



## Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

### Research Report

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#### **Borderline Russian: Regional Boundaries and the Remapping of the Russian Federation**

##### **Research Topic**

My dissertation examines the relationship between territorial-political institutions and state centralization in Russia's regions. During the 1990s, Russia's federal subjects acquired a degree of political autonomy unprecedented in Russian or Soviet history. At the root of this phenomenon was the pervasive weakness of the post-Soviet Russian state, combined with the ability of regional political elites to capitalize on the vaguely-defined division of powers between the federal center and the regions. Throughout the last decade, politicians and analysts argued that Russia stood on the brink of disintegration, threatened by various forms of separatism at the level of its constituent regions (and particularly from the federal republics). Today many claim that former President Boris Yeltsin's single greatest achievement was his ability to hold the federation together. At the same time, it is recognized that Yeltsin's methods of extra-constitutional bargaining and negotiation with regional elites provided but a brittle federal edifice – Russia remains relatively intact, but neither the state nor the polity are necessarily any better off than at the beginning of the 1990s. Correspondingly, the content of regional political autonomy remains weak and uninstitutionalized, while central incapacity continues to hinder the consolidation of federal relations.

The arrival of Vladimir Putin appeared to signal a change in the trajectory of center-regional relations. On the surface, his broad-based attempt at (re-)centralization, launched immediately following his election as Russia's second president, aims at consolidating and

institutionalizing center-regional relations by diminishing regional prerogatives, leveling the relative status of Russia's regions, and re-asserting control over territorial branches of federal agencies in Russia's 89 federal subjects. The linchpin of Putin's reforms is the creation of seven Federal Districts (FD) – a territorial reform aimed at rationalizing the “power vertical”. The dissertation takes the creation of the FDs as its starting point and probes regional responses to state centralization under Putin.

### **Relevance and Contribution to the Field**

In many respects, the creation of the FDs resembles the territorial reforms of regional governance analyzed in Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*, though the scope of what Putin seeks to accomplish is far greater. At stake is not just improvement in the efficacy of institutional performance, but the future trajectory of state-building and democratization in post-Russia. My dissertation examines regional responses to state centralization in general, and particularly to the creation of the seven FDs, with an eye towards what Russia's contemporary experience can offer to political science's understanding of regime transitions from authoritarian rule and democratization.

### **Research Methodology**

The study of regional political processes in Russia unavoidably begins with the regional executive branch. Throughout the 1990s, regional executives established a virtual monopoly on formal political power throughout all of Russia, often in collusion with commercial elite interests. At issue is how regional elites attempt to define the rules of engagement with central authorities – how regional interests are defined and defended. Insofar as all levels of governance intersect at the regional level, regional executives are apt to view ambiguities in the division of powers as opportunity structures to be manipulated. At the same time, the definition of regional interests is constrained (or shaped) by inherited institutions and traditional understandings of government's role and obligations.

The primary method of analysis consists of interviews with regional elites to determine the local/regional set of interests and terms of discourse. The analysis of interview content is paired with content analysis of regional press and triangulated with existing case studies of regional politics. The level of analysis is that of the federal subject. For this study, four regions were selected with an eye towards obtaining maximum variation in terms of federal status, geographic location, levels of socio-economic development, regional regime type, and placement within the FDs: Perm Oblast', Republic of Kareliya, Tiumen Oblast, and Republic of Buryatia. The rationale behind this approach (known in political science parlance as the “most different systems” approach) is that the commonalities emerging from the examination of different regions reflect elite strategies and resources in center-regional relations that are more institutionalized and, hence, more likely to affect the trajectory of federal relations across multiple regions. In practice, this mode of analysis bridges the gap between political discourse and actual policy implementation.

