

Center-Regional Relations in Russia during the War: Are There Signs of Model Erosion?

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As of fall 2023, a military stalemate had emerged between Russia and Ukraine, with no clear path to a lasting compromise acceptable to both sides failing a change in government in Moscow. Experts are actively debating the impact of international and domestic factors on the course of the war. Western sanctions – which have by many accounts [made](#) Russia the world’s most sanctioned country – have somewhat limited Moscow’s capacity to boost weapons production while simultaneously maintaining the well-being of the population. Yet most observers agree that the sanctions are unlikely to compel Putin to end the war. An elite revolt aimed at halting the war seems highly unlikely, as do mass protests.

Internal fragmentation, however, could significantly impede Moscow’s war effort. This raises an important question: Is an erosion of current center-regional relations and a shift toward increased regional autonomy a possibility within the Putin regime?

In this context, our memo adopts a cautiously optimistic view. On the one hand, under current conditions, governors have had little choice but to support the war. Indeed, regional authorities have uniformly endorsed it. Moreover, regional governors play an integral role in Putin’s personalized regime and rely heavily on him for their own political survival. Thus far, therefore, the ongoing war has not prompted either side to actively seek to change this model of center-regional relations. On the other hand, the more that governors commit to supporting the war effort, the more they must – paradoxically – take actions that rely on public support for success. As such, governors must now engage with their regional populations as politicians do with their voters. This evolving dynamic challenges the very foundation of the current model of center-regional relations, which is

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based on governors acting primarily as agents of Moscow rather than as responsive representatives of their local populations.

The Model of Center-Regional Relations in Russia

Constitutionally, Russia's center-regional relations are framed as federal. In practice, however, they deviate significantly from democratic federal principles. Indeed, the Russian approach to federalism can more accurately be described as an authoritarian adaptation of democratic institutions to support the country's non-democratic governance. This federal structure has demonstrated remarkable resilience and plays a crucial role in legitimizing Russia's political regime. As long as Russia maintains its authoritarian character, federalism is likely to remain a fundamental aspect of the prevailing political order. Nonetheless, the stability of Russian federalism is intimately linked to the continuation of non-democratic rule. Any steps toward political liberalization or a reduction in authoritarian control might jeopardize the stability of the current model of center-regional relations, potentially undermining its ability to serve as a legitimizing force for the regime.

In its hierarchical structure and power dynamics, Russia's current model of center-regional relations increasingly mirrors that of the Soviet system. Moscow dominates regional governments, which in turn exert control over local administrations. The stability of center-regional relations in the Soviet Union hinged on the absolute primacy of central authority and the dominance of the Communist Party. Since Putin's rise to power, a parallel pattern has emerged in the Russian Federation, with the Kremlin reasserting its control over the regions. Putin's rhetoric and policies are oriented toward rebuilding the "power vertical," using the Soviet model as a reference point. Consequently, the reconsolidation of centralized power under Putin has made Russia's federalism increasingly akin to Soviet-era practices. In both models, regional governors function as agents of the central authority. The emergence of influential and popular regional figures is disruptive for such models.

At the same time, Russia's vast territorial expanse necessitates a degree of power-sharing, meaning the delegation of responsibilities from Moscow to the regions. As such, while Putin's "power vertical" implies ultimate political centralization, it still allows for some decentralization of economic and social policies. In other words, regional governors retain a measure of "freedom of maneuver," particularly during major crises. This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when governors had to independently weigh the imposition of social restrictions against the need to minimize harm to regional economies.

Similarly, the new urgent tasks arising from Russian aggression in Ukraine, primarily related to "social support" for mobilization, have also called for some degree of decentralization. Without this flexibility, regional authorities would likely struggle to effectively implement policies like conscription and support for soldiers' families. Thus,

while political power has become more centralized under Putin, there remain areas where regional autonomy continues, driven by political, administrative, or economic necessities.

So far, the existing model of center-regional relations in Russia has shown remarkable effectiveness and resilience, weathering significant challenges and crises. However, there are indications that tensions between the center and the regions may intensify in the future.

Are There Any Signs of Model Erosion?

Since the beginning of the military aggression against Ukraine, Russia's federal and regional elites alike have been navigating three interconnected yet conflicting constraints. First, it has been crucial to ensure that President Putin's high popularity rating remains unchanged in the face of military action. Second, it has been essential to provide a constant flow of new recruits for the front lines. Third, it has been necessary to sustain the civilian economy, secure consistent tax revenue for the budget, and support the development of military industries. The responsibility for meeting these demands has fallen largely on the regions; there has been no significant direct reallocation of resources from the federal budget in support of these goals. As such, the Kremlin is increasingly reliant on governors, who in turn must seek support from the populations and local businesses of their regions in an unprecedented way. This tension may provoke the erosion of relations between the center and the regions, thus weakening the Putin regime.

Since the war's beginning, an important new responsibility for all governors has been to ensure an adequate supply of recruits for the Russian Army. Regional governors, in collaboration with federal military authorities, have been tasked not only with overseeing the mobilization campaign, but also with managing the delivery of necessary supplies to mobilized personnel and providing support to their families. Following presidential directives, support centers for the families of those involved in the special military operation have been [established](#) across all Russian regions. Beyond financial compensation to the mobilized, the regions also allocate funds for essential services such as hot meals, education, and medical care for conscripts' children.

