

Federalism and Electoral Authoritarianism under Putin

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Abstract: Throughout its short history, federal relations in Russia have been dominated by extra-legal political and economic relations rather than constitutionalism and the rule of law. The Russian Federation's unique blend of constitutional, socioeconomic, and political asymmetry, far from promoting democracy, has bolstered authoritarian regimes in the regions. Federalism and regional democracy have also been thwarted by the weakness of Russia's civic culture and the lack of a federal and democratic tradition. Regional elites in particular have more often supported authoritarianism than democracy. Under Putin the principles of federalism and democracy have come under attack and electoral authoritarianism is the norm rather the exception, particularly in the ethnic republics.

Key words: democratization, electoral authoritarianism, federalism

In December 1993, Russia ratified its first postcommunist constitution that, in Article 1, proclaimed that it was “a democratic federative rule of law state with a republican form of government.” However, there are now major concerns about the current regime's commitment to the principles of federalism. Since the inauguration of Vladimir Putin as Russian president in May 2000, federalism and democracy have come under attack. We have witnessed a concerted effort to rein in the power of the regional governors and to centralize power under the presidency. As I demonstrate in this article, the major challenge to the Russian state today is not confederalism or the threat of ethnic disintegration, but rather defederalization and the creation of a centralized and authoritarian state under Putin.

The problems of federalization in Russia are rooted in the country's centuries-long history of authoritarian rule and the absence of a federal and democratic tradition. The 1993 constitution provided Russia with all of the major institutional prerequisites necessary for a federation. However, as Elazar stresses, “True federal systems manifest their federalism in culture as well as constitutional and

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structural ways” and “the viability of federal systems is directly related to the degree to which federalism has been internalized culturally within a particular civil society.”¹ Moreover, as Watts stresses, federalism requires a legal democratic culture with “recognition of the supremacy of the constitution over all orders of government.”²

However, as Kempton notes, “although Russia inherited a federal structure, it did not inherit a federal tradition.”³ The Russian state that emerged out of the ashes of the Soviet Union in January 1992 was bequeathed a highly authoritarian political culture and a weak and inchoate civil society. Nor was there any genuine tradition of federalism that the leadership could call upon to support it in its new statebuilding strategy. Although the USSR was formally a federation, and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was a “federation within a federation,” in reality, Soviet federalism was a sham. As Mikhail Gorbachev (General Secretary of the Communist Party), admitted in 1989, “Up to now our state has existed as a centralized and unitary state and none of us has yet the experience of living in a federation.”⁴

Federalism also requires the support of political elites. However, the collapse of communism in 1991 did not lead to a democratic “circulation of elites” in Russia. On the contrary, nomenklatura continuity was the norm, particularly in the ethnic regions where former communist elites were able to utilize the ethnic card to win and hold on to power. Postcommunist elites have used federalism primarily as a smokescreen for the promotion of their own narrow political and economic interests and as a shield behind which to carve out electoral dictatorships.

Russia’s weak and fragmented party system has also hindered the development of federalism. Up until the elections of December 2003, only a minority of parties in the lower house of the Russian parliament (the Duma) had nationwide organizations to glue the federation together, and many of the key parties had been hostile to Russia’s ethnoterritorial form of federalism. It is only since Putin came to power that we have witnessed the development of a parliamentary coalition (United Russia) strong enough to command a constitutional majority in the Duma. Putin has used his dominance over the Duma to undermine, rather than defend, federalism.

Russia may have adopted all of the key structural trappings of a federation, but neither the federal authorities nor the federal subjects actually operate according to federal principles. In Russia, as I argue below, we have neither federalism nor democracy. Behind the formal veneer of democracy and constitutionalism, federal and political relations in Russia are dominated by informal, clientelistic, and extraconstitutional practices.

In this article, I discuss four key factors that have thwarted the consolidation of federalism and democracy in Russia: (1) the extremely high levels of socioeconomic, constitutional, and political asymmetry; (2) the “war of constitutions” and the development of “contract federalism”; (3) the problematic legacy of ethnoterritorial federalism bequeathed to Russia from the Soviet Union; and (4) Putin’s radical assault on the principles of federalism and democracy.

Socioeconomic, Constitutional, and Political Asymmetry

With a population of 145 million citizens incorporating 172 nationalities and an area covering 170 million square kilometers, Russia is one of the largest and most ethnically diverse multinational federations in the world. Furthermore, Russia has the largest number of constituent units of any federation. Founded on the dual principles of ethnicity and territory, the federation comprises eighty-nine federal subjects, fifty-seven of which are territorially defined subjects, and thirty-two of which are ethnically defined subjects (including twenty-one republics and eleven national autonomies, see Table 1).

Asymmetry in Russia

Given the sheer size and ethnic diversity of the country, it is not surprising that the Russian Federation should be asymmetrical. Indeed, as Stepan observes, with the possible exception of Switzerland, all mononational democratic federations (Austria, Germany, Australia, the United States, Argentina, and Brazil) are constitutionally symmetrical and all multinational democratic federations (India, Belgium, Canada, and Spain) are constitutionally asymmetrical.⁵ Nor is Russia unique in developing constitutional asymmetry through bilateral treaties. India and Spain provide special constitutional privileges to over ten of their federal subjects.⁶ It is not asymmetry per se that is the problem in Russia; rather it is the potent mixture of socioeconomic, constitutional, and political asymmetry.

Socioeconomic Asymmetry

The eighty-nine different components of the Russian Federation vary widely in the size of their territories and populations. Thus, for example, the territory of the republic of Sakha is 388 times greater in size than that of the republic of North Osetiya-Alaniya. The population of Moscow (8.5 million) is 443 times greater than that of the sparsely populated Yevenk Autonomous Oblast.⁷ There are also vast differences in the socioeconomic status of the federal subjects. For example, income per capita in the oil rich Yamala-Nenetsk Autonomous Oblast is 178 times greater than in the republic of Ingushetiya. Investment per capita across the federation varies by a factor of twenty and regional differences in per capita gross regional product vary by a factor of thirty.⁸ In addition, one federal subject, the city of Moscow, overwhelmingly dominates Russia's federal economic and polit-

TABLE 1. The Federal Structure of the Russian Federation

Territorially defined federal subjects (57)	Ethnically defined federal subjects (32)
6 Krai	21 Republics
49 Oblasts	10 Autonomous Okrugs
2 Federal Cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg)	1 Autonomous Oblast

ical landscape, with tax payments from the city regularly comprising one third of the Federation's total tax revenues. Such high levels of inequality between regions are particularly worrying in multinational federations where the unequal distribution of resources can quickly take on an ethnic dimension exacerbating tensions between ethnic groups.

