



Border issues, regional aspirations and realism in the Russian Federation

The aim of conducting their own foreign policy may exceed the capacity of many of Russia's eighty-nine constituent units.

THEME I: FEDERALISM AND FOREIGN POLICY

BY *ALEXEI S. AVTONOMOV*

In the past, the term "foreign policy" meant primarily war and peace and security of boundaries. In the industrial epoch, customs regulations, promotion of national merchants and trade abroad were added to the foreign policy sphere. From those perspectives foreign policy did not involve constituent units of a federal country directly.

Today, however, especially in the rapidly changing international system, a country's foreign policy involves much more than this. Along with national and collective security and international trade, it covers such matters as foreign investment, living conditions, humanitarian cooperation, the environment, energy, communication, transportation, etc. There has been a diversification of objectives and the geographical framework for policy-determining factors has broadened from national and bilateral to regional and worldwide.

Local, national and international public policy interpenetrate one another, reflecting structural changes such as the internationalization of various fields of activity and technological change. Economic conditions, especially in crisis periods have a great impact on the degree to which foreign and domestic policy-making become intertwined. These days no country can be immune to global economic events. Indeed by the 1990s, world economic crises had reached a genuinely global scale. During the crisis of 1997-1999 almost all countries were affected, while earlier the Soviet Union and other socialist countries would have been somewhat insulated from worldwide developments of the market economy.

Along the "frontier strip"

The Russian Federation is an immense and, in many regions, sparsely-populated country. The majority of the population lives in the smaller European part of the national territory. The bigger territory to the east of the Urals is less populated.

More than one third of all of Russia's constituent units are situated along the land boundaries of the Russian Federation. If we add to them constituent units that are attached to the Russian sea and ocean boundaries, we can easily see that the majority of constituent units are within the "frontier strip" of the Russian Federation and are naturally interested in the adequate regulation of boundary economic activities and trans-boundary cooperation.

With some of the former Soviet Republics (for instance, Belarus or Kazakhstan) the Russian frontier is more virtual than real, and a long history of relationships ties some Russian Federation constituent units with the former Soviet Republics of Kazakhstan, the Ukraine and Belarus.

Some ethnic groups living in the Russian Federation are close ethnically and culturally to those living in the neighbouring countries. All these factors stimulate Russian Federation constituent units' interest to become involved in shaping Russian foreign policy.

Seeking more control

At the beginning of the 1990s, in the process of disintegration of the Soviet Union, some constituent units of the Russian Federation claimed their right to full independence or at least a special status within the Russian Federation.

Among these were the Tatarstan Republic (which is a major oil producer) and the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic (an important producer of diamonds) which both proclaimed their own jurisdiction and interests abroad.

Neither the Russian Federation nor the international community recognized the full international legal capacity of Russian constituent units. Meanwhile, "real life" showed that the perspectives of development or even survival of any of these regions without cooperation within the Russian Federation were not bright. By the end of the 1990s it became clear enough that for most constituent units, attempts to have a separate foreign policy were more burdensome than beneficial. On the other hand it was (and it is) clear that constituent units in the contemporary situation had (and have) their own interests in transnational cooperation. So, the problem is how to harmonize national and regional interests in the conduct of foreign policy and how to take into account regional interests in the course of conducting foreign policy without prejudice to the national interest.

A role of federal bodies

According to the 1993 Russian Constitution, the Russian Federation is vested with all powers in the fields of foreign policy and international relations, international treaties, as well as foreign economic relations. The Russian Federation Government insists that foreign *policy* is exclusively within the powers of the federal bodies. However, it recognizes a certain role for constituent units authorities in transnational *activities*.

