

# Representation, identity and limits of centralization: Russian regionalism through the lens of critical theory

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In this paper, the author seeks to find pathways of extrapolating the critical potential of post-structuralist reasoning to the study of Russia's domestic regions' policies. He argues that ideas, norms and rhetorical frames are important ideational arguments to explain policy outcomes in specific Russia's region and in the whole system of Russian federalism. Analysis of Russian regionalism, therefore, can be enriched by engaging with and adopting the new concepts and tools bringing attention to the power of regional identities as exemplified by different types of discourses.

There is a variety of theoretical approaches that appear to be instrumental in understanding the phenomenon of regionalism. One possible way of conceptualizing sub-national regions is grounded in the agent - structure debate. Within this broad theoretical framework, sub-national regions might be equated with *agents*, while the entire system of federative (including center - periphery) relations could be presented as *structure*. What lays at the intersection of agents - structure interaction is a set of various institutions which, as all rules of the game, are capable of both inciting and restricting agents' behaviour within the structural frame.

Yet what kind of agents are of utmost importance in terms of changing the *modus operandi* of structures? In political theory, there are two dominant traditions that may be recalled at this point. One of them is of a state-centric background: it is the sovereign who has the monopoly on upgrading the rules of the game and inventing new ones. The assumption often present in this type of scholarship is that the state of Russian federalism depends on the actions undertaken or political conditions transpiring in the center. In this logic, all institutional

*The choices made by the regions in the 1990s to assert their particularity and special character and create linkages to foreign cities and territories rather than to their own neighbors, could not have worked to induce regional collective action that could have become a bulwark against the sweeping re-centralization undertaken by Putin.*

innovations are generated in the core of political system, and – more specifically – are driven by the political will of the central rulers. The center becomes the 'privileged,' most powerful actor in federal relations with regions merely secondary and reactive in nature. The center dominates and dictates; the regions react and adapt<sup>1</sup>.

A second answer to this question – which I treat as more appropriate for this study – suggests that the main impulses that foster institutional change are channeled through the activity of those elements of the structure that lack their fixed and properly defined place in it and, therefore, are likely to disturb its stability. This argument was mainly formulated in post-structuralist conceptualizations of power and politics. In comparison to the agent - structure debate, post-structuralism attempts to make a step further in problematizing the structure and presenting it as inherently vulnerable, unstable, prone to multiple intrinsic dislocations and challenged by those elements that resist their allocated subordinate places in the system.

It is from here that the analysis of Russian sub-national regions' activity may start. In 1990s the studies of Russian regionalism were mainly focused on the mechanisms of decomposition, fragmentation and erosion of state sovereignty that the regional agency entailed. Regionalization and external activities of federate units were seen as key

elements in the new model of governance with the perspective of dismounting the structural foundations of centralized national state and replacing it with networks of regions. However, this analytical framework seems to oversimplify the problem by describing regions' self-assertion – both domestic and trans-national – as presumably objective and unavoidable process lacking either counter-moves or alternatives. In the meantime, it is our understanding that "regionalism is best viewed as an unstable and indeterminate process of multiple and competing logics with no overriding teleology or single-end point"<sup>2</sup>. Thus, contingency, indeterminacy and instability are inherently present in federal politics, which involves the study of key regional subjects and their modes of representation, image building and political discourse strategies. This approach would involve treating regions as actors that are not merely pursuing their interests but are engaged in construction and representation of regional identities – on the one hand responding to the national political context and, on the other hand, either expanding or constricting their field of 'imaginable possibilities' through adopted discourse strategies.<sup>3</sup>

In this study I present a research framework that focuses on regional representation strategies and explore the analytical leverage of considering regional behavior as constrained by identity construction and representation rather than solely by interests. I argue that such non-rationalist approach based on a careful consideration of regional representation strategies in the 1990s provides an important clue for some remaining questions in the evolution of Russian federalism. Yet not all sub-national regions may be viewed as actors with strong potential of attaining political subjectivity. Again, it is the multiplicity of post-structuralist



departures that may be helpful in arguing that in order to identify the sources of change within institutional structures we ought to pay attention to those regional units that are in a possession of an ability “to be more than themselves”, or, in other words, that are capable of representing some trends that stretch beyond their particular identities. Against this background, I venture to explore the relevance of regional discourses and identity-construction to demonstrate that regional representation strategies in the 1990s worked for the most part to promote regions as singular entities not related to each other through common goals and interests. Regions frequently reached out to foreign entities and to the past in their effort to construct and express their identity. No cohesive position that would unite different regions and make them act out of solidarity and commonality of aims could be constructed given the prevailing representation strategies. This made regions vulnerable to the political discourse promoted by the center. In the context of disjointed regional singularities, the center could easily establish what Ernesto Laclau refers to as a ‘hegemonic relation’. This is precisely what happened when Putin initiated a new project of state-building and constructing the vertical of power that easily integrated regional elites within its structure<sup>4</sup>.