Constitutional Asymmetry

One of the most destructive legacies that Russia inherited from the Soviet Union was its ethnoterritorial form of federalism. The dual nature of Russian federalism, which grants different constitutional rights and powers to different subjects of the federation, has created major tensions and divisions between federal subjects. Although the Russian constitution declares that all subjects are constitutionally equal (Article 5), in fact the twenty-one ethnic republics have been granted far greater powers than the other subjects of the federation.

Political Asymmetry

Socioeconomic and constitutional asymmetry in turn generates political asymmetry. For example, rich "donor subjects" (regions that pay more taxes to the federal budget than they receive back) have been more successful in carving out higher levels of political autonomy than the impoverished "recipient regions," which depend on federal transfers from the center for their economic survival. Constitutional and political asymmetry led to the creation of highly diverse political regimes in regions during the Yeltsin era, ranging from partial democracies at one end of the political spectrum to electoral dictatorships at the other end.⁹

The "War of Constitutions" and the Development of Contract Federalism

During the period from October 1991 to October 1993, there was a fierce struggle for power between the Russian presidency and parliament. Taking advantage of this period of political turmoil, a number of republics were able to ratify radical confederalist constitutions, which granted themselves considerable powers of political and economic autonomy. As Umnova notes, at least four types of central-local relations were in operation during this period: "(1) international relations (between Chechnya and Russia); (2) confederative relations (between Russia and the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan); (3) federative relations with elements of confederative and unitary systems (in almost all of the ethnic republics and the richer donor territorially based subjects); and (4) federative relations with elements of a unitary system (in the poor territorially based regions)."¹⁰

To bring a halt to the parade of sovereignties, the Yeltsin regime was forced to sign a Federation Treaty in March 1992 in which it conceded major powers to the ethnic republics. In the treaty, the republics were recognized as sovereign states with rights of secession and granted independent powers over taxation and ownership of their land and natural resources. In addition, the republics were to have their own "constitutions, legislation, elected legislative bodies (parliaments), supreme courts, and presidents."¹¹ In contrast, the territorially based regions were given none of the above rights and their chief executives (governors) were to be

directly appointed by the president. The Federation Treaty was ratified by the Russian parliament in April 1992 and its text was directly incorporated into the Russian constitution (the 1978 RSFSR constitution).

Tatarstan and Chechnya both refused to sign the Federation Treaty, and in November 1992, Tatarstan adopted its own rival constitution, which declared that, "it was a sovereign state, and a subject of international law, *associated* with the Russian federation on the basis of a treaty and the mutual delegation of powers."¹² Chechnya, which had declared its independence as early as November 1991, proclaimed that it was an independent sovereign state and a full and equal member of the world community of states.

The December 1993 Constitution

The Federation Treaty had been signed at a time when Yeltsin was weak and appeared to be losing his struggle for power with the Russian parliament. Yeltsin's victory over the parliament in October 1993 turned the tables, and Yeltsin now sought to take back in December 1993

what he had been forced to give up in March 1992. Thus, much to the chagrin of the ethnic republics, the text of the Federation Treaty was left out of the new constitution and Article 5 declared that all subjects of the federation were equal.

The constitution also stripped the republics of their rights of sovereignty and secession. Thus, Article 4(1) states that, "The sovereignty of the Russian Federation extends to the whole of its territory," and Article 4(3) declares that, "The Russian Federation ensures the integrity and inviolability of its territory." Further articles guarantee the supremacy of the federal constitution. Thus, Article 4(2) states that, "the constitution of the Russian Federation and federal laws are paramount throughout the territory of the federation" and Article 15(1) declares that, "the Constitution has supreme legal force, is direct acting and applies throughout the territory of the Federation. Laws and other legal enactments adopted in the Federation must not contradict the Constitution."

The distribution of powers between the federation and its subjects is set out in Articles 71–73 and is "based on the fundamental principal that the subjects of the Federation 'enjoy full state power' in all areas that have not been expressly delegated to the Federation or defined as spheres of joint competence."¹³ An important article in the constitution is Article 78, which allows the center to transfer "the implementation of some of its powers' to the federal subjects and vice versa."¹⁴ This article was used by the Yeltsin regime to promote the development of bilateralism and "contract federalism."

The constitution also contains a number of ambiguous or even contradictory articles. For example, Article 11 states that central-periphery relations are deter-

"By 1996, the Yeltsin administration reported that nineteen of the twenty-one republican constitutions were in breach of the federal constitution."

mined “by the Federal Treaty and other treaties,” which suggests that the Federation Treaty and the constitution are both still valid. Furthermore, although Article 5(4) declares that “all components of the Russian Federation are equal with each other in their interrelationships with federal bodies of state power,” some subjects are clearly more equal than others. Once again, as in the Federation Treaty, the republics were granted greater powers than the other subjects of the Federation. For example, only the republics were granted their own constitutions, official languages, and citizenship rights. Furthermore, in contradiction to Articles 4(1) and 4(3) discussed above, Article 5(2) defines the republics as “states” implying that they have independent rights of sovereignty and secession.

The status of the autonomous okrugs is also ambiguous, to say the least. According to the constitution, the okrugs have equal status with all other federal subjects, although nine of them are situated inside the territories of other subjects (oblasts and krajs). This would seem to suggest that the okrugs are simultaneously subordinate and equal to the regions in which they are situated.

The Weak Legitimacy of the Russian Constitution

A crucial aspect of any federal state is that it should be founded on a voluntary union or covenant. In Russia, Yeltsin’s presidential constitution was imposed on the country from above and although the constitution was supported by 58.4 percent of the voters nationwide (according to official statistics) it failed to be ratified in forty-two of the eighty-nine subjects. The election to ratify the constitution was boycotted altogether in Chechnya.

It was not long before a number of those republics whose citizens had rejected the constitution declared that the federal constitution was not valid in their territories and a war of sovereignties was waged between the republics and the federal center. By 1996, the Yeltsin administration reported that nineteen of the twenty-one republican constitutions were in breach of the federal constitution. As Smith notes, such violations included, “declaring the republic a subject of international law, establishing illegal taxes and dues, and proclaiming the right to decide questions of war and peace and the right to grant citizenship.”¹⁵ Those constitutions (Chuvashiya, Sakha, Chechnya, Tatarstan, and Tuva), ratified between the signing of the Federation Treaty in March 1992 and the ratification of the Russian constitution on December 12, 1993, were the most confederal, including declarations of sovereignty, rights of secession, and citizenship. As noted above, Tatarstan declared that it was an associate member of the Russian Federation. Only Chechnya went so far as to declare its complete secession, and in 1994 and 1999, Russian troops had to be sent into Chechnya to restore federal control.

