

## Analysis

### Subnational Authoritarianism in Russia

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#### Abstract

The contemporary Russian constellation of localized politics and monopolized control by the local elites, dubbed “subnational authoritarianism,” was typical in various historical settings and for numerous regions and cities in many countries from Latin America to South-East Asia; the “political machines” in US cities of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries also presented an example of this type of government. Subnational authoritarianism in various countries and regions differed considerably in terms of its genesis, forms of rule, and consequences: some subnational authoritarian regimes were temporary and transitional; others dug in for long centuries. This article addresses the general trends and special features of subnational authoritarianism in Russia.

#### The Origins of Russia's Subnational Authoritarianism

The practice of subnational authoritarianism in the Soviet period was the “point of departure” for processes of decentralization in the 1990s and recentralization in the 2000s, both of which were path dependent in that they depended heavily on historical legacies. The centralized subnational party authoritarianism of the USSR was a complex political project. On one hand, it was based on a hierarchical concentration of power and resources, which was supported by the vertically integrated structures of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the nation-wide branch ministries and agencies, including the coercive agencies from the military to the State Security Committee (KGB). On the other hand, at the local level, the territorial committees of the CPSU performed the functions of social integration and distribution of social benefits. Also, they acted as interest groups in lobbying the interests of territories in the upper echelons of the political hierarchy. In the 1960s–1980s, the Soviet system of regional and local governance came into conflict with the constantly decreasing effectiveness of central control. The relations between the national and sub-national regimes in the USSR can be described as “loyalty in exchange for non-interference.” Perestroika, accompanied by a large-scale change in the managerial cadres at the local level, dealt a powerful blow to the balance of power defining subnational authoritarianism. But the collapse of the Soviet Union, the processes of economic transformation, and the politics of institutional change, unleashed by the federal Center at the local level, quickly led to the replacement of the centralized subnational authoritarianism with decentralized subnational authoritarianism.

First, the unintended consequences of the dissolution of the USSR led to the substantial weakening not

only of the distributive, but also the coercive capacity of the Center. The side effect was the spontaneous transfer from the Center to the local level of the most important powers and resources, including the leverage capacity of institutional regulation and the coercive apparatus, which at times were de facto subordinate to regional political-financial (and criminal) groups. Second, the economic crisis of the 1990s weakened ties between the national economy and regional “closed markets”, which were only partially restored by the territorial expansion of the national financial-industrial groups at the beginning of the 2000s. Against the background of the spatial polarization and growing inequality both between regions and between municipalities within regions and the displacement of resource bases at the subnational level, these processes enabled the local elites to exercise greater control over economic resources. In particular, they played the role of “veto groups” in terms of property rights and concentrated in their hands control over budgetary flows, the share of which for subnational governments exceeded 60 percent of the overall Russian budget. Third, the federal policy of institution building in the area of regional and local governance was rather inconsistent; in general, it undermined the incipient efforts in many regions to establish political pluralism. Thus, in place of the excessive centralization of the Soviet period came the excessive decentralization of the 1990s.

#### The Decentralized 1990s

Although the characteristics of the decentralized political regimes in the regions and cities of Russia differed depending on the constellation of the elites in the various regions and cities, the majority of them demonstrated trends toward the establishment of decentralized subnational authoritarianism. The societal base of

these regimes included various social groups that were dependent on the regional and local authorities, such as public sector employees, local business, and local criminal groups, who gained an opportunity to legalize their activities by supporting the status quo. In several Russian republics, ethnic mobilization served as a means for strengthening the monopoly of the ethnic elites within the framework of subnational authoritarianism. The weakness of the political parties at the local level made it easier for regional and local leaders to monopolize power despite the conduct of competitive elections because they were not attached to any of the parties. For its part, the Center, unable to stop the development of subnational authoritarianism, tried to use the powers of the local leaders in order to preserve its own power in the course of competitive federal elections. The result of this was the policy of “selective appeasement” for some territories and the transfer of exclusive rights and powers to several regions. It is not surprising that most of observers deemed these trends as negative.

Many features of decentralized subnational authoritarianism in the Russia of the 1990s coincided with the characteristics of the American “political machines” at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In both cases, subnational regimes were inherently defined by patrimonial control over political processes at the local level, political influence at the federal level, and a monopoly of ties with federal actors. Additionally, the national parties in both cases were weak and the ties of local leaders to them were ad hoc, they both had high levels of economic monopolization and corruption and a tendency for economic interest groups to capture the state. But there were significant differences between the Russian and American cases. First, in contrast to the US, in Russia demand to undermine the subnational authoritarianism from below at the local level was rather weak and no equivalent of the reformist (“progressive”) movement materialized. Second, if in the US at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, federal political and economic actors sought to undermine the “political machines,” in Russia such alliances did not develop due to the policy of the Center. In the 1990s, the Center did not have the resources to fight subnational authoritarianism and had to accept it as a given, while in the 2000s the Center used its opportunities to co-opt subnational authoritarianism “from above” into a national system of authoritarian governance.