## Poststructuralist conceptualizations of space, territoriality and regional subjectivity

Seen from the perspective given above, one may argue that the phenomenon of regionalism may be viewed through a binary opposition between *singularity* and *universality*, which otherwise may be presented as a collision of *exceptions* and *models*, or norm-breaking versus norm-setting practices. What is remarkable here is that some of Russia’s regions can be viewed as *both* exceptions (i.e. peculiar units possessing their specificity and distinctiveness) and models (i.e. examples for a wider scope of regional actors). Referring to the experience of the Nordic regionalism, Christopher Browning argued that the major tension is to be found between “its identity element of exceptionalism (implying constant difference) and its emphasis on being a model (implying others can become like us). The result is that to the extent that the brand has been successfully sold it threatens its very existence as a model of exceptionalism”<sup>5</sup>. Presumably, this explanatory framework may be applicable to the cases of Russian regionalism as well.

Another influential theory important for this analysis is Ernesto Laclau with his concept of “the rebellion of various particularisms”. Laclau nicely grasped the key point of current political debates on center - periphery relations by saying that “both universalism and particularism are two ineradicable dimensions in the making of political identities, but ... the articulation between them is far from being evident... The dominant tendencies have been polarized around two positions. One of them unilaterally privileges universalism and sees in a dialogical process a way of reaching a consensus transcending all particularism; the other, dedicated to the celebration of pure particularism and contextualism, proclaims the death of the universal (as in some forms of postmodernism)”<sup>6</sup>. Extrapolating this conceptual framework to the field of this study, one may assume that the first trend roughly corresponds to the policy of the federal center imposing a unified pattern of governance all across Russia (according to this logic, “the particular can only corrupt the universal”<sup>7</sup> and therefore has to be cancelled/disavowed), while

the second one seems to reflect the state of mind of all forms of autonomy-driven regionalist movements.

What is worth of attention is that at the intersection of these two tendencies one may find “the emergence of the universal within the particular”<sup>8</sup>. The application of this approach to the realm of my analysis is feasible in two ways. On the one hand, it leads us to assume that each particular region involved in political activity has to appeal to what it thinks of as allegedly universal norms (like democracy, local autonomy, minority protection, subsidiarity, trans-border cooperation, people’s diplomacy, etc.). There are many examples of this sort in the West: Quebec, for example, is a strong supporter of a number of allegedly universal principles – from free trade to human rights protection<sup>9</sup>.

On the other hand, the ideas of Laclau can be understood in a sense that what makes regions symptoms is not only their appeal to global norms but – what is even more substantial – their ability to incarnate / reflect some of the most meaningful trends and vectors that are constitutive for the political space they belong to. More specifically, regions that can’t be completely subdued and absorbed by the vertical-of-power federal system of governance are symptoms of the impossibility to run the country from one single center and, therefore, of the necessity to acknowledge the limits of the re-centralization project launched by Putin a decade ago.

These two aspects, obviously, are the two sides of the same coin. St.Petersburg can serve a good example of a city-region developing and promoting its international image by referring to its ability to be part of “world culture” and, therefore, to become a showcase of Russian Westernization<sup>10</sup>. In the meantime, it is exactly due to its international credentials that St.Petersburg deserved a special status within the federation, which gave some palpable results (like convening major international events and hosting the Constitutional Court removed from Moscow in 2007).

To come back to Laclau, “no particularity can be constituted except by maintaining an internal reference to universality as that which is missing”<sup>11</sup>. Yet his reasoning is

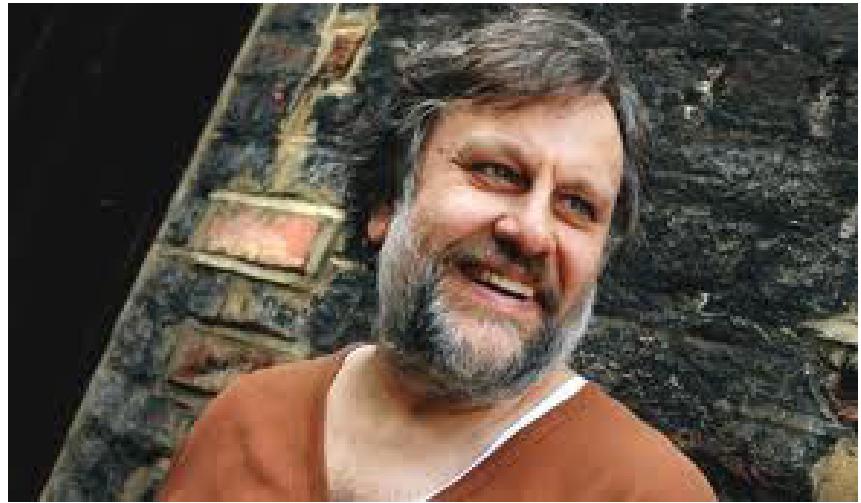
even more complicated: he argues that “the relations between particularity and universality is an essentially unstable and undecidable one... Particularity both denies and requires totality... Totality is impossible and, at the same time, is required by the particular: in that sense, it is present in the particular as that which is absent, as a constitutive lack which constantly forces the particular to be more than itself, to assume a universal role which can only be precarious”<sup>12</sup>. That is why regions with strong local identities have to find a proper balance between stressing their separate differences, on the one hand, and adhering to some universal principles appealing to wider political milieu, on the other. I will turn to this issue in the following section.