Bilateral Treaties and the Formation of a Treaty-based Federation

During the period 1994–98, forty-six bilateral treaties were signed between the federal government and subjects of the federation, which gave the local signatories a whole host of political and economic privileges. The vast majority of these treaties (forty-two of the forty-six) also contained provisions that violated the Russian constitution. In many instances the bilateral treaties actually legitimized

those extraconstitutional powers that the republics had unilaterally proclaimed in their republican constitutions. Special and often secretive agreements attached to the bilateral treaties have, in addition, granted the republics the right to appoint federal officials in their territories, conduct their own independent relations with foreign states, set up their own national banks, and create their own political and administrative organs.

Although Yeltsin adopted a presidential decree in 1996, which stated that all treaties had to conform with Articles 71 and 72 of the constitution, this was to no avail. In June 1999, the Russian parliament also adopted a law to regulate the treaties, which reiterated that all new treaties had to conform to the federal constitution.¹⁶ However, the law came too late to make any impact, as no new treaties were forthcoming after the last bilateral treaty was signed with Moscow oblast in June 1998.

Supporters of bilateral treaties argue that the agreements have made it possible to ease tensions between the center and the federal subjects, thereby allowing federal agencies “the ability to take into consideration the specific features of each region.”¹⁷ Moreover, the bilateral treaties “make the legal system more flexible and responsive to regional diversity and help promote consensus and compromise.”¹⁸ The treaties also played a positive role in preventing the disintegration of the federation. Opponents of the treaties stressed that they “contradicted the constitutional principles of federalism, destroyed the unity of the legal system, weakened the supremacy of the federal Constitution and federal laws, and violated the principle of the equality of subjects of the Russian Federation.”¹⁹ The treaties have also been criticized for their lack of transparency and their absence of a democratic mandate. None of the treaties were ratified by regional or federal parliaments. Moreover, not one of the treaties was brought before the constitutional court for scrutiny. As Gordon Hahn stresses, “Conflict and bargaining among officials and bureaucrats, not the rise of civil society and culture, led the process. . . . Russia’s asymmetrical federalism was superimposed on weak semi- or quasi-democratic institutions and not embedded in strongly democratic institutions, as was the case, for example, in the democratic transition in Spain.”²⁰

However, Yeltsin’s compromise with the ethnic republics was bought at a cost—that of undermining the federal constitution and sanctioning authoritarianism.²¹ As Furman notes, “The federal center agreed to grant the republics more rights than the Russian provinces, allowing them to develop into ‘vassal kingdoms’ in whose internal affairs Moscow did not interfere as long as they regularly paid Yeltsin their ‘tribute’ in the form of votes—which they did in every important federal election.”²²

By the mid-1990s, political power had passed from the center to the regions and regional politics was firmly under the control of regional elites. As the Ministry of Justice reported, of the forty-four thousand regional acts adopted during the period of 1995–97, almost half were in violation of the Russian constitution and federal legislation.²³ For Sakwa, Russia’s “war of laws” created a process of “segmented regionalism,” which fragmented the sovereignty of the polity and transformed Russia from a multinational state into a “multi-state state.”²⁴ By June

1998, when the last bilateral accord was signed, Russia was governed (or ungoverned) by five competing and contradictory sources of law: (1) the federal constitution, (2) the federal treaty, (3) federal laws, (4) bilateral treaties, and (5) the constitutions and charters of the republics and regions.²⁵

In 2000, Putin came to power with a mandate to reassert central control from Moscow, to rein in the powers of the ethnic republics, and to bring an end to the “war of laws.”

The Fears of Ethnic Secessionism

During the period of the “parade of sovereignties” (1991–93), there were real worries that the Russian Federation would follow the fate of the Soviet Union and fall apart. Chechnya’s unilateral declaration of independence and its refusal to sign the federation treaty only served to confirm deep-seated fears that it would not be long before the other ethnic republics would follow suit. The creation of federal state, based on the dual principles of ethnicity and territory, was therefore seen by many members of the political elite as the only way to prevent the disintegration of the state.

However, fears of Russia’s ethnic disintegration have been exaggerated. There are a number of demographic, economic, and geopolitical factors, which make it highly unlikely that the federation will fall apart. First, Russians make up 83 percent of the population and the second largest ethnic group, the Tatars, comprises just 3.8 percent.²⁶ Second, Russia’s twenty-one republics make up just 15.7 percent of the total population of the federation, and in only seven of these republics does the indigenous population comprise a majority (Chechnya, Chuvashiya, Dagestan,²⁷ Ingushetiya, Kalmykiya, North Osetiya-Alaniya, and Tuva). Third, of the eleven autonomous areas (the ten autonomous okrugs and the autonomous oblast), the eponymous population is a majority in only two.

If we assume that viable demands for secession can only come from those subjects whose territories border foreign states and where a majority of their population is indigenous, then this leaves us with just six republics that meet these criteria:²⁸ Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetiya, Kalmykiya, North Osetiya-Alaniya, and Tuva. Another factor to take into consideration is the economic status of these republics. All six are totally dependent on the federal budget for their economic survival. Thus, it is not surprising that only Chechnya has gone so far as to declare its outright secession. Indeed, Chechnya’s experience of two bloody wars and occupation by Russian troops is another important factor that has undoubtedly dampened the separatist demands from other republics.

Federalism, Ethnicity, and Democracy

Clearly democracy will be that much more difficult to create and consolidate in multinational states where there are disputes over the boundaries of the state and desire by some groups to secede from the federation. Russia’s wars with Chechnya have not only frightened other republics into submission, they have also bolstered authoritarianism at the center and played a major role in bringing President Putin to power. As Rustow stresses, no democracy can be consolidated until

consensus has been reached over national unity and any contested boundaries of the state have been settled.²⁹

However, as I have outlined elsewhere, Yeltsin's negotiated or contract form of federalism allowed authoritarianism to flourish unchecked in the ethnic republics.³⁰ The leaders of the republics have largely maintained their rule through rigged and guided elections. Moreover, the intimidation of political opponents and other forms of corruption are endemic in the republics; ethnic minorities are treated as second-class citizens, and human rights abuses are commonplace.