### **Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions**

The process of centralization begun by Putin appears to benefit regional executive elites most, while the extent to which central state capacity has increased remains ambiguous. The role and powers of Putin's appointed heads of the FDs, or *polpredy*, remain vaguely specified and their activities vary significantly in each of the FDs. At the same time, the legitimation of state centralization in federal relations has been successfully extended to

include relations between regional and local levels of governance, the latter of which are most vulnerable to manipulation. While there has been much talk of the “strengthening of federal subjects” and consolidating regions into a more manageable number (for which the creation of the FDs is seen as a necessary first step), in practice one finds that organs of local governance are being transformed into administrative wings of regional power, effectively deprived of electoral legitimacy and political functions. While the rationale for the consolidation of local government within Russia’s regions and for state centralization on the federal level are similar, regional administrative-territorial boundaries appear to remain inviolable. This is particularly evident in regions with complex federal relationships (known as *slozhno-postroennii* federal subjects), where the political and economic boundaries between oblast (or krai) and autonomous okrug have become more rigidly defined since Putin’s arrival. These boundaries are carved out of conditions of extreme economic competition and inequality among and within Russia’s regions and an ambiguous political space in which powers are vaguely defined by the Russian Constitution.

Many analysts have commented on the emergence of regional identities which strengthen the normative basis of regional autonomy and provide political support for regional opposition to centralization. While most attention has been focused on ethnic or national identity in the federal republics, it is also clear that a non-ethnic regional identity is emerging in line with the strengthening of regional boundaries. While the content of regional identity varies, it is interesting that regional normative boundaries are “sticky” despite the movement of cadres across them. To the extent that the boundaries of regional identity correspond with formal administrative-territorial divisions, the process of regional consolidation (or even coordination) is sharply curtailed along normative, legal, and economic dimensions. It is further likely that the weak state of development of civil society in Russia precludes the institutionalization of cross-regional coordination and, hence, allows regional executives to play a guiding role. This in turn further enhances the significance of territorial-administrative boundaries, which continue to acquire greater institutional bases that will be difficult for central authorities to bring to heel.

### **Suggestions for Future Research Agendas**

There are a number of fruitful directions future research on Russian regions can (and should) take. First, studies of relations between regional and municipal government are increasingly important and necessary, particularly given the gradual erosion of the latter. Second, Western scholars can follow the lead of Russian scholars in examining regional political regime types and extend analysis to cover the implications for the overall process of democratization in Russia. Particularly valuable would be comparative studies of similar processes in other post-Soviet states. A third avenue of investigation would be the examination of how inter-ethnic relations are managed in regions not considered to be separatist or volatile.

### **Policy Recommendations**

There is a growing discourse of economic pragmatism in regional politics that tends to legitimize non-democratic practices. Despite their intentions, US policy-makers reinforce this process by (implicitly or explicitly) prioritizing political stability over the quality of regional political governance. At the same time, policy-makers must be sensitive to growing suspicion of the US’ international agenda, which paints political conditionality as

an extension of hegemonic policy. To this end, US policy options for encouraging democratic state-building in Russian regions are limited:

- The growth of civil society is necessary to offset undemocratic practices ratified by state centralization in Russia. This could be facilitated by expanding outreach programs, especially on the level of providing basic information on organization and networking. Information about existing programs and funding opportunities often does not reach students and potential activists. Even where such information is available, many projects are scuttled owing to the lack of experience with soliciting and applying for funding. Support is also needed in the provision of computer technology and internet access.
- Additionally, the US government should provide support for independent, native political monitoring of regional politics. Many regions either lack information about processes in neighboring regions or rely solely on the central Russian press. Regardless, the effect is a growing political nihilism that demobilizes citizens' interest in regional politics and amplifies distrust of regional and central political institutions.
- The US government should take an active interest in the quality of regional political governance in Russia. This can be accomplished in the first instance by encouraging cooperation between Russian regions and municipalities with American counterparts. Given the extent to which universities and government are closely intertwined in Russia, the US should also seek to expand student and teacher exchange programs, particularly in the areas of public administration and policy studies.
- Most regional political elites look to Europe rather than the US for lessons in regional governance and center-regional relations. The US government can work indirectly by co-sponsoring projects through the EU and European non-state entities that facilitate cross-border cooperation. Much of Russia's dissatisfaction with existing projects stems from the tendency of European partners to fund projects on the Western side of the border. While the US cannot hope to displace the EU as Russia's most promising Western partner (particularly with North-West Russia), its interests can best be served by facilitating the successful implementation and expansion of Russian-European cooperation.