## Models of regional representation

To analyze the regional identity formation based upon regional representation strategies in the 1990s I employ Ernesto Laclau’s analytical distinction between the two logics – of difference and equivalence – that operate in the social and political field.<sup>13</sup> The logic of difference presupposes regions’ individual moves aimed at finding their particular subject positions within the structure of Russian federalism. The logic of equivalence postulates that regions are able to construct and reify their subjectivity through some kind of collective actions based upon the principle of similarity (that certain regions are similar in their relation to the center). It appears that in the 1990s the logic of difference dominated and the logic of equivalence was very scarce; the resulting disjointed regionalism was therefore vulnerable to establishing a ‘hegemonic relation’ by the center. Regions invested in forging their singular identities at the expense of the promotion of more universal ideas that could provide fertile ground for collective regional action and coalition-building.

### The logic of difference and equivalence in action

In accordance with the logic of difference, many sub-national units developed their representation strategies differentially, i.e. on an individual basis and emphasizing their particularity. Individual regional identities were not directly linked to each other and did not necessarily reflect or appeal to



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something that reaches beyond their boundaries. This de-centralized model of regionalism could be dubbed a “Russian archipelago” – a persuasive metaphor pointing to a very fragmented space dominated by centrifugal forces with heterogeneous regional “islands” that lacked strong mutual ties.<sup>14</sup> This pattern of spatial organization is close to what Slavoj Žižek ventured to figuratively call “organs without bodies.” This unusual and intellectually provoking metaphor might be a useful tool for conceptualizing regions’ self-assertion as “partial objects” eager to produce their own identity discourses, sometimes in clear dissociation from the federal center and in conflict with other regions.

The individualistic way of regions’ self-promotion may be exemplified by discursive battles between regions on the domestic scene. For instance, Pskov’s identity-building efforts consist of the attempted “cultural rivalry” with St. Petersburg and Novgorod, Nizhny Novgorod competes for the informal status of Russia’s “third capital” with Kazan, and so on. For the purpose of this analysis it could be assumed – with a certain degree of creative imagination – that in the 1990s Russian federal system became “vaguely coordinated agglomerate of partial objects” that “seem to lead their own particular lives.” An agglomeration of “partial objects” is a nice formula to describe the ruptures and disconnections within the fabric of “region-centered asymmetric” federalism.<sup>15</sup>

Jean Baudrillard’s references to “marginal,” “unique,” “odd,” “exotic,”

“eccentric” objects that deny their inclusion/inscription into the larger system on conditions equal to others as well as Slavoj Žižek’s concept of a “surplus element” that is “thoroughly out of place,”<sup>16</sup> not easily accommodated and domesticated by the system, tending to separate and move away in search of alternative spatial or territorial affiliations appear helpful in understanding the nature of Russian federalism in the 1990s. Baudrillard points to the objects that challenge the uniformity of the system they formally belong to. By the very virtue of their existence they dislocate the existing hierarchy of established relations. These objects, formally being parts of a certain system, tend to break out into other spaces – for example, those related to the historic memories or other cultures.<sup>17</sup> In the context of Russian federalism, the Kaliningrad *oblast*, Russian enclave in the Baltic sea, could be discussed as an analogue of a “unique” and “marginal” object, a sort of “war trophy” seeking to reach beyond the framework determined by the Russian federal system and find its niche in the context of Russia’s relations with the entire Europe in general and the Baltic Sea region in particular. St. Petersburg is another city the alleged “eccentricity” of which makes this “Northern capital” a kind of “internal analog of an external center,”<sup>18</sup> a city irreducible to “Russian average” and, in a certain sense, dissimilar to surrounding territories. Here we see strong allusions to the exceptionality of this region which is dubbed “a foreigner in its own land”, or a “rootless cosmopolitan.” Yet it is exactly these exceptional traits that are constitutive for the region’s turning into

an emblematic and in a way “stylish” unit which has a potential to evolve in time into what would be considered as something indispensable for Russia’s national identity.<sup>19</sup> A number of other territories (such as Primorsky *krai*, for instance) campaigned for a ‘special’ status emphasizing their frontier position, historical traditions and economic necessities.

