics argue that federal districts have been created irrationally. Presidential Representatives are supposedly appointed to bring central executive authorities closer to people living in regions situated far from the

capital. The federal districts farthest from the capital should therefore be smaller than the ones closer to the political centre of the country in order to guarantee citizens easiest access to central executive authorities.

But today one federal district comprises the huge territory of Siberia, all the Far Eastern territories are contained in another federal district, and the Ural mountain regions are included into a third federal district. So, in the European part of Russia (where the capital is located) there are four federal districts, while the remaining three federal districts cover the more than two thirds of Russian territory which lies beyond the Ural mountains.

Formally, the federal districts have very little to do with the development of the structure of the federation—they have been created for the purposes of presidential representation. But some politicians argue that the new federal districts should replace all current constituent entities. The Russian President has never supported this idea in his speeches so far. 

### **Historical background on presidential representatives**

*After he was elected President in 1991, Boris Yeltsin began to appoint presidential representatives in republics and other territorial units. The status of those presidential nominees was not defined in any law and was regulated in a vague manner by presidential decrees.*

*Presidential representatives were estranged from the people and elites of constituent entities. Even though some of them were selected among locals, they were appointed by the central authority and their role was to keep an eye on regional affairs for Moscow.*

*At first, some presidential representatives, hoping to play an important role in regional politics, tried to compete with regional administrative heads. However, the resources at the representatives' disposal were quite limited. There was only modest funding of the representatives, and they could only afford a small staff.*

*Officially, these representatives did not have the right to make binding decisions or to control subsidies transferred from the federal budget to constituent entities.*

*As well, they did not have preferential relationships with the President which*

*might have increased their significance in the perception of the local population and authorities. Rather, the President preferred to deal directly with executive bodies of constituent entities.*

*By 1993 it became quite clear that the institution of presidential representatives had little political weight.*

*The coup d'etat of 1993 and the approval by referendum of a new Russian Constitution did not result in any practical modification of this institution. The 1993 Russian Constitution provides for presidential power to appoint and dismiss such representatives. (This provision does not concern exclusively territorial presidential representation. For example, the President of Russia also appoints representatives in the State Duma, the Federation Council, and the Constitutional Court.)*

*In 1994, President Yeltsin issued a decree confirming all earlier appointments (before the 1993 Constitution entered into force) to the office of presidential representative in constituent entities.*

*But the same vague legal status of presidential representatives remained until Vladimir Putin's reforms in May 2000.*