

Russian Federalism in Crisis

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In December 1993 Russia ratified its Constitution which in Article 1 proclaimed that it was ‘a democratic federative rule of law state with a republican form of government’. However, during the Yeltsin era a ‘federation’ was formed but the guiding principles of ‘federalism’ were never fully implemented. Instead, a highly asymmetrical and ‘negotiated’ form of federalism was developed, central-local relations became highly politicised and personalised, and the rule of law and constitutionalism were seriously undermined. Moreover, after the inauguration of Vladimir Putin as President in 2000, we witnessed an outright attack by the President on the principles and practices of federalism, and a recentralisation of power in the Kremlin. The major challenge to the Russian state today is not confederalism or the threat of ethnic disintegration, as was the case during the Yeltsin era, but rather defederalisation and the creation of a centralised and quasi-unitary state under the Putin and Medvedev ‘tandem’.

Scholars of federalism have also stressed the positive relationship between federalism and democratisation. By distributing power, federalism curbs arbitrary rule, both at the centre and locally. It decentralizes responsibility while providing a mechanism to restrain potential local conflicts and abuses. It provides a school of democracy, and it brings government closer to the people. However, the impact of federalism on democratisation is a ‘double edged sword’. Here we need to take into account the fact that more autonomy does not necessarily lead to more democracy. For just as sub-national politics can harbour sources of economic dynamism and democratic change, so can the sub-national act as a bulwark for authoritarian enclaves in nationally democratizing polities. Regional elites in Russia have more often used their powers of autonomy to instigate authoritarian regimes than to promote the development of democracy. Moreover, in Russia, it was those federal subjects which were granted the greatest levels of constitutional autonomy, namely the 21 ethnic republics which have been able to instigate the most authoritarian regimes.