Putin's Radical Assault on the Principles of Federalism and Democracy

It was Putin's election victories in 1999 and 2000 that paved the way for his first package of radical reforms, which were initiated in his first term in office, March 2000–March 2004. More recently, in the wake of Putin's second presidential victory and the Beslan hostage tragedy, the Kremlin has begun to unveil a second package of federal and political reforms.

Putin's Stage 1 Reforms: March 2000–September 2004

Armed with a democratic mandate from his impressive victory in the 2000 presidential elections and coupled with the surprise success of his presidential party (Unity) in the December 1999 Duma elections, Putin was able to persuade a now tame parliament that a radical overhaul of the federal system was essential, if Russia was not to collapse into anarchy and ethnic turmoil. Under the anarchy of the Yeltsin years, the regions had almost turned into the personal fiefdoms of the regional governors, and there was now a general consensus that something radical had to be done to reinstate a single legal space in Russia.

One of the major powers of the regional executives was their control over the appointment of the heads of federal bodies situated in their territories. By controlling the appointment of such powerful officials (e.g., heads of the tax inspectorate, financial oversight bodies, customs offices, the judiciary, procuracy, central electoral commissions, and others), regional executives were able to undermine the authority of the federal government and to thwart the implementation of federal policies. As Putin stated in his annual message to the federal assembly in 2004:

The Russian Constitution and federal laws had lost the power of supreme law in many regions. Federal laws were applied selectively, at one's discretion. . . . Things went so far that individual regions in effect found themselves outside the common legal, financial and fiscal system of the state, stopped contributing taxes to the federal budget, and were demanding the creation of their own gold and hard currency reserves, their own energy and customs systems and regional monetary units. The emerging common market of goods and services began to fall apart.³¹

To "restore an effective vertical chain of authority" and to implement a uniform policy, Putin called for a dictatorship of law to enforce universal legal standards across the federation.

There were five major strands to Putin's first package of federal reforms which were implemented during the period 2000–04: (1) The creation of seven new fed-

eral super-districts, (2) a reform of the federation council, (3) the creation of a new state council, (4) the granting of new powers to the president to dismiss regional governors and dissolve regional assemblies, (5) a major campaign to bring regional charters and republican constitutions into line with the Russian constitution. Below I examine each of these reforms in turn.

1. The Creation of Seven Federal Districts

On May 13, 2000, Putin adopted what was to be the first of a package of decrees whose key aim was to rein in the power of the governors and to “strengthen the unity of the state.”³² In this first major reform of the federal system, Putin divided the

“The powers and responsibilities of the polpredy, at least on paper, are very impressive.”

country into seven superdistricts, each of which contained a dozen or more federal subjects, and he appointed an envoy (“plenipotentiary representative” or “polpredy” for short) to each district.

Five of the original envoys had a background in the army or security services. Of the two civilians, only Sergei Kirienko (the former Russian prime minister) had experience working in politics at the national level and the other was a former diplomat. Moreover, each of the presidential envoys had a staff of approximately fifteen hundred officials, 70 percent of whom had a background in the military or federal security service (FSB).³³ In terms of responsibilities, their rank is somewhere between deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration and deputy prime minister.³⁴ The high status of the envoys is also reflected in their membership on the Russian Security Council, and their right to attend cabinet meetings of the federal government. In fact, the decree setting up the federal districts was drafted by the security council. The status of the envoys is also reflected in their regular meetings with the president. To prevent the polpredy “going native,” the presidential administration funds them directly.

Power and Responsibilities of the Polpredy

The powers and responsibilities of the polpredy, at least on paper, are very impressive. Their key tasks are: (1) to monitor the regions’ compliance with the Russian constitution, federal laws, and presidential decrees; (2) to oversee the selection and placement of personnel in the regional branches of the federal bureaucracy; (3) to protect the national security interests of the regions; and (4) to set up and coordinate interregional economic programs within their districts.³⁵ They also have the power to recommend that the president suspend specific local laws or decrees that contradict federal laws and to call for the dismissal of governors and the dissolution of regional assemblies if they adopt decrees or laws that violate federal laws. In addition to the above powers, Petrov and Slider note

the following unstated functions of the polpredy: “Bringing military, police, and security organs out from under governors and back under the control of the center [and] overseeing and controlling the process of gathering compromising material (*kompromat*) on regional leaders.” Here, the Kremlin’s Main Oversight Department and the Audit Chamber play key roles, including the removal from power of “regional leaders who are considered obstacles by the Kremlin.”³⁶

2. Reform of the Federation Council

In a second major initiative, Putin stripped the governors and chairs of regional assemblies of their ex officio right to sit in the upper chamber of the parliament.³⁷ They were to be replaced (from January 2002) with delegates chosen by the regional assemblies and chief executives. The new body would now meet full time, instead of a few days a month as in the past. New members would gain far greater opportunities to scrutinize legislation coming from the Duma and the presidency. More troubling for the governors was that once they lost their seats on the council, they also forfeited their right to immunity from criminal prosecution.

Although Putin has been able to influence the selection of new delegates in some federal districts, we have witnessed the unforeseen selection of outgoing governors or deputy governors. Legislative chairs have also selected former high-ranking members of their assemblies as their representatives. Thus, by the end of January 2002, twenty-three former governors and fifteen former regional speakers had been appointed to the council.³⁸ And in other cases, regions have chosen Moscow insiders or high-ranking entrepreneurs. Indeed, Muscovites now make up more than 70 percent of the membership of the upper chamber.

The Federation Council has also witnessed a very high turnover of members, with 131 of the 178 members changing hands since January 2002. Such developments have undermined one of the basic prerequisites for a federation, namely what Preston King calls “the legislative entrenchment” of federal subjects in central decision-making.³⁹ The formation of a powerful pro-Putin group, *Federatsiya*, in the council, and the election on December 5, 2001, of Putin’s choice of speaker (Sergei Mironov), have also seriously weakened the independence of the upper chamber.

Putin has now created a much more compliant and passive council that is now there primarily to do the president’s bidding. As Corwin notes, the upper chamber has become “a kind of legislative conveyor belt. All bills, even bills that directly infringe upon regional interests, are quickly considered and approved.”⁴⁰ For example, in the summer of 2002, deputies supported changes to the law on the police, which rescinded the governor’s powers of appointment of top regional law-enforcement officials.

