

Broken Pendulum: Recentralization Under Putin

Nikolai Petrov

November 2000

PONARS Policy Memo 159

Center for Political-Geographic Research (Moscow)
and Macalester College

The development of center-region relations in Russia since 1990 is analogous to the oscillations of a pendulum, reflecting the changing balance between the alternative processes of decentralization and centralization. These oscillations used to be uneven with rather long periods of decentralization (1990-August 1991, 1992-93, 1994-96, 1997-98), opposite short but energetic bursts of centralization. Given momentum by upcoming elections, in 1999 the centralization-decentralization pendulum swung dangerously toward decentralization, exceeding the limits of usual oscillations, and perhaps threatening the pendulum itself. This did not happen; instead, the pendulum changed direction, passing and then exceeding the former extreme of centralization.

1999 was thus a year of great change, during which we witnessed the rise and fall of regionalism in Russia. The cavalry of regional leaders who decided to attack the Kremlin was badly wounded during the last Duma campaign, and was crushed in the battle of Chechnya. Until May 2000, changes in the center-regions balance of power were occurring in a "natural" way, i.e., they fell within the normal oscillations of the pendulum. Due to the strengthening of the center, which was more effectively realizing its own prerogatives without changing the legal foundation, the regions were losing ground.

The Current Period of Centralization

After the presidential elections, Vladimir Putin undertook several steps that fundamentally altered center-region relations in favor of the center. It was a shift of the axis, rather than an oscillation of a pendulum. The center outmaneuvered regional leaders, who seemed almost paralyzed. The power balance was defined almost totally by centralization processes.

Early in his term, President Putin addressed issues involving the regions, which had been a focus of his interest since 1997, when he came to the Kremlin. The 1999 "war" with the center was lost by the governors, and this would be reflected by the new rules of the game; with forthcoming gubernatorial elections, the political calendar favored the center.

Of Putin's new initiatives, the following are significant for the center-regions balance:

- the establishment of seven federal districts (sometimes called "super-regions") headed by generals (both military and police);
- the adoption of a new scheme of Federation Council (FC) membership--there are now two representatives from each region, one appointed by the governor, another by the regional legislature (as opposed to the former mix of governors and speakers). The new Council is expected to appear in a year and a half, but those governors currently passing through FC elections are losing their seats immediately;
- the creation of a mechanism for federal intervention that allows the president to remove governors and to dismiss regional parliaments;
- changes in interbudgetary relations between the regions and the center (which favor the latter); and
- increasing central control over federal agencies in the regions, including courts, the police, and television.

The federal districts were delimited by the Security Council; it is not a coincidence that their borders match the interior troops districts, which are quite different from both Russia's eleven economic regions and its eight associations of economic cooperation. Although the federal districts' functions are not clearly defined, they are widening all the time; the State Committee on Statistics (Goskomstat) has begun to report by federal districts instead of economic regions, and geography textbooks are being rewritten according to federal districts as well. The delineation of federal districts appears to be the third attempt to enlarge Russia's regions (the first took place in the late 1920s through the early 30s, the second in the late 1950s through the early 60s--both failed). It also represents a transfer towards territorial rather than sectoral management. The construction of a new intermediary level between the federal and regional ones can mean both centralization (if powers are transferred both formally and informally from the regional level to the center) or decentralization (if they devolve from above). In this case, clearly centralization is indicated, although some elements of decentralization are evident in conflicts between presidential envoys and federal ministries, and government in general. Presidential envoys are elements of a new "power vertical" with the Security Council at the top--and as such could be interpreted as a sort of bypassing strategy in a competition between the Security Council and the government.

Why was the center so successful in achieving this general shift? First of all, the political consolidation of the center itself was achieved on the grounds that centralization of the state was a vital necessity for Russia--a view supported by the majority of Russia's elites and society. Second, for the first time since 1993, there has been strong political will in concert with public opinion. Third, a new organizational and personnel basis--the Federal Security Services (FSB)--appeared to help realize centralization. Fourth, in terms of resources, the center benefited from high oil prices.