For most of 2022, despite significant losses reported in Ukraine, the Kremlin refrained from announcing a formal mobilization. Mobilization was a risky choice, as it had the potential to lower Putin's approval rating, in a context where Putin's personal popularity is the main pillar of regime [legitimacy](#). In lieu of this, regional authorities were charged with encouraging volunteers to enlist for military service, including in newly formed "volunteer" battalions – more than 40 of which were established across various regions. Upon signing their contracts, volunteers were entitled to a one-time federal or "presidential" bonus, amounting to 195,000 rubles. Additional payments promised to volunteers varied by region. In Moscow, an extra annual bonus of 600,000 rubles was offered. The Moscow region provided only an extra one-time bonus of 405,000 rubles. In

St. Petersburg, the extra bonus was set at 300,000 rubles. Meanwhile, in the Orel and Tver regions, there were no lump-sum bonus payments from the governor at all. Funding for the mobilization emerged as an unanticipated expense for local authorities, one they had not factored into their budgets. While they might have hoped for compensation from the federal budget, Moscow has yet to announce any centralized financial support for the regions, at least publicly.

In 2023, the Kremlin did not announce a new wave of mobilization, instead shifting to the regional authorities the responsibility for supplying the army with replacements for those killed and wounded on the battlefield. This shift has obliged governors to increase their interactions not only with potential volunteers, but also with their families and local businesses. Almost all governors are regularly seen participating in funeral processions to honor those who have fallen at the front, a fact frequently covered by local media.

Local businesses' support for governors is becoming increasingly crucial to governors' popularity in the regions as the regional budgetary situation tightens. Local enterprises often informally shoulder some of the costs associated with recruiting volunteers for the army, particularly those related to providing social support to volunteers' families. In addition, they play a key role in ensuring that the region's economic potential remains robust, despite growing labor shortages due in part to conscription and in part to heightened demand for military production.

In the eyes of the local population, governors are increasingly perceived as protectors from the consequences of the war, a conflict actively perpetuated by Moscow's decisions. Official opinion polls indicate that the majority who support the war and Putin would prefer a quicker end to it, assuming such a decision came from Moscow. Thus, in the perception of the populace, the war, its continuation, and its costs are attributable solely to Moscow's decisions, not to those of the governors.

This contrasts with the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, when major decisions about restrictions were made by governors and mayors of major cities, attracting citizen discontent. Now, governors are positioned as intermediaries between Moscow's decisions regarding the conduct of the war, on the one hand, and the local population, on the other hand. While they cannot disobey orders from Moscow, they can exhibit varying levels of concern for citizens affected by the hardships and risks of the war. Consequently, a governor's legitimacy within his region is now significantly influenced by the extent of social patronage he has extended to mobilized individuals and their families.

The heightened interactions between regional leaders and the public that have been necessitated by recent events may [contribute](#) to a resurgence in their popularity. Governors are beginning to act more like true public politicians, a shift that seems to be yielding positive results. Notably, some governors' approval ratings have [soared](#) to as high as 90 percent, a figure previously unheard of among Russian regional leaders.

Levada Center polls, while often critiqued for potential distortions due to respondents' fear of reprisals, remain the sole source for monthly estimates of average gubernatorial approval ratings in Russia. Historical data dating back to 2000 [show](#) that governors' average approval ratings reached an all-time high in 2023. Notably, this increase in approval followed a dip observed in 2020–2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. To illustrate this trend, we present the approval ratings for the five years from October 2019 to October 2023 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Average Gubernatorial Approval Ratings, October, 2019–2023

| Date | Approval Rating |
|--------------|------------------------|
| October 2019 | 65% |
| October 2020 | 62% |
| October 2021 | 59% |
| October 2022 | 69% |
| October 2023 | 71% |

Source: Levada Center [polls](#).

These figures indicate a significant rise in approval ratings after the drop in 2020–2021, highlighting a changing public perception of governors during this period.

In the September 2023 elections, official figures released by the Central Election Committee showed the resounding success of incumbent governors running for re-election. All incumbent regional governors were successfully re-elected, with results ranging from 63.1% to 86.6%. Nearly all acting governors secured a higher share of the vote than they, or their predecessors, had in previous elections. Even the lowest result, recorded in the re-election of the head of Khakassia, [surpassed](#) previous figures – 63.1% compared to 57.6% – despite United Russia's campaign against the incumbent Communist.

Conclusion

The Russian model of center-region relations has demonstrated significant stability and resilience since the onset of the war against Ukraine in February 2022. However, while its core features remain intact, this model has started to evolve due to growing recognition that the conflict with Ukraine might be a long-term undertaking that will necessitate more substantial resources and support from the regions. This incremental change, driven by the extended duration and increasing demands of the war, indicates a possible shift in the well-established relations between the central government, the regional authorities, and the population.

In the current situation, the conduct of the war remains strictly a federal matter, while managing the war's political, social, and economic fallout has become the responsibility of the regions. Regional governors' responses to these challenges are, on balance, enhancing their popularity. To date, this surge in governors' popularity has not come at the expense of President Putin's approval ratings. Should the Kremlin experience a dip in popularity while the governors continue to gain favor, however, it could challenge the stability of the existing governance model.

This situation could amplify the contrast between the central government's directives and the regional leadership's increasing dependence on local support, potentially leading to a transformation of the traditional power dynamics within the Russian Federation. Such a gradual shift indicates the potential for a change in center-regional relations, with regional interests and the support of the local populace potentially becoming more important to a governor's continued tenure than absolute loyalty to Putin or his successor.

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