

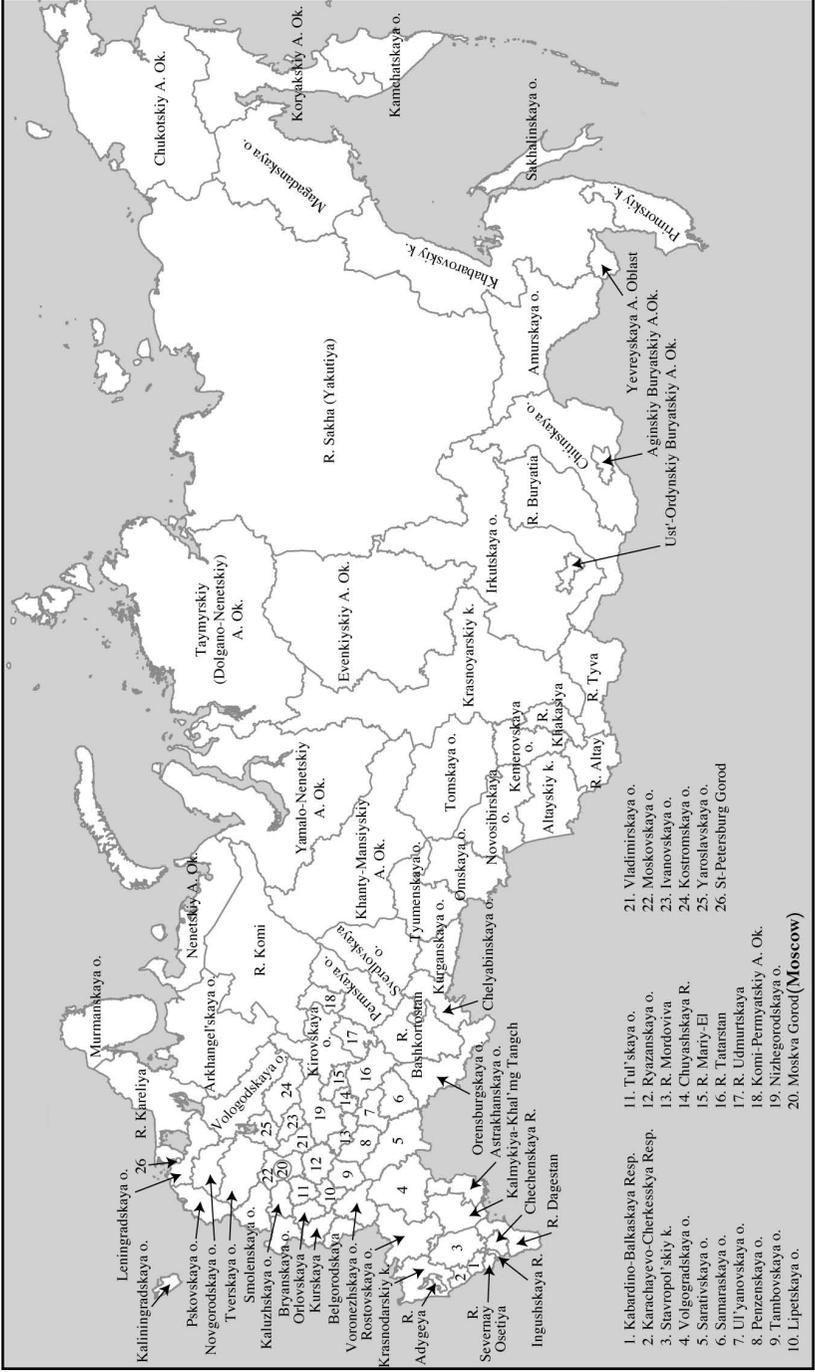
Minority Rights and the Impact of Authoritarian Regression in Russia's Federalism

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Russia is ethnically and regionally very heterogeneous. Combining both ethno-federalism and territorial federalism, the country's 89 constituent units are divided into six different types: republics, autonomous districts, one autonomous region, territorial regions, districts, and two federal cities. During the 1990s, 32 out of its then 89 constituent units, 85 today, existed as ethnic autonomies – among them 21 republics, ten autonomous districts and the Jewish autonomous region. At the beginning of the 1990s, the republics pioneered federalization in Russia by forming loose coalitions; the then president Boris Yeltsin had addressed the leaders of these republics – mainly Tatarstan and Bashkortostan – with the famous phrase: “Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow.” This message is a far cry from the de-ethnicization of federalism led by the centre in today's Russia.

Resembling nation-states in several respects, republics help to preserve and develop regional and ethnic identities. Conventional justifications for having been assigned the status of “republic” include traditions of settlement, the spiritual meaning of a given territory (“homeland”), and making amends for past historical grievances. Republics have the power to adopt constitutions and introduce their own state languages. They can also sign international treaties providing they respect the confines of the federal Constitution. With the exception of the Constitution and state languages, most other competencies are shared by the purely territorial entities, the *oblasti*, and the *kraya*.