As asserted by Laclau, the relationship between the logic of difference and logic of equivalence is dialectical: “the particularized element does not simply remain as purely particular, but enters into a different set of equivalences”<sup>20</sup> exhibiting features similar to other particulars. He argues that “there is a possibility that one difference, without ceasing to be a particular difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality. In that way, its body is split between the particularity which it still is and the more universal signification of which it is the bearer.”<sup>21</sup> In the same vein, Giorgio Agamben speaks of a fragment that “pretends to be more than itself, hints to a more general, infinite dimension ... shows its belongingness to a class, but for this very reason it steps out of this class at the very moment in which it exhibits and defines it.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, each particular element of Russia’s federal structure, even trying to distinguish itself from other regional units, is likely to associate itself with some external regions, cultures or patterns of development. This brings us to the analysis of intricacies of the “logic of equivalence” which, in accordance with the premises of critical theory, might potentially lead to the formation of strong regional actors whose political subjectivity would be grounded in their ability to represent a wider spectrum of units and identities that sustain them. The exploration of how the logic of equivalences worked in the 1990s reveals that, for the most part, Russia’s regions constructed the chains of equivalence with foreign countries and regions rather than with other Russian regions. It was the external milieu that contained imaginary “chains of equivalences” that Russian regions wished to plug in, further contributing to the disjointed character of Russian federalism.

For example, for Novgorod and Kaliningrad one of those “chains” was exemplified by a contemporary version of the Hanseatic



*Ernesto Laclau*

League; the informal title of St. Petersburg as Russia’s “Northern capital” alludes to this city’s multiple associations with its Nordic and Scandinavian partners; the revival of Karelian identity places this republic in a group of Finno-Ugrian territories dispersed within both Europe and Russia (i.e., Finland, Hungary, Estonia, Republic of Komi); and the most radical version of Kaliningrad’s autonomy was articulated through a concept of the “Fourth Baltic Republic.” Furthermore, different models of the so-called “growth triangles,” especially in the areas of the Gulf of Finland (Southern Finland, Estonia and St. Petersburg), could serve as a good example of various external links advocated by Russian regions similar to scenarios ‘geometrically’ connecting Kaliningrad, Lithuania and the neighbouring areas of Poland. In each of these cases, the “growth triangle” concept is aimed at capitalizing on the parties’ economic complementarities, their geographic proximity, and common infrastructure projects.<sup>23</sup> Same approaches are readable in such transportation schemes as “Northern ray” (St. Petersburg-Helsinki-Stockholm), “Southern ray” (St. Petersburg-Ukraine-Moldova-Romania-Bulgaria-Greece); “Asian ray” (St. Petersburg-Central Asia-China), “Far Eastern ray” (Trans-Siberian rail road); as well as the modern version of the “The Way from Varagians to Greeks and Hazars,” “King’s Road” from Norway to St. Petersburg through Sweden,<sup>24</sup> “The Murmansk corridor” from Kirkenes to the Kola isthmus, “The Arkhangelsk corridor” to connect German industrial centers, ports of the Gulf of Bothnia and Russia’s North East, the “Blue Road” (a highway and a tourist route crossing Norway, Sweden, Finland

and Karelia), the “Baltic Palette” (a group of cities including Helsinki, Tallinn, Riga and Stockholm), and South Baltic Arc (Lübeck-Rostock-Szczecin-Gdansk-Kaliningrad-Klaipeda-Karlskrona) that can also be added to the list. The Murmansk oblast was labelled as “New Ruhr” (or “Northern Near East”) for its huge natural resources, while the Kaliningrad *oblast* promoted itself as “Russian Hong Kong.”

In St. Petersburg there is a number of “foreign” toponymic metaphors inscribed into the identity of this city which developed and promoted its international image through the references to its ability to be part of “world culture” and, therefore, to become a showcase of Russian Westernization.<sup>25</sup> The “new Venice” metaphor contains strong associations with skillful diplomacy, world-class culture, and well-developed trade relations, while in the “new Rome” one may discover some imperial and geopolitical allusions.<sup>26</sup> Other authors add another metaphor to the list – a “new Jerusalem”, suggesting that due to the skillful re-actualization of the images derived from other cities’ geographies, St. Petersburg turns into a meaningful resemblance of the Western civilization.<sup>27</sup> The “Russian Amsterdam” scenario is meant to turn St. Petersburg into a transportation hub and communication center for East-West commodities flows, while the “Russian Boston” idea presumes to make St. Petersburg one of the leading centers in Russian education.<sup>28</sup>

What these multiple examples illuminate is that the logic of equivalences was mobilized when there were attractive external poles of gravitation, which incited

– perhaps unintentionally – the process of association and identification. Much less numerous were examples of the chains of equivalences meant to oppose the internal pole of power – the federal center. There were only a few regions that possessed the ability “to be more than themselves,” or, in other words, were capable of representing some regional trends that stretch beyond their particular identities.