3. The State Council

To sweeten the pill, and to partially compensate the regional elite for their loss of membership in the Federation Council, on September 1, 2000, Putin created a new presidential advisory body—the State Council.⁴¹ The new body, which is made up of all of the chief executives from the regions, meets once every three months and is chaired by the president. There is also an inner presidium made up

of seven governors (one from each of the federal districts), whose membership rotates each six months. The members of the presidium meet with the president once every month.

However, neither the State Council nor its presidium is likely to have real powers. The new body is purely consultative and has no law-making functions. Moreover, as it was drawn up by presidential decree, the president may similarly dissolve it. Its main aim at present is to give the regional leaders a direct channel to the president and some limited input into policymaking.

4. Dismissal of Governors and Dissolution of Regional Legislatures

The fourth major reform struck at the very heart of the regions' power structures—a new law giving Putin powers to dismiss popularly elected governors and to dissolve regional assemblies.⁴² As Putin explained, this legislation makes it possible for federal intervention “in situations in which government bodies at the local level [have flouted] the Russian Constitution and federal laws, violating the uniform rights and freedoms of Russian citizens.”⁴³ The new law gives both chambers of the legislature, the general procurator, and the regional legislatures the right to recommend that a governor be removed. However, as Corwin notes, the process is so long and involved that regional leaders would have to demonstrate “unprecedented obstinacy, audacity, and even stupidity” before they could be fired. For a regional head to be dismissed,

One, he must on two different occasions ignore presidential decrees, two, allow the passage of two bills with provisions that violate federal laws, or three, make use on two different occasions of regional acts previously denounced by the president or the courts. And, in each of these cases, a court verdict is required ruling that these actions constitute violations of federal law.⁴⁴

It is interesting to note that Putin did not use his new powers against the governor of Primorskii Krai, Yevgenii Nazdratenko. Instead, Putin simply dismissed Nazdratenko and, to keep him quiet, rewarded him with a ministerial post in Moscow. Likewise, regional heads in Ingushetiya and Sakha were removed without resorting to these new powers, and only after being promised important posts in Moscow. Moreover, as Orttung and Reddaway note, “even if the president did force a governor out of office, the region will hold new elections within six months, and there is no guarantee that the new governor will be any more pleasing to the federal government than the old one.”⁴⁵

However, in a somewhat contradictory move, Putin promoted the passage of the so-called third-term law through the Duma. Under this law, the leaders of sixty-nine regions were granted the right to run for a third term, and some for a fourth, although such extensions to their tenure violated regional charters and republican constitutions.⁴⁶ Putin's support for such a law revealed the weakness of his position at this time, and the stark reality that he still depended on regional elites to “bring home the votes” in the upcoming 2003–04 parliamentary and presidential elections. After his sweeping electoral victories in 2003 and 2004, Putin has now called for governors to be directly appointed by the president.

The law also called for the dissolution of regional assemblies if they violated federal legislation. According to this legislation, regional assemblies have three months to amend any legislation that violates federal laws or legal proceedings may be enacted against them. However, the president must gain the approval of the State Duma before an assembly can be dissolved.

In April 2002, the constitutional court reaffirmed the president's right to fire governors and the State Duma's powers to disband regional legislatures. However, it made the procedures even more complicated and protracted. Under this new ruling, for the removal process to begin, the law requires that the action of a governor or regional legislature must have "caused massive and serious violations of individual and civil rights and freedoms, threatened the unity and territorial integrity or national security of the Russian Federation and its ability to defend itself, or the unity of the country's legal and economic space."⁴⁷

5. The Campaign to Bring Regional Charters and Republican Constitutions in Line with the Russian Constitution

Putin also launched a major campaign to bring regional legislation into line with the federal constitution and created a special commission headed by Dmitry Kozak, the deputy head of his presidential commission, to oversee this work. By 2000, the number of normative legal acts adopted by the regions and republics exceeded three hundred thousand, and of these, approximately one quarter violated federal laws.⁴⁸

Putin struck out at the powers of the ethnic republics. On June 27, 2000, the constitutional court asserted that the declarations of sovereignty in the republics' constitutions were unconstitutional. The federal procurator instructed the envoys that all legislation was to be brought into line with federal norms by January 1, 2001. Reporting back on this date, Kozak confirmed that 80 percent of the regional laws had been brought into line with federal law.⁴⁹ Putin also called for the bilateral treaties to be rescinded and reported in his annual address to the federal assembly in April 2002, that that twenty-eight of the forty-six treaties had been annulled.⁵⁰ By the summer of 2004, only eight treaties were still operative, the most important with Moscow, Tatarstan, and Sverdlovsk.⁵¹

However, despite these achievements, it would appear that the number of laws violating federal norms might actually be rising. For example, in Bashkortostan there are almost as many violations of federal law in its new constitution (51 of the 164 articles contain violations), which was adopted in November 2001, as there were in its old constitution. Likewise, Tatarstan's new constitution, which was adopted in April 2002, still contains as many as fifty points of contention. Moreover, both Bashkortostan and Tatarstan continue to uphold their bilateral treaties with Moscow. The Tatarstan leadership has also steadfastly refused to renounce the republic's sovereignty and the new constitution also reiterates the republic's citizenship rights.⁵²

Putin's Second Round of Reforms: Post-Beslan

On September 13, 2004, in the aftermath of the Beslan hostage tragedy, Putin put forth a second package of federal and political reforms: (1) the presidential

appointment of governors, (2) a second reform of the federation council, (3) the abolition of the single mandate seats in the Duma, (4) proposals to raise the number of members a party must have before it can be legally registered, (5) the merger of federal subjects and the gubernization of Russia.

Putin argued that his new policies were necessary, "to ensure the unity of the country, the strengthening of state structures and confidence in the authorities, and the creation of an effective system of internal security."⁵³ However, all of these proposals had already been discussed in the Kremlin before the horrors of Beslan.

1. The Presidential Appointment of Governors

On October 29, Putin's tamed Duma voted to adopt, in its first reading, Putin's controversial proposals to eliminate the direct election of regional chief executives. Under the new law,⁵⁴ regional legislative assemblies are charged with the task of giving approval to the president's nominees.⁵⁵ If a legislature twice declines to confirm the president's nominee, the president has the right to disband the assembly and to appoint an acting regional head to serve until a new legislature is elected. The president also has the right to dismiss any regional head for failure to fulfill his or her duties or if they lose the president's confidence.