### **Recentralization in the 2000s**

The policy of recentralizing governance, begun in 2000 at the initiative of Vladimir Putin, became the answer to these challenges. It sought to restore the Center’s con-

trol over the coercive and distributional capacity of the state, which in the 1990s ended up under the control of local actors. The administrative recentralization (including the return to the Center’s control over regional branches of federal agencies), and the recentralization of economic resources (which led to the increased concentration of financial resources in the hands of the Center at the expense of the regional and local elites), were only some of the consequences of this policy. What was its influence on subnational authoritarianism in Russia?

The restoration of central control squeezed the local actors to the periphery of national politics and policy – their role in federal decision-making dropped sharply and this reduced influence was institutionalized in such changes as the reform of the Federation Council and the introduction of the proportional electoral system in the State Duma elections. Nevertheless, dictating from above to local actors through the means of the centralized state apparatus had only a limited impact. At the subnational level, the Center was not able to take control of local regimes exclusively through the use of administrative measures because many of these regimes by the beginning of the 2000s had been able to eradicate the autonomous potential of the opposition in the form of local business, legislatures, and political parties. Therefore, the most important instrument for restoring central control was through institutional changes and, in particular, transferring the influence of national political parties from the national to the regional and local levels. At the initiative of the presidential administration, starting in 2003, regional legislative elections had to be conducted with a mixed electoral system, making it possible to strengthen the influence of national parties in the regions, particularly the main weapon of the Kremlin – United Russia. However, this reform had only a limited impact in terms of strengthening central control over local leaders. In fact, stimulating inter-party competition increased the availability of political alternatives at the regional and local levels, which could in the future facilitate efforts to undermine subnational authoritarianism. Such a political trend could hardly fit the plans of the country’s leaders, who were above all interested in holding onto power in the wake of the 2007–2008 federal elections. Their political survival could be assured most easily by including the local “political machines” in a nation-wide political “convoy”. Therefore the Center’s 2004 decision to abolish direct popular elections for governors was a logical continuation of the policy of recentralization.

Introducing the effective appointment of governors essentially put in place a new informal contract between

the Center and local leaders, which resolved the problem of mutual commitments that had earlier prevented United Russia from becoming a dominant party. The institutional changes also provided new incentives for the behavior of local leaders, who had to demonstrate their loyalty to United Russia while not giving up their previous opportunities to diversify their political investments. It was therefore no surprise that in the 2007 State Duma elections, 65 of 85 governors joined the United Russia list. For its part, the Center generally sought to preserve in power the existing regional leaders to take advantage of their ability to deliver votes for the Center in the federal elections. It was precisely this ability to control the local electoral process through any means necessary, rather than effective regional and local governance, that guaranteed the continued political survival of the governors appointed by the Kremlin during the 2007–2008 electoral cycle. The compromise between the federal and local leaders, achieved on the basis of the scheme “monopoly control on power in exchange for the ‘correct’ results in the elections” was the most important part of Russia’s subnational authoritarianism.

The centralization of subnational authoritarianism and the transformation of its foundation from a purely personalistic to a party base strengthened the local regimes since the “political monopoly of the governors should coincide with the monopoly of United Russia in all meaningful electoral positions at the regional and local levels.” The economic base of the centralized subnational party authoritarianism is a system of politically-driven exchanges of resources between the Center and regional and local authorities. Large corporations also supported this economic base because they had expanded their influence at the local level during the 2000s and became interested in supporting the status quo there. They were likewise politically dependent on the Center. In contrast with the 1990s, the social base of subnational (as well as national) authoritarianism grew due to the expansion of the urban middle class, which was prepared to support the status quo in conditions of economic growth and the consumer boom and was not inclined to violate the evolving political balance of power.

### **Today’s Centralized Subnational Party Authoritarianism**

The centralized subnational party authoritarianism that evolved in Russia during the 2000s significantly differs from the centralized bureaucratic model practiced in post-Soviet Central Asia and Belarus, and the model of decentralized subnational authoritarianism of the

1990s. Rather, its characteristics are more similar to the centralized subnational party authoritarianism of Southern Italy in the 1950s–1980s. The main similarity is not only the predominance of patron-client ties, the negative incentives to be loyal among local actors and the insignificance of their compensation from the ruling groups, but also the absence of significant forces capable of undermining the local regimes from below. The main difference in the Russian case is the political monopoly of the dominant party not only at the subnational level, but also at the federal level, making it comparable to the cases of Mexico in the 1930–1980s and the USSR.

