

# Russian Regions and International Systems

## A Trajectory of Post-Soviet Interaction

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### **The Challenges of a New Geography**

In the 15 years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has been forced to reinterpret its role in international relations, reformulating its national interests and crafting new methods of participating in world affairs. Among the major challenges Russia has faced is determining how to deal with the new political map of Eurasia. While Moscow has had to develop new policies toward former constituent parts of the Soviet Union which, as independent states, have pursued their own interests, it has also had to formulate new policies toward many regions within Russia, formerly situated in the depth of Soviet national territory but now borderlands.

Russia's new frontier has played a role in shaping Russia's relations with the outside world in a number of ways. The liberalization of the state border regime, a loosening of restrictions on travel and migration, the arrival of transnational firms to Russia's new periphery, and the active role of international nongovernmental organizations have exposed formerly isolated regions and populations to the wider world. Terrorism and drug trafficking pose new challenges to stability in Russia's periphery. The increasingly international aspects of regional economic, social, and, to some extent, political development has made transborder integration one of the most important factors in the evolution of Russia's federal system.

These developments raise questions about the future of the Russian Federation itself. Is there any real danger that Russia's regions will be cut away from the center as a

consequence of their integration into international subsystems? Should activities that promote the international integration of these regions be feared or welcomed? The answers to these questions are of both academic and policy significance.

## Russia's Regions

Since the end of their Soviet-era isolation fifteen years ago, many of Russia's regional units – its oblasts, republics, and krais – have become linked to, and occasionally even become the geographic center of, new transborder regions and international subsystems. The Russian Far East is no longer a passive neighbor of the rapidly growing Asia-Pacific region, whose powerful economies are drawing Russia into its orbit. It is a question only of the time and conditions of the Far East's integration.

Far to the west, Kaliningrad oblast, a Russian "exclave" surrounded by European Union members, has desperately appealed to Moscow (and occasionally to Brussels and other Western capitals) to allow it to create its own agenda for international dialogue.

Southeast Russia hovers over Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia, controlling significant transport routes viewed alternatively as a channel for drug trafficking and illegal migration, or as the basis for the rise of a new Great Silk Road.

Southern Russia is increasingly being classified less as Russia's "soft underbelly" and more as part of a transborder arc of instability which includes Chechnya, as well as the quasi-independent autonomies of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus. These territories, through the work of local and foreign elites, are gradually turning into an arena for a new "great game."

Finally, internal regions of Russia that possess abundant energy resources are becoming centers of attention for many of the world's economic powers.

## The International Integration of Russia's Regions

Russia's regions have experienced three distinct periods of interaction with broader regional and international systems.

The first period stems from the economic collapse of the early 1990s. A struggle for survival defined most activities of ordinary people, NGOs, regional, and even federal authorities. A large part of the population – especially in border regions – engaged in shuttle trade, flying either to Turkey and Germany from western Russia or to China and Korea from the Far East. NGOs and impoverished scholars fought for foreign grants, with the Soros Foundations' Open Society Institute (OSI) playing an especially important role. Authorities sought foreign assistance to reform regional state institutions.

Starting with a gradual rise of oil revenues, the economic effects of tough decisions in 1998, and President Vladimir Putin's rise to power, the picture began to change, however. During Putin's first administration (2000–2004), administrative measures led to an increasing centralization of power and the severing of direct contacts between regional authorities and foreign states. This second period was also marked by the appearance of large internal sources for the financing of nongovernmental activity, such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia foundation, seen as a domestic substitute for

Soros' OSI. The recovery of national industry and the development of large retailers significantly decreased the number of shuttle traders in the population. As a result, transborder integration took on less importance for Russia's regions during this time.

The third period began with Putin's second term, when his administration sought to establish unified control over internal political and economic actors. This change in federal-regional relations, which deepened after the Beslan tragedy of September 2004, drastically limited the resource base of regional elites by including them into the vertical hierarchy of power.

At the same time, while Russian regions are no longer able to pursue the kind of semi-independent "foreign policy" they were accustomed to in the 1990s, processes of integration with different – though not always neighboring – international subsystems continue. Resources from abroad not controlled by the federal center have acquired new importance. In addition, even when the interests of a region align with those of the federal center, many processes still remain uncontrolled by Moscow and are not taken into account in central foreign policy decisionmaking. There is no way back to the isolation of Soviet times. Regions and their political actors are already part of larger international systems.

## **Factors of International Integration**

The oblasts, republics, and kraia of the Russian Federation shape their priorities in international interaction in different ways. Several groups of factors are especially important in influencing the direction and pace of a region's transborder integration.