One example is the Kaliningrad *oblast*, which presented itself as a “pilot region” and thus tried to universalize “its own particularism,”<sup>29</sup> i.e. establish a comprehensive model of cross-border interaction that hypothetically might be both integrated into Russia’s Europeanization process and projected to the multiplicity of other regions. Symptomatically, in order to fit into the “pilot region” concept, Kaliningrad has to be a different kind of region, showing capacities to become an actor “not like others” in many respects. Many authors argued that the Kaliningrad *oblast* could be a model for Russia’s integration into Europe; at the minimum, the function of Kaliningrad as a “show window” has to be extended to the entire Russia’s North West.<sup>30</sup> The region may also play the role of representing North-Western Russia in the Baltic Sea Region, and simultaneously think of itself as a place for perfecting schemes of cooperation that could later be projected to other Russian regions (for example, in the issues of investments and legal approximation).<sup>31</sup> Metaphors like “Russia’s cultural outpost” or “a training institution for Russian periphery”<sup>32</sup> – as applicable to Kaliningrad – could serve as good examples of representative functions. A “demonstration ground”, a “contact territory,” a “vanguard” of Russia’s rapprochement with Europe, an “indicator” and an “interface” of EU - Russia relations, a “linking space”, an “experimental zone,” an “outpost” of strategic partnership, Russia’s “business card,” a “nodal link,” “litmus test,”<sup>33</sup> and other metaphors are all quite telling in this regard.

The Republic of Tatarstan is another example of a region that tried to play a representative function for all ethnic regions in Russia. While focusing on its individual relations with the federal center, Tatarstan has often publicly framed its ‘autonomy-seeking’ arguments in more universalistic

terms. Tatartsan’s policies – especially in 1990s – were meant to offer an alternative model of federalism appealing to other constitutive units of the Russian Federation. With this aim, the republic has actively sponsored scholarship on federalism, setting up Kazan Institute of Federalism, convening numerous conferences and workshops, introducing and promoting new concepts in center-regional relations, frequently borrowed from other federal contexts.<sup>34</sup>

To summarize, according to representation strategies adopted by particular regions, Kaliningrad was not just an individual region within Russia but a “little Russia,” symbolizing and representing Russia’s strategic interests in Europe.<sup>35</sup> Tatarstan was not just one of the ethnic units in the federation but the one that claimed to represent the interests of all ethnic units and, arguably, entire Russia conceived as a strong federal state with strong center and strong regions. It is such intermingling of the regionalizing and universalizing discourses that was constitutive for the molding of regional identities. Each of these particular regions embodied “the universal in the exception” and thus bore political connotations.

The crucial weakness of such regional representation strategies was that regions seeking to perform representative functions were reluctant to admit that they have to be, in a way, typical (“like dozens of others”) regions. On the contrary, they claimed to possess original, distinctive and irreducible to the “average” features, deeply embedded in local traditions and historical memories. For instance, on the one hand, the pilot strategy of the Kaliningrad *oblast* contained universalising effects that eventually boosted the region’s claims for greater status within the federation as an “example”, a “model” whose experience is applicable to other regions nationwide. Yet on the other hand, region’s behaviour was rather individualistic, since region’s identity developed in a competition with other Russian regions that claimed to be the frontrunners in the Russia - EU relationship. Similarly, Tatarstan constantly sought preferential treatment from the federal center, while developing and promoting more universalizing discourse that would advance such formulas as “strong regions - strong center”. In short, the representation strategies were



somewhat contradictory and, in the end, privileged the particular over the universal, leaving for the federal center to promote the universal and establish a hegemonic relation.

On the one hand, these two logics – of equivalence and of difference – seem to be in conflict with each other; yet on the other hand, they require and presuppose each other as necessary conditions for the construction of regional identities. This is so because, one may argue, “all social (that is, discursive) identity is constituted at the meeting point of difference and equivalence”<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, the logics of difference and equivalence represent the two extreme points in the spectrum of regions’ identity-building policies. Each of the endeavours to fix regional identities is a fluid combination of different moves that ultimately are derivatives of both of these logics.

Yet what is even more important is that in the light of the difference - equivalence dichotomy the very idea of “partial objects” could be reformulated: “the partial object is not a part of a whole but a part which is the whole”<sup>37</sup>. This utterance offers a conflation of the two logics: it is through a certain part of the whole (a region) that the political scene of the country could be disclosed and expressed. In terms of Laclau, “the partial object ceases to be a partiality evoking a totality, and becomes ... the name of that totality”<sup>38</sup>. It is at this point that the regionalizing and universalizing discourses intermingle, and this intermixture is

constitutive for the molding of the regional identity-building process.

### The 'Real' and the 'Simulated' in the Making of Regional Autonomy

The rationalist scholarship presents and treats regional power and autonomy as something that regions 'possessed' in the 1990s. The alternative and complementary understanding of federal relations in the 1990s would stress that regional power and autonomy were something that regions 'performed' and 'enacted.' Much of regions' strategies of self-assertion were "virtual" in a sense that they resembled regional PR campaigns and many of the 'chains of equivalences' discussed earlier were of imaginary nature.<sup>39</sup> Yet it is exactly these "virtual discourses" that substantiated regions' performances and identifications.