How did the Center manage to push forward "the federative package" in May through June of this year? There are at least three reasons: 1) the political timing--on the eve of elections in the regions; 2) the fragmentation of regional elites and the turning of public opinion against them; and 3) the use of a "secret weapon"--blackmail against regional leaders.

The Shifting Balance Between Society and Elites

The general balance of forces will be clearer if one looks at a matrix showing the three major actors--society, regional elites, and central elites--at two basic levels: federal and regional. In light of developments during 1999, society appears to be the most stable. Very weak and disorganized at the federal level, *society* is stronger--though almost totally controlled by local administrations--at the regional level. Furthermore, *regional elites* are increasingly weak at the federal level; once strong at the regional level, they are now weakening there as well. *Central elites* used to be relatively weak at the federal level but are now rapidly strengthening--at the regional level as well.

Instead of the further development of politics in the regions, federal politics is dissolving, becoming more and more similar to regional politics. In short, we are witnessing the *regionalization of federal political life*. Both the 1999 parliamentary and 2000 presidential elections illustrate this phenomenon. The major features of this model--the regionalization of federal political life--are:

- authorities possess strong control over citizens and their everyday life;
- society and legislative bodies have weak, if any, control over authorities;
- political parties are weak, and play the role of the "prince's armed forces" for elite clans;
- the legislature is weak and under the control of executives;
- the court system and the office of the public prosecutor are not independent;
- government wields control over the media, and there is an absence of political pluralism; and
- elections are controlled, with predetermined results.

The state of society is of crucial importance. It is very weak now, and tired from both the last decade of reforms, and the reformers themselves. Democratic procedures and democracy itself are no longer valued. The society that was pushing former President Boris Yeltsin in the direction of democracy, and at least partly preventing him from regressing, is now playing at best a marginal role in shaping the political course. Public opinion strongly supports Putin, regardless of what he does. In a situation where control over the mass media is increasing, a rapid change of societal mood is implausible. If

society is ready for authoritarianism, and elites are somewhat consolidated and somewhat disorganized, authoritarianism is almost inevitable.

What is occurring in Russia now is the strengthening of the centralized state. Due to the weakness of Russian society, this strengthening undermines and could destroy certain elements of Russian democracy--which was always the democracy of a weak state, not of a strong society. The weakness of society in the regions--now accompanied by the powerlessness of regional elites--may eventually cause the disappearance of Russian federalism. Democracy and federalism are not Putin's major targets--their weakening is merely a side effect of strengthening the centralized state.

What is very important in this transformation is not only the weakening of all independent players, but the weakening of legal institutions as such. The president's already enormous power is growing, while legal institutions are increasingly replaced by new, non-transparent ones with imprecise prerogatives: the Security Council instead of the government and the presidential administration; the State Council instead of the Council of Federation; presidential plenipotentiary representatives in districts and chief federal inspectors instead of representatives; and the Audit Chamber as a kind of law enforcement agency. What is this, if not growing authoritarianism? The emergence of less legal structures parallel to the existing bodies of power can be understood as the construction of an entirely new political machine that will work for a while in parallel with Yeltsin's old one, and soon entirely replace it.

The Origins of Putin's Centralization

In trying to define the new Russian politics, the concept of counter-revolution is used. Putin seeks to keep certain external features of Yeltsin's regime, while replacing its content. There is essential continuity between Putin's current activities and the approaches of Yeltsin and Unified Energy Systems head Anatoly Chubais in 1996-99. The recent radical changes would be impossible had they not germinated both institutionally and psychologically within the previous regime.