A first group of factors arise from the role that certain regional historical configurations play in contemporary politics. In some Russian regions, historical heritage plays an important role in defining contemporary policy and/or their current place in the international subsystem. The idea of Eastern Prussia, which has not existed since 1945, still influences the efforts of Kaliningrad oblast to integrate more closely into Europe. The region consciously seeks to distinguish itself from its pre-war predecessor, but at the same time seeks to establish special relations with Germany and attempts to emulate models for economic development and tourism dating from that epoch. For the regions of Russia's far southeast, the Far Eastern Republic of 1920-1922 offers a historical justification for closer relations with Japan and the United States, two countries which that short-lived state considered its foreign policy priorities. Finally, the historical role of South Russia as an outpost of Russian expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia is being reconsidered, and in some cases reinforced, in political and scholarly debates, as is the idea of a Siberian frontier.

Discussion of frontier zones inevitably arouses identity questions. How do a region and its population position themselves: as an outpost of Russia or a gate to the outside world? The notion of an "outpost" has dominated media and politics in southern Russia, but both terms have also been applied to Russia's western regions, with regional debates not always in line with national ones (for example, the 1990s enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization caused more protests in Moscow than in the western regions that border new NATO members).

Migration constitutes a second important factor. Different types of migration prevail in different regions. While the Far East absorbs labor migrants and is a gathering point for shuttle traders, Kaliningrad is attractive as a staging post for individuals heading to Europe. Other border areas also experience transit migration.

Regional resources – natural, labor, territorial, industrial, and agricultural – constitute another group of factors. For instance, western Siberian regions that are rich in oil and natural gas but do not border any foreign state are much more integrated into the world economy than the poor borderlands of southern Siberia. Attracting the interest of all major economic actors, the region is able to increase its connection with both European and Far Eastern consumers, making its integration international rather than regional.

Transport corridors have become another important set of factors influencing the process of regional integration. The Trans-Siberian railroad, the North-South transport corridor, and natural gas and oil pipelines are the most important of these corridors. In some cases, competition over projected and constructed transport routes has led to conflict between regions, for example, over alternative Caspian Sea port projects in Kalmykia and Astrakhan.

Cross-border commerce and the federal border regime play a special role for border regions. Generally, the barrier function of the new borders is much more pronounced than their integrative function. At the same time, Russian-Chinese diplomatic rapprochement has led to an intensification of cross-border trade in the Far East.

## **Internationalization and Federal Reform**

Russian foreign and defense policy have not undergone further regionalization over the last few years. Centralization is key, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not permit independent foreign policy initiatives on the part of Russia's regions.

At the same time, regionalization has not entirely halted. The center still has problems controlling regional heavyweights like Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiyev or Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. The latter, for example, "recognized" the independence of Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia in the summer of 2006, creating difficulties for Russian diplomats. In addition, the opening of borders and other processes of globalization and international regionalization continue to have an impact on Russia's regions even without the direct consent of central or regional authorities.

In fact, one could say that cross-border integration processes have been more intensive than processes of regionalization within Russia itself. Russia's economic and political space, fragmented during the disturbances of the 1990s, has yet to be reunited. Even the formation of large federal districts in 2000 has not led to the increase of contacts that was expected among the administrative units within each district. From most areas of Russia, the only way to reach neighbors with sufficient speed is to switch planes in Moscow. Cooperation among regions has been transformed into competition.

This is also true with regard to the internationalization of Russia's regions. Because the Far East, the South, Siberia, and other "regions" are not really cohesive, each of

Russia's republics, oblasts, and krais forms its own strategy of integration based upon its own resources. International integration is thus accompanied by internal disintegration. Neighboring regions have lost their old ties and are not creating new ones. There are almost no instances of collective planning or coordination of international activity. Kaliningrad oblast, for example, has had much more success shaping and lobbying for its interests in Moscow and in neighboring international subsystems than the Far East, split as it is into many administrative units.

## **Conclusions**

Globalization and internal divisions have in most cases superseded region-building within Russia. A triangle has emerged, with one vertex representing regions; a second, Moscow; and the third, international subsystems considered as alternative resource bases. There is no line representing horizontal region-to-region relations; most interactions follow the three sides of the triangle.

As Russian domestic policy and the Russian economy become increasingly homogenous, with a strengthening of the vertical hierarchy of power and an increase in state control over industrial and corporate assets and proprietors, the external environment becomes the only real basis for the relative independence of Russian actors outside the central government. This, in turn, leads to the Kremlin's exaggerated fears of an "orange menace": the idea that foreign organizations are covertly interfering with Russia's political life. Keeping the system stable, however, requires that greater independence be given to regions to shape their own agendas, including in the sphere of international interaction.