For example, in the 1990s Novgorod under the governorship of Mikhail Prusak won an international reputation of an "outspoken champion of liberal, market-oriented economic reform" and even "the model of present Western economic theory and business."<sup>40</sup> However, in 2007 it turned out that the regional economy was controlled by two competing criminal groups that incapacitated the governor who eventually was fired by the President. Another good example of "virtual" strategies was Nizhny Novgorod, a region that in the first half of 1990s was widely referred to as a leader of free-market capitalist reforms. However, a few years after its liberal governor Boris Nemtsov left the post, the election was won by a communist candidate, who strongly challenged the image of the region as a hotbed of Western-style reforms. This image deteriorated further with the advent to power in Nizhny Novgorod of a group of Moscow-based administrators who in fact performed a function of "external management" of an economically unsustainable territory.

As discussed earlier, the case of Tatarstan (as well as several other ethnic republics) is no less illustrative of creative and simulative technologies involved in the making of regional autonomy. Tatarstan's main strategy involved a pretense of behaving like a state, enacting and projecting sovereignty at home and abroad.<sup>41</sup> Not only did Tatarstan follow Russia in adopting the

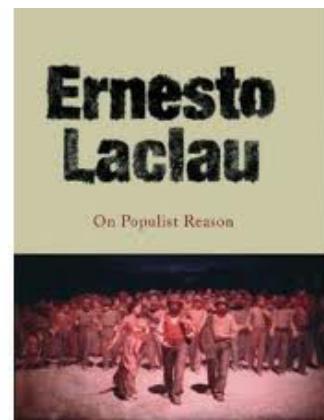
Declaration of Sovereignty; it also pursued other symbolic attributes of statehood designing its own flag and the code of arms, electing its own president, adopting its own Constitution, and establishing its own Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Similar technologies were used by all the actors that declared sovereignty.

Among the most curious attempts to construct "virtual identities" is a peculiar project of an imagined territory named "Smirnovia". The idea circulated for some time in Ivanovo oblast where, according to estimates, the majority of people with the Smirnov family name reside. Another example of ostensibly virtual identity-building is the reinvention of the so called "neo-Novgorodian republic," which is believed to become an inheritor of ancient Novgorod, a city known for its grass-roots democracy and inclusion in the Hanseatic League, a network of North European cities specializing in trade and commerce.

The idea about the 'simulated' character of regional autonomy in the 1990s does not imply that autonomy was not real in a sense of being non-consequential, shallow, or based on entirely voluntaristic actions of regional elites. Regional 'simulations' did reflect and even result in a greater autonomy and additional privileges the regions enjoyed within the Russian Federation (especially in the case of ethnic republics). The concept of 'simulation' helps to apprehend the 'contingent' nature of regional autonomy; the fact that it did require active regional agency and particularly symbolic and expressive actions by regional elites. Regional influence was not simply predetermined by the alleged center's weakness or the functional requirements of economic liberalization. In the political context of the 1990s the republican sovereignty became "what the republics made of it;" but the republics had to rely in their actions on the political discourse that dominated at that time.

### The Limits of the Kremlin's Re-centralization Project

A more careful consideration of representation issues is also warranted in the analysis of contemporary developments in Russia's center-regional relations. The commonplace assessments of the results of Putin's



federal reforms converge on the idea that the package of legal, fiscal and institutional reforms worked to radically restructure the center-regional relations in the positive direction. Allegedly, these reforms worked to unify and harmonize Russia; in more radical interpretation, they 'saved' Russia from potential fragmentation, disintegration and even collapse. An emphasis on representation mechanisms would however introduce a degree of skepticism with regards to official pronouncements about the outcomes of these reforms. A more careful investigation reveals that, similar to the overstated regional autonomy of the 1990s, the effects of federal reforms on Russian federalism and the ease with which they were implemented have also been overestimated. The alleged success of these reforms was also partially 'simulated' just like the regional autonomy has been 'simulated' in the 1990s. Putin changed the dominant political discourse, forcing the regional leaders into a new ideological/political field defined by state-building and "vertical-of-power" construction. The regions however can not be completely absorbed and integrated into such system of governance. There are clear symptoms of the impossibility to run the country from just one center that reveal the limits of the re-centralization project.

In Slavoj Žižek's vocabulary, "symptoms" denote moments when a blockage of the given social order emerges. Žižek posits that a symptom "is the exception which disturbs the surface of false appearance, the point at which the repressed truth erupts". Therefore, the logic goes on, the existing "universal order" (in the Russian case - the proverbial "vertical of power", the integrity and uniformity of the nation, "sovereign democracy", etc.) may be problematized "on behalf of its symptom, of

the part that, although inherent to the existing universal order, has no ‘proper place’ within it.” In our context symptoms are referred to certain situations that subvert the official interpretations and, at the same time, reflect some of the most meaningful trends and vectors constitutive for the Russian federalism. These are situations and cases that “disturb the surface of false appearance” of an overwhelming success of Putin’s efforts to re-centralize Russia. These symptoms emerge in different spheres, but all of them point to the failure of the re-unification/re-centralization project as conceived by Putin from the outset of his presidency.