It is not surprising that a majority of Russia's regional governors have publicly embraced Putin's proposals; many of them are coming to the end of their legally proscribed terms in office, and others are so unpopular with their electorates that they have only been able to stay in power by resorting to electoral fraud and corruption. As Petrov notes, by the end of 2004, fifty governors will have come up for their second and last terms in office; in 2005, this will rise to sixty-seven, in 2006; seventy-five; and in 2007, eighty-eight.⁵⁶ Those thirty or so governors who stood on United Russia's party list for the 2003 Duma elections, and those who brought home the votes for Putin in the 2004 presidential elections, will now, no doubt, hope to be rewarded with further terms in office.

Supporters of the law on appointing governors, such as the chair of the Duma's constitutional legislation committee, Vladimir Pligin (a member of United Russia), argue that it will strengthen the power vertical and defend its legality by citing Article 77 of the Russian constitution, which calls for "a unified system of executive power in the Russian Federation."⁵⁷ Opponents argue that it will destroy the country's constitutionally mandated federative structure and replace it with a unitary state. For example, Vladimir Ryzhkov, one of the few independent deputies left in the Duma, declared, "The president is asking us to violate three constitutional principles at one go: the principle of democracy, by depriving citizens of their right to elect their own leaders; the principle of federalism since appointment from above has nothing to do with the principles of a federation; and the principle of a law-based state, since the president is proposing that we ignore the constitution, the laws, and the decisions of the Constitutional Court." In an open letter to Constitutional Court Chair Valery Zorkin, Ryzhkov points out ten articles of the Russian constitution that he believes are violated by Putin's proposals (Articles 1, 3, 5, 10, 11, 32, 71, 72, 73, and 77).⁵⁸

In utilizing his new powers, Putin has tended to reappoint incumbent governors. For example, Sergei Darkin (Primorski Krai), Konstantin Titov (Samara Region), Viktor Shershunov (Kostroma Region), Petr Sumin (Chelyabinsk Region), Aman Tulyev (Kemerovo Region), and Yegor Stroyev (Orel Region) have all been returned to power. All of these governors “exercise extensive personal control over their territories while remaining loyal to the Kremlin.”⁵⁹ In only four cases has the sitting governor been ousted: on March 9, Vladimir Loginov was dismissed from his post as governor of the Koryak Autonomous Okrug; on March 30, 2005, the communist governor of Tula Oblast, Vasily Starodubtsev, was replaced by Vyacheslav Dundka;⁶⁰ and in April 2005, deputies voted to impeach the governor of Altai Krai, Mikhail Yevdokimov; and the ousted governor of Saratov, Dmitry Ayatskov, was replaced by Pavel Ipatov.

2. Putin’s Second Reform of the Federation Council

The cynical nature in which Putin carries out federal reforms is well illustrated in his new proposals to bring

regional governors and the chairs of regional assemblies back into the federation council. When the governors were appointed by popular mandate and Putin could not control the membership of the upper chamber, Putin ousted them from the council. But now that he plans to appoint the governors, he has called for them to be brought back into the chamber. Putin now effectively has the right to appoint one half of the members of the upper house—a power which Yeltsin also held during the period from 1991–95.

“Putin’s policy to eliminate single-mandate seats in the State Duma and elect all of the members of the lower house by proportional representation is clearly designed to make the deputies loyal to the Kremlin.”

3. The Abolition of the Single-mandate Seats in the Duma

Putin’s policy to eliminate single-mandate seats in the State Duma and elect all of the members of the lower house by proportional representation is clearly designed to make the deputies loyal to the Kremlin. At present single-mandate deputies have divided loyalties to the Kremlin and their constituents or are firmly under the control of the regional governors. After the adoption of this system, when all the deputies are elected from party lists (with a new and higher electoral threshold of 7 percent), the party leaders in Moscow will have far greater control over them than they do at present.

4. Changes to the Law on Political Parties

In April 2005, the Duma adopted, in its second reading, amendments to the law on political parties, which now mandate that a party must have a minimum of fifty thousand members (compared to the former stipulated ten thousand). A party will also have to maintain regional offices in no less than half of Russia’s

eighty-nine regions with a minimum of five hundred people in each region (as against one hundred in the original legislation).⁶¹ Any party that fails to show the necessary membership figures by January 1, 2006, will be barred from competing in elections.⁶² The implementation of this law will inevitably reduce the number of parties competing in elections.

Putin's law on political parties also prohibits regional parties and electoral blocs from competing in regional elections. As Mikhaleva notes, previously "regional parties served as political machines for incumbent governors. This reform, thus further limits the powers of regional heads while augmenting that of the Center."⁶³

Putin has also amended the legislation on the election of regional assemblies. Instead of first-past-the-post elections, half of each legislative assembly (from July 2003) is now constituted through proportional representation. Currently, United Russia has factions in two-thirds of regional assemblies, but a majority of seats in just twelve. Once the new law on the appointment of governors takes root, and the legislative assemblies are charged with ratifying the president's choice of chief executive, it will be much more important to the Kremlin that United Russia has a majority of seats in the regional parliaments. With fewer parties able to compete in the elections and the implementation of the new electoral rules, United Russia will have a far greater chance of winning a dominant control over the regional assemblies.⁶⁴ This may explain why, in yet a further twist, Putin's April 2005 address to the Russian parliament called for regional governors to be chosen from the parties that win the greatest number of seats in the regional assemblies.⁶⁵

5. The Merger of Federal Subjects

As Coalson notes, many Russian political analysts predict that Putin will use the momentum created by Beslan to vastly reduce the number of federal subjects.⁶⁶ Federation Council Chair Morozov and First Deputy Chair of the Duma Sliska (Unified Russia) have both stipulated an ideal figure of forty-five federal subjects. However, Dmitry Oreshkin has poured scorn on such suggestions. He argues that the process of merging regions is so complicated that the Kremlin will probably only be able to reduce the number of federal subjects from eighty-nine to seventy at the lowest.⁶⁷ A law, adopted in December 2001, outlined the time-consuming and complex procedures necessary for the merging of federal subjects. According to the law, all changes must be voluntary and requests must come from both regions in question. Before the process can begin, the citizens of both regions must approve the merger in a referendum. Then legislation is drawn up that requires the approval of two-thirds of the members of the Duma and three-quarters of the members of the Federation Council. However, this assumes that Putin will not use his constitutional majority in the Duma to pass a new, less onerous law on mergers.