Indeed, comparing today’s subnational regimes in Russia with the practice of regional and local management of the Soviet period provides a basis for a series of parallels. As it was 30–40 years ago, Russian regions and cities are ruled by bureaucrats who are de facto appointed by the Center with only formal approval by the local elite. Their ability to resolve the most important economic issues – ensuring the development of the territory and attracting resources from outside – as before depends on the effectiveness of informal lobbying in the Center. Their opportunity for political maneuvering at the local level and beyond its borders is limited by the structure of economic interest groups at the level of the regions and cities. Similar also is the tendency for the local authorities and economic actors to establish mutual ties along corporatist models. And, although United Russia is not a reincarnation of the CPSU, and the role of today’s corporations, led by Gazprom, has little in common with the dictates of the former nation-wide branch ministries, the non-competitive nature of the federal and subnational regimes and the monopolization of the economy, though no longer based on central planning but on extracting resource rents, makes it possible to identify many similar trends. The Center, as in the Soviet period, seeks to minimize the loss of its control over the local elites, rushing to redistribute rents among the local lobby groups and selectively repress those who fall under the dispensation of mid-level bureaucrats. Therefore again, as in Soviet times, there is a spontaneous transfer of powers and resources from the Center to local leaders (especially in the republics) within the framework of an informal contract exchanging loyalty for non-interference.

The Russian subnational authoritarianism of the 2000s completed a U-turn from the decentralized to centralized party model according to the scheme “back in the USSR.” In contrast to the decentralized subnational authoritarianism, which was a temporary and

transitional phenomenon in the process of state and institution building, centralized subnational authoritarianism is much more stable. Its framework is based, first of all, on a concentration of the coercive and distributional capacities of the state in the hands of the ruling group in the Center, which is able to block efforts to undermine the status quo at the local level from above, and, second, the lack of influential actors capable of carrying out such an undermining from below. From this point of view, centralized subnational party authoritarianism can be stable. The experience of such regimes from southern Italy to Mexico shows that their undermining is more likely as a result of the collapse of the national regime and/or the party system, than under the influence of their internal evolution at the local level. Therefore one can predict that in the short-term there is little reason to expect that subnational authoritarianism in Russia will significantly weaken or fall of

its own accord. In fact, even the possible potential liberalization and democratization of the regime at the national level does not guarantee the undermining of the local regimes. In addition to the historical legacy of the Soviet (and pre-Soviet) period, the formation of a new institutional legacy in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s hinders the undermining of subnational authoritarianism in Russia.

One can expect that in the short-term, with the preservation of the current Russian national and local regimes, there will be a further conservation (if not stagnation) of subnational authoritarian regimes. Also, the chances for fully-fledged democratization of the Russian national political system and the chances for the effective state building needed to create the conditions for the successful development of its cities and regions depends ultimately on the overcoming of subnational authoritarianism in Russia.

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## Analysis

### Who Governs?

#### The Transformation of Sub-Regional Political Regimes in Russia (1991–2009)

By D. G. Seltser, Tambov

#### Abstract

In the post-Soviet period, Russia's city and local district leaderships were variously appointed (1991–1994/1996) and elected (4 election cycles: 1994–1996; 1998–2001; 2003–2005; 2008–2010), leading to significant changes in these leaderships. Based on the oblasts of Ryazan, Samara, Tambov, and Ulyanovsk and the republics of Mordovia, Udmurtia and Chuvashia, this article examines the political transformations of local government regimes through an analysis of elites. It seeks to address the following questions: What changes have occurred in the make-up of city and district mayors? What are the dynamics for removing leaders? Who are these people? Who are their support base and who are they answerable to? Summarizing this data makes it possible to address the key question: Who makes political decisions in local government?

#### The Evolution of Local Government Leadership

##### *Appointments 1991*

In the initial post-Soviet period, Russia did not hold "founding elections." Instead, President Yeltsin directly appointed regional leaders, first as representatives of

the president, and then as governors. Once these positions were filled, he also appointed mayors. In the absence of comprehensive information and reliable surveys from the local districts, Yeltsin and his team chose leaders based on their estimates of who would be the most loyal to the federal center and they generally succeeded in this task as the officials indeed remained loyal.