This continuity between the Yeltsin and Putin administrations is evident in many ways, including:

- the appearance of *federal districts* is a logical continuation of the reform of the power ministries districts and the implementation of a one-man management principle, which was begun a couple of years ago (this helps explain the appearance of generals in the role of representatives);
- *federal intervention* schemes, including mechanisms for governors' removal, were "invented" by the presidential administration in 1996-97;
- *coordination of all federal agencies in a region* and reinforcement of a presidential representative's functions were designed by the regulation on representatives in 1998;

- *reform of the Federation Council* was discussed for many years;
- all the current *interbudgetary issues*--including the tax code and redistribution of revenues in favor of the center--had roots in the previous administration;
- *control over expenditures* in regions by means of treasury branches were designed at least a couple of years ago;
- the *Chechen war* was well prepared by the former administration; and
- *the weakening of the Duma and political parties* this fall was prepared for by the presidential team for quite a while.

All these things were not only prepared during Yeltsin's second term, there were even attempts to implement them at that time, although they failed due to a lack of consolidation in the center, lack of political will, and a shortage of resources. What we see now is the logical continuation of these earlier processes.

Thus, Putin's reforms are not only deeply rooted, they appear almost inevitable--especially considering what Yevgeny Primakov, the previous presidential candidate, said about all these things. Putin can thus be considered as a kind of crisis manager, invited to carry out certain plans that were worked out (but not realized) in the previous administration. This is reminiscent of 1999, when Sergei Stepashin (currently the head of Russia's Audit Chamber) failed to prevent the formation of Fatherland-All Russia--an anti-Kremlin governors' opposition party formed around Primakov and Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov. What is currently happening is an accelerated counter-*evolution* rather than a revolution.

Previously, there was a belief that large-scale economic and political changes in the society initiated by the central elite were blocked by regional elites; the problem then was how to overcome their resistance to in-depth changes. This is no longer the case: instead the regionalization of federal politics is occurring while Russian political life is becoming similar to that of the regions.

The strengthening of the state, which was of vital importance for Russia, is proceeding in the wrong direction--one that is very dangerous for society. This direction, the so-called *FSB-ization* of political life, entails the following:

- the growing presence of FSB representatives in executive and legislative structures, and FSB control over all spheres of societal life including the economy, politics, and the mass media;
- the growing societal role of the FSB, the police, and the military in general, along with the restoration of public trust towards them and public support for the imposition of order and security (especially after the Moscow bombings of 1999, which almost restored the atmosphere of total fear that characterized the 1930s);

- actions by the principle "the ends justify the means," with double standards and prioritization of "the highest interests of the state" (as construed by officials) above all else;
- a lack of transparency in the functioning of the executive;
- manipulation of public opinion using methods of "informational war," such as provocations of different kinds and information noise (with different, sometimes contradictory versions of ongoing events being offered by different officials, with no attempt to present an official one);
- the large-scale use of compromising materials often gathered under the slogan of the fight against corruption--blackmail--which is becoming a "normal" political instrument (the flip side of the coin is that authorities are interested in having corrupt governors since they are more manageable); and
- the use of law instead of the rule of law with the general procurator's office and the court system doing the bidding of the authorities.

There is the illusion of effectiveness in the new presidential team's FSB-style of Russian politics. After their initial success, they may revert to giving orders and forcing their realization, which in turn will lead to the transfer of semi-military organization principles with direct subordination of society. Due to a false interpretation of the relative economic stabilization caused by the default in 1998 and by high oil prices, society sees Putin's regime as effective.

Conclusion

What are the implications of ongoing centralization for Russian society? It has both positive and negative consequences. Let's start with the good news. First of all, central authoritarianism--if that is what is being constructed--is better for individuals than regional authoritarianism, due to the fact that the rulers are at least farther away, and there is at least a possibility to keep local rulers in check. Second, centralization provides for the unity of political, legal, economic, elite, information, and other spaces in Russia that until recently were fractured.

The bad news regarding Putin's centralization is connected not only with centralization itself, but with the undemocratic ways of achieving it, since means do matter. These anti-democratic ways include:

- the weakening of democracy and of federalism (even if Russia's federal divisions were more decorative than real, they played a very important role in forming certain traditions in society);
- the unification/standardization of political life with the inevitable weakening of strong regions, which previously served as laboratories of political and social-economic development;

- the further desertification of the political landscape with the president as the sole important political player; and
- growing governmental control over society with a return (to a certain extent) to the Soviet past.

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