There are real fears that these mergers will lead to the gubernization of Russia, and that the twenty-one ethnic republics and eleven autonomous okrugs will be swallowed up by the territorially defined regions. There is also evidence that Putin's merger policy has sharpened territorial disputes across the federation, potentially opening a Pandora's box of ethnic and territorial disputes. Although

there has been consensus over the merger of Komi-Permyak Autonomous Oblast with Perm Oblast, as well as the merger of Taimyr and Evenk autonomous oblasts with Krasnoyarsk Krai, there has been much more opposition from ethnic Adygs to the proposed unification of Adygeya with Krasnodar Krai. As Paul Goble notes, there are now demands from Adygeya leaders for the “creation of a single Cherkess (Circassian) Republic, which they believe should include, in addition to the Adygeya Republic, the territory of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and about half of Krasnodar Krai.”⁶⁸ In addition, Krasnoyarsk leaders are engaged in a territorial dispute with the Republic of Khakasia, with some officials even urging that the “Krai absorb all of Khakasia as well as the neighboring Republic of Tyva.”⁶⁹

Federalism and Electoral Authoritarianism

When Putin first came to power in 2000, many scholars of Russian politics were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, believing that his federal reforms were a necessary counterweight to the anarchy and chaos of the Yeltsin years. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the tide of scholarly opinion has now turned against Putin, and there is now little faith left in his democratic credentials.⁷⁰ I agree that the question that now needs to be addressed is not so much what kind of democracy exists in Russia, but rather, what kind of authoritarian regime has now been instigated. I argue that Schedler’s concept of “electoral authoritarianism” best captures the reality of Russian politics under Putin.

There are many competing definitions of democracy, ranging from the minimalist concept of “electoral democracy,” which focuses almost exclusively on the provision of “free and fair elections,” to the much broader concept of “liberal democracy” which requires the institution of other “vital dimensions of democratic constitutionalism such as the rule of law, political accountability, bureaucratic integrity, and public deliberation.”⁷¹ Some regimes may conduct elections and tolerate some pluralism and competition, “but at the same time violate minimal democratic norms so severely and systematically that it makes no sense to classify them as democratic.” These regimes do not represent limited, deficient, or distorted forms of democracy, but rather are examples of what Schedler calls “electoral autocracies,” which “neither practice democracy nor resort regularly to naked repression.”⁷² By organizing periodic elections, leaders “try to obtain at least a semblance of democratic legitimacy, hoping to satisfy external as well as internal actors. At the same time, by placing those elections under tight authoritarian controls they try to cement their continued hold on power. Their dream is to reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risk of democratic uncertainty.” Schedler concludes that electoral democracies “comply with minimal democratic norms” while electoral authoritarian regimes do not.⁷³

I argue that the Russian Federation is now best classified as an electoral authoritarian regime and that Putin’s centrally sponsored authoritarianism is now replacing the indigenous authoritarianism that flourished in the regions under Yeltsin. Slowly, but surely, the administrative resources of the center are winning out over the administrative resources of the regions. This is not to suggest that Putin now

dominates all regions and that the Kremlin is able to score victories in all regional elections—this is far from the case. Nor is the Kremlin always united itself in the candidates it supports in gubernatorial elections. “There are many towers in the Kremlin.” In some regions, there exists a kind of oligarchic pluralism by default. Regional economic and political elites compete for power with each other and with the federal authorities. In others, oligarchic monopolies are dominant.⁷⁴ Moreover, we have witnessed instances of regional courts and electoral commissions supporting one gubernatorial candidate while the central electoral commission and supreme court support another, as was the case in the Krasnoyarsk gubernatorial election of 2002. But I would argue that the center of gravity has clearly shifted in favor of the center since Putin came to power.

As Gel'man stresses,

while the first regional elections held in the early 1990s were an important step on the path to democratizing political life in the regions, in the beginning of this decade we are witnessing movement in the other direction, a “de-democratization” of Russian political life. The formal elections are nothing more than a smoke screen for uncompetitive voting, hiding the informal practice in which leaders are simply appointed, as happened during the Soviet era.⁷⁵

Moreover, as Petrov concludes, “the fate of elections in Russia is more and more often decided not at the polling stations, but in Kremlin offices, courtrooms, and election commission headquarters.”⁷⁶ In place of the governors’ control over the regional power ministries, courts, and electoral commissions, which was common during the Yeltsin era, we are now witnessing centralized control over these bodies and the direct and open interference of the presidential administration in regional elections.

For Alexander Lukin, electoral clanism rather than electoral democracy dominates the political landscape in Russia. Here, “elections are not a means of selecting public officials according to law, . . . rather they are merely the means of settling disputes among post-totalitarian clans that generally operate outside the law.”⁷⁷ Officials at the federal level have taken up the cry of regional dictators, such as Rakhimov in Bashkortostan and Shaimiev in Tatarstan—“It is not so important how the votes are cast but rather how they are counted!” What Pribylovsky calls Bashkir Electoral Technology (BET) is one of the favorite methods employed by the Putin administration to manipulate elections. Here, opposition candidates are prevented from competing by decisions of the regional electoral commissions or local courts, or they are expelled from the elections during the campaign itself. In some cases, compromising materials may be collected by the security forces to “persuade” incumbent governors to voluntarily withdraw from the elections.⁷⁸ The security forces will also be assisted in their work by officials from the Kremlin’s main oversight department, who, as Petrov and Slider note, “have a substantial presence on the polpredy’s staff.” In addition, members of the audit chamber (headed by former FSB head Sergei Stepashin), which has recently set up local financial control agencies in the federal districts, will also assist the polpredy in investigating the financial dealings of regional governors.⁷⁹

As O'Donnell notes, "in democracies accountability runs not only vertically, making elected officials answerable to the ballot box, but also horizontally, across a network of relatively autonomous powers that can call into question, and eventually punish, improper ways of discharging the responsibilities of a given official."⁸⁰ But in Putin's Russia, state officials engaged in electoral manipulation and fraud often have the Kremlin's blessing. As Petrov stresses, "using courts and *izbirkoms* (election commissions) in favor of the ruling candidate is not new. What is new is that the Kremlin is able to exert influence on electoral outcomes by manipulating court decisions. Now that the center—instead of the regional authorities—controls the courts, courts are ruling in favor of the center, and their decisions are final."⁸¹