The limits of central reach in the regions were clearly seen in the analysis of federal intervention in regional elections. Moraski and Reisinger reported that, despite all the institutional changes (with federal districts, presidential envoys, etc.), the Kremlin’s influence in regional elections was very limited. “Not only was the Kremlin unable to protect those incumbents whom it supported, but its preference for ousting a sitting governor had, at best, an indirect effect on the election’s ultimate outcome.”<sup>42</sup> It is in response to this perceived weakness that Putin finally decided to abandon regional elections altogether, the authors claim. Similar observations about Kremlin’s weakness in influencing regional elections are made by other scholars although some analysts have also noted that Kremlin’s “success rate” in getting their favorites elected or re-elected has increased dramatically towards the end of Putin’s first term.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, given these observations, it would be plausible to expect that Kremlin would want to renew the gubernatorial body, replacing the entrenched regional governors for cadres more loyal and answerable to the Kremlin. However, even with such radical change in the mechanism of gubernatorial selection, the actual mobility of regional leadership during Putin’s term in power was surprisingly limited. Most of the strongest governors, the archetypical regional barons such as Luzhkov, Shaimiev, Rakhimov, Tuleev – have actually remained in power throughout Putin’s presidency.<sup>44</sup> The Kremlin, by the same token, did not pursue (until 2010 at least) the politically significant symbolic ‘end’ of regional “presidencies” that was promised/threatened at the beginning of federal reforms.

Furthermore, despite the sought-after equality of all regions vis-à-vis the center, some regional leaders remained “more equal than others” and have blatantly refused to accept the presidential envoy as an intermediary in the relations with the Russian president. Mintimer Shaimiev, Tatarstan’s former president was perhaps most conspicuous in that he refused to travel to Nizhny Novgorod (the capital of the Volga Federal District) to meet Sergei Kirienko (the first presidential envoy to Volga district) but regularly met directly with Putin instead. Furthermore, the government of Tatarstan has also persevered in demanding and obtaining a special privilege of signing a bilateral treaty despite the official policy of eliminating all bilateral arrangements. Even if the treaty lacked any substance, it was symbolically very important for Tatarstan that claimed to build relations with Russia on a treaty basis.

In some republics the issues of protecting local ethnic identities re-entered the public policy agenda. Again, the leader here is Tatarstan where in 2009 local groups campaigned for acknowledging the Tatar language as the second official language in Russia, as well as for the right of local graduates to pass the Single State Examination test in Tatar language. Both claims brought no immediate success yet they were indicative of the revival of demands for more cultural diversity and regional autonomy.

The developments in Russia’s Caucasian regions are increasingly dictated by security considerations which necessarily presuppose their distinguishing from the rest of Russia in terms of obvious specificity of not only their cultural identities but also of their political – even geopolitical – orientations. Republics like Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia were always relatively immune from the fluctuations of the federal center’s policies since their traditional systems of governance were decided locally, being products of the distribution of power resources among indigenous clan-like groups. Yet the sharpening of the security concerns – partly stemming from the overall complication of geopolitical situation in the aftermath of the war with Georgia in August 2008 and the subsequent recognition by Russia of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia – only add new constraints to the policies of

Moscow in these remote peripheral regions and exacerbate their claims for exceptional treatment by federal authorities.

Chechnya has also been able to preserve its special status in Russia not only because it was the only other region besides Tatarstan that signed a bilateral treaty with Moscow but also because Putin practically left Chechnya under full control of Ramzan Kadyrov and his military forces. As poignantly noted by some commentators, Chechnya achieved the degree of independence from Russia it sought out in the 1990s.<sup>45</sup> Keeping in mind the outrageous murders of Kadyrov’s opponents that have occurred in Moscow, it could be suggested that his reach is not limited to the Chechen territory. Kadyrov’s reach was extended officially after the murder of Ingushetia’s president in June 2009 when he was selected by the federal center as a man responsible for establishing security and order in the whole of Russia’s Caucasus.<sup>46</sup> The recent termination by Moscow of the “regime of counter-terrorist operation” in Chechnya, a decision strongly lobbied by Kadyrov, may also be viewed as an example of successful regional pressure upon Moscow. In short, it is evident that as long as the Chechen president maintains personal loyalty to Putin-Medvedev’s political regime, he is allowed a practically free hand in ruling over Chechnya and now even controlling the situation in the neighboring republics.