At the time of the last census of 2002, there were 41 titular non-Russian ethnic groups, who individually or together provided the name for a region of the federation; however, in most of the ethnic regions native people are not predominant. All in all, in ten out of 21 republics the titular ethnic group forms the majority, but among the autonomous districts, not a single



1. Kabardino-Balkskaya Resp.
2. Karachayev-Cherkesskiya Resp.
3. Stavropol'skiy k.
4. Volgogradskaya o.
5. Saratovskaya o.
6. Samarskaya o.
7. Ul'yanskovskaya o.
8. Penzenskaya o.
9. Tambovskaya o.
10. Lipetskaya o.
11. Tul'skaya o.
12. Ryzanskaya o.
13. R. Mordoviya
14. Chuyshskaya R.
15. R. Mariy-El
16. R. Tatarstan
17. R. Udmurtskaya
18. Komi-Permyatskiy A. Ok.
19. Nizhegorodskaya o.
20. Moskva Gorod(Moscow)
21. Vladimirskaaya o.
22. Moskovskaya o.
23. Ivanovskaya o.
24. Kostromskaya o.
25. Yaroslavl'skaya o.
26. St.-Petersburg Gorod

one has a majority of the titular ethnic group. Smaller populations of ethnic groups include the indigenous peoples of the far North, Siberia, and Asia – officially 45 registered peoples of roughly 275,000 individuals who are distributed over 27 regions.

Contradictions between the formal equality of Russian citizens and the actual implementation of laws often allow for *de facto* discrimination of non-dominant groups. For instance, ethnic groups are allowed to form associations, yet the 2001 “law on political parties” forbids the formation of parties on ethnic grounds. Some of the less numerous indigenous people receive assistance for the preservation of their means of survival. They may also be granted preferential taxation rights and privileged use of public property. However the *de facto* rights of indigenous people are far less protected than the list of formal rights would suggest.

Conflicts with and among non-dominant groups in Russia can be found in various forms: those between titular ethnic groups in ethnic regions and non-titular groups who feel under-represented or discriminated against; conflicts between non-Russian ethnic groups over the ethno-territorial boundaries inside or between autonomies; demands by ethnic groups who are part of existing autonomies for territorial autonomy of their own; conflicts between migrants, descendents of deported people, and refugees on the one hand and permanent regional residents on the other; socio-economic problems of non-populous indigenous peoples; intra-regional conflicts between Russians and non-Russians that led to an emigration of ethnic Russians (mostly in the North Caucasus); and violent conflicts with nationalist or fundamentalist militants. The conflict in Chechnya is certainly the most striking evidence of the inadequacies of the federal policy towards non-dominant groups: its inability to institutionalize conflict regulation, the rejection of negotiations with nationalist opposition, the excessive emergency powers of the president, poor development impulses, the inefficiency of inter-regional redistribution, and the unwillingness to cope with the repression under Stalinism, are among the most important deficits.

Whereas Soviet federalism was perceived as a mere means of symbolically solving the “nationality problem,” the re-foundation of Russia was originally characterized by the exporting of federal principles into state construction. With the end of the Yeltsin era in 1999, and the beginning of the Putin period, the prevailing views on federalism shifted. In order to justify his centralizing agenda, Putin’s supporters have pointed to deficits in Yeltsin’s federal system such as: sovereignty claims of the republics, contradictions between the Russian Constitution and the constitutions of the republics, hierarchy among regions, language legislation favouring languages other than Russian, problems of inter-governmental coordination, the alleged weakening of state capacity, as well as the potential for disintegration resulting from the heterogeneity of the country.

After a phase of ethnicization of federalism, the second half of the 1990s has produced a phase of de-ethnicization; economic and political expectations have superseded ethnic calculations. The de-ethnicization of federalism corresponds with a so-called “russification” of the state in the sense of an explicit and implicit preference for the attributes of the Russian dominant culture *vis-à-vis* non-Russian cultures. There has been no official farewell to federalism; the disempowerment of the regions is depicted instead as a strengthening of federalism. There has been a profound shift in the federal attitude towards republics. While during the 1990s they were treated as a special type of constituent entity, today the centre’s relationship with the purely territorial and ethnic regions is mostly symmetrical.

The official conception of federalism has to some extent made a return to its Soviet past. Regions are treated as mere parts of the inter-governmental, administrative-territorial machinery. The imposition of uniform rules under Putin’s presidency has led to neither a strengthening of the rule of law and of checks and balances nor has it curbed the authoritarian policy styles of governors or republican presidents. Rather, it has undermined the prerequisites for democratization. De-federalization and de-democratization have gone hand-in-hand.

The radical reduction of accessibility or institutionalized participatory rights *vis-à-vis* the central government has led to non-transparent, informal ways of pursuing one’s interests, including a policy of favors. The political infighting over the institutional structure and division of competencies is still not resolved. In formal institutional terms, Russia is no longer a federation. The sources of Russian federalism are nonetheless deeper than Putin’s instrumentalism seem to suggest. Putin’s centralism, institutionally unstable and characterized by a disrespect for constitutional principles, repeats the mistake of the defunct Soviet system. It is systematically overburdened, unable to learn from its errors, extremely personalized, and displays a low degree of predictability.

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