The Russian Federation has mechanisms for involving representatives of constituent units in the federal governing bodies' decision-making process dealing with certain foreign policy. For example, the Federation Council (the upper house of the central government, consisting of representatives of the constituent units) has the jurisdiction to approve (or not approve) decrees of the Russian President on the introduction of martial law, and has the right to decide on deploying the armed forces of Russia outside the territory of the Russian Federation. As well, the Federation Council approves or rejects laws adopted by the State Duma (the other house of the Russian Parliament – the Federal Assembly). According to the Constitutional provisions, if the Federation Council does reach a decision dealing with this or that law within a period of 14 days, the law is considered to be approved by the Federation Council.

However, the Federation Council must examine laws dealing with certain matters. Among these are ratification or rejection of international treaties of the Russian Federation, laws concerning the status and protection of the border of the Russian Federation, war and peace, currency, credit, and customs regulation. The Russian President, in accordance with the Constitution, appoints and dismisses diplomatic representatives of the Russian Federation in foreign states and international organizations only after consultations with appropriate committees and commissions of the Federal Assembly (i.e. the Federation Council and the State Duma). So, the Federation Council has the constitutional responsibility to play an important role in some foreign policy decisions.

From 1996 to 1999 the head of the executive branch of government and speaker of the legislature of each constituent unit were *ex officio* members of the Federation Council. In 1999 a new law on the formation of the Federation Council was adopted.

According to the new law, each regional legislature and each regional executive body *appointed* its own representative

as a member of the Federation Council. The Law provided for a transitional period till the end of 2001, when the heads of constituent units' executive and legislative bodies would be substituted by their appointed representatives. Now (since January 1, 2002) all the members of the Federation Council are representatives of regional executive and legislative bodies.

In any event, despite a change in the procedure for selecting members of the Federation Council, the main principle that the Federation Council is composed of representatives of constituent unit authorities has been preserved. The Russian Federation is comprised of 89 constituent units: 21 republics, 6 provinces, 49 regions, 2 federal cities, 1 autonomous region and 10 autonomous districts, and each constituent unit has two representatives in the Federation Council.

At the end of 1999 a new institution with a consultative status was created by the decree of the Russian President. It is the State Council, which consists of all heads of administration of constituent units. The Chair of the State Council is the President of the Russian Federation, who convokes this body from time to time to discuss the most important issues of politics (these are predominantly domestic, but theoretically foreign policy issues might be examined by the State Council as well).

In May 2002 a Union of Legislators was set up. It consists of all speakers of constituent units' legislatures and is presided by the chairman of the Federation Council. It was announced that one of the aims of the Union is to advise the Russian President on actual issues of Russian Federation politics (it is quite possible that foreign policy issues might be under its examination).

Constituent units' legitimate interests

Along with participating in federal foreign policy decisions through their representatives at the centre, constituent units of the Russian Federation conduct their own transnational activity.

There are a lot of contacts between the authorities of constituent units of the Russian Federation and the authorities of territorial units of foreign (federal and unitary) States. One of the forms of transnational activities is an exchange of delegations, composed of high executive officials or regional legislators. In many cases treaties and agreements on economic and cultural cooperation are signed as a result of those visits.

Unfortunately, there are no reliable statistics dealing with these activities. But, in general, hundreds of such visits take place every year.

Of course, those constituent units that are stronger economically have more possibilities and are more active in transnational activities. On the one hand they have more resources for the development of such activities. On the other hand, they have a greater need to develop relations abroad. Constituent units situated along the frontier strip are developing trans-boundary cooperation with territorial units of foreign countries, attached to the same border on the other side.

Some constituent units of the Russian Federation even have agreements on economic and cultural cooperation with certain countries. Those constituent units, whose transnational activities are very intensive, have representation offices abroad.

As the experience of the previous ten years has shown, despite the ambiguous declarations of certain constituent units to the effect that they wish to conduct their own foreign policy, all their transnational activities are of an economic or cultural nature, because their greatest interests lie in promoting the economic development of their regions.

In addition to all the activities detailed above, we should add that Russian Federation constituent units take part in the activities of the Council of Europe and are represented in the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities. 