BET takes its name from the illegal and corrupt practices of President Rakhimov of Bashkortostan who was one of the first regional leaders to employ these methods successfully. Following Putin's ascent to power, BET has been used extensively by the presidential administration. For example, "in the first two years of Putin's presidency political figures not to the liking of the president in the regions of Kaluga, Kursk, Krasnodar, Primorskii Krai, Sakha, North Osetiya and Ingushetiya were removed from the political stage."⁸²

As Pribylovsky notes, in 2000–02, BET was adopted in elections for the governors of "Saratov (March 2000), Khanty-Mansi AO (March 2000), Kursk (October 2000), Primorskii Krai (June 2001), Komi-Perm AO (December 2000), Nizhni Novgorod (July 2001), and Rostov (September 2001); the presidents of Yakutiya (December 2001–January 2002), North Osetiya (January 2002), Ingushetiya (April 2002); [and] mayors of Nizhnii Novgorod (September 2002), Kyzyl (October 2002)."⁸³ In 2003–04, refusals to register candidates and the withdrawal of candidates from elections was implemented in elections; "to the State Assembly of Bashkortostan (March 2003), the Mayor of Novosibirsk (March 2003), the Legislative Assembly of Rostov Oblast (March 2003), Mayor of Norilsk (April 2003), City Duma of Vladivostok (July 2003), Chief Administrator of Omsk Oblast (August–September 2003), President of Chechnya (September–October 2003), the Chief Administrator of Kirov Oblast (December 2003), and also in the elections for the Governor of Krasnodar Krai (March 2004), the Mayor of Vladivostok (July 2004), and for the new President of Chechnya (August 2004)."⁸⁴

Besides this, Pribylovskii notes that a softer form of BET was also used in St. Petersburg in the elections of Matvienko as governor (September–October 2003). Here the incumbent Governor Vladimir Yakovlev was bribed with the post of deputy prime minister before the elections to ensure that a candidate favorable to the president would be appointed. A similar act took place in the repeat elections for the mayor of Noryabr'sk (January–February 2004) and in the elections to the governor of Voronezh Oblast (March 2004)—in both these cases the potential winners both voluntarily withdrew their candidatures.⁸⁵ Finally, as Corwin notes, in gubernatorial elections in Bryansk, Pskov, and Volgograd in November and December 2004, it was the courts, rather than political parties, which played the most significant role, with the main opposition candidates to United Russia "disqualified shortly before the ballot."⁸⁶

Conclusion

Federalism and regional democracy in Russia have been thwarted by the weakness of Russia's civic culture and the lack of a federal and democratic tradition. Regional elites in particular have more often supported authoritarianism than democracy. Throughout its short history, federal relations in Russia have been dominated by extra-legal political and economic relations rather than constitutionalism and the rule of law. When the central leadership has been strong, the constitutional powers of the regions have been curtailed; when the leadership is weak, as it was during the period of the parade of sovereignties, extra constitutional powers were ceded to the regions. When Yeltsin required bilateral treaties to buy votes and ensure that taxes would flow to the federal budget, he was prepared to violate his own federal constitution and grant greater powers to a select group of federal subjects.

Thus, by 1998 (with the conclusion of the last bilateral treaty) the Russian state had been transformed from a constitutional to a contractual federation, and there were now a number of competing and contradictory sources of constitutional authority: the federal constitution, the federal treaty, bilateral treaties, the constitutions of the republics and charters of the regions, and federal and regional laws. Political, not constitutional, criteria would decide which of these competing sources of law were to prevail, which federal subjects were to benefit, and which were to lose out. Under Yeltsin, home-grown authoritarian regimes were allowed to flourish in the republics and indeed were given support by the president as long as the leadership kept ethnic unrest at bay and delivered votes to the president.

Federalism and Democracy

Although acknowledging that not all federal states are democratic, scholars of federalism nonetheless stress the positive relationship between federalism and democracy. Thus, for example, Daniels argues that, "by distributing power, federalism curbs arbitrary rule, both at the center and locally. It decentralizes responsibility while providing a mechanism to restrain potential local conflicts and abuses. It provides a school of democracy, and it quite literally brings government closer to the people."⁸⁷ For King, federation and democracy are synonymous, and for true federalism to function relations between the center and regions must be grounded in constitutional law and democratic representation. For King, only liberal democracies can be truly federal.⁸⁸

Such theories are fine for liberal democracies, but what of transitional regimes, such as Russia, where federalism and democracy need to be constructed and consolidated simultaneously, and where constitutionalism and the rule of law are only weakly developed? The Russian Federation's unique blend of constitutional, socioeconomic, and political asymmetry, far from promoting democracy, has bolstered authoritarian regimes in the regions. High levels of regional autonomy have, as we have seen, led the regions more often in the direction of dictatorship than democracy.⁸⁹ For Elazar, federalism also "implies a posture and attitude toward social as well as political relationships, which lead to human interactions that emphasize coordinative rather than superior-subordinate relationships, negotiated

cooperation, and sharing among parties.”⁹⁰ Moreover, in federations, in contrast to unitary states, regional autonomy is not only devolved but also constitutionally guaranteed. But Putin’s reforms have been driving the state towards the reinstatement of the Soviet-style principles of hierarchy and centralized administrative control from Moscow. Although Putin’s initiatives to bring regional legislation into line with the constitution are to be welcomed, particularly in those ethnic republics where citizens have been deprived of universal democratic rights, there are now serious concerns about the future of federalism and democracy in Russia.

In his address to the federal assembly in April 2005, Putin stated that he regarded “the development of Russia as a free and democratic state as our main political and ideological task.”⁹¹ However, the actual record of his regime tells a different story. For many observers Putin is recreating all the trappings of a full-fledged authoritarian state. The president’s initial reorganization of the federation council, his usurpation of unilateral powers to dismiss regional assemblies and chief executives, and his creation of seven unelected super-governors were all major setbacks for Russian federalism, and his more recent centralizing policy initiatives, initiated in the aftermath of the Beslan hostage tragedy, are further steps towards the development of an authoritarian unitary state.

It is time now to drop any suggestions that Russia qualifies as some kind of qualified democracy (described by words such as semi, façade, pseudo, illiberal, virtual, delegative, or managed).⁹² Putin’s former stealth authoritarianism is now clearly visible for all to see.⁹³ Neither federal nor regional elites are committed to the democratic rules of the game, and the conduct of regional elections has now fallen well below the minimum requirements of even an electoral democracy. In conclusion, electoral authoritarianism is now entrenched in a large number of regions in Russia, and federalism is a sham.

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