The above examples deal with the weakest links in federal center’s “vertical” policy towards regions. In the meantime, on a horizontal level, i.e. between regions themselves, a number of trends also set limits for the re-unification project and questioned the perspectives of a centralized way of running the country. I will single out only few of these trends, which seem to be most relevant. For example, it turned out that regions may react differently to the policies of the federal government. For example, the Kremlin’s decision to raise import duties for foreign cars – as part of the anti-crisis program – was harshly challenged in the Far East where most of the cars are imported, but in the meantime supported in car-producing regions like Nizhny Novgorod. Secondly, certain signs of inter-regional conflicts reappeared. In the sphere of regional identities, the most telling case was the contest between Nizhny Novgorod

and Kazan for the right to bear the name of “Russia’s third capital”. The juridical battle ended up in Kazan’s victory, but as a compromise Nizhny Novgorod was officially awarded the status of the “Volga capital.” Finally, in the economic sphere, the ongoing crisis has re-actualized regional protectionist strategies aimed not only at supporting local producers but also at closing regional markets for merchandise coming from other regions.

Thus, President Medvedev has to deal with the increasing regional diversity in Russia manifested in the spheres of economics, identity and security. It is quite feasible that under certain circumstances the claims for greater diversification and autonomy could be formulated in political categories, i.e. linked with the way power resources are distributed between the federal center and regions. Therefore, it is hard to expect that the future of the center - regions relations in Russia will be void of conflicts.

## Conclusion

This paper shed light on the incompleteness of rational choice based explanations of the evolution of Russian federal system. Interest based explanations cannot adequately account for the sudden retreat of regional elites that were widely viewed as powerful before the re-centralization project started. Addressing this inadequacy, I adopt a new framework that focuses on the issues of identity and representation and treats regions not merely as self-interested actors responding to incentives but as social and political actors that engage in creative actions in an attempt to shape the political field and construct their own identity. As I discuss in the paper, the creativity of regional elites in constructing their identities and the repertoire of actions available to them are both enlarged and constrained by the image-making strategies they choose. Thus, the choices made by the regions in the 1990s to assert their particularity and special character and create linkages to foreign cities and territories rather than to their own neighbors, could not have worked to induce regional collective action that could have become a bulwark against the sweeping re-centralization undertaken by Putin.

The more fine-tuned approach for analyzing federal relations in Russia that considers the issues of identity and representation strategies promotes a more nuanced understanding of current federal relations as well. Specifically, as I show in this paper, scholars need to be more cautious in evaluating the alleged success of Putin’s re-centralizing measures. The still remaining and indeed increasing regional diversity and particularity reveals the need for a more nuanced and differentiated policy on the side of the federal center vis-a-vis the regions in Russia.

### Notes:

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- 2 Andrew Hurrell. One world? Many worlds? The place of regions in the study of international society, *International Affairs*, 83:1 (2007), p.130.
- 3 The reference to the “field of imaginable possibilities” is borrowed from Consuelo Cruz, *Political Culture and Institutional Development in Nicaragua and Costa Rica: World Making in the Tropics* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 4 I am grateful to Gulnaz Sharafutdinova for her insightful remarks and comments to the earlier drafts of this paper.
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- 6 Ernesto Laclau. *Emancipation(s)*. London & New York: Verso, 2007, p. VIII.
- 7 Ernesto Laclau. *Emancipation(s)* ... p. 22.
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- 13 Ernesto Laclau. *On Populist Reason*. London & New York: Verso, 2005, p. 70.
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<sup>33</sup> Charles Silva, “Russia and the EU. How Can the Process of Rapprochement be Furthered?” Report from the EU-Russia Forum for Foreign & Security Policy, Moscow, 15 February 2001.

<sup>34</sup> See for example the work of the Kazan Institute of Federalism at [www.kazanfed.ru](http://www.kazanfed.ru)

<sup>35</sup> Pami Aalto, “Semi-Outsiders or Close Outsiders? Russia and Its Kaliningrad Region in European Integration,” paper presented at the “New World Politics” conference, 12-13 January, Hammeenlinna, Finland, p. 33.

<sup>36</sup> Ernesto Laclau. *Emancipation(s)* ... p. 80.

<sup>37</sup> Ernesto Laclau. *On Populist Reason* ... p. 113.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>39</sup> B.A.Uspenskii, “Evropa kak metafora i kak metonimiya,” <http://www.logic.ru/Russian/vf/Papers2004/Uspenskii62004.htm>

<sup>40</sup> Blair Ruble and Nancy Popson, “The Westernization of Russian Province: the Case of Novgorod,” *Post-Soviet Geography* 39 (8), 1998, pp. 433-445.

<sup>41</sup> Katherine Graney, *Of Khans and Kremlins: Tatarstan and the Future of Ethnofederalism in Russia*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Bryon J. Moraski and Wiliam M. Reisinger, “Eroding Democracy: Federal Interventions in Russia’s Gubernatorial Elections,” *Democratization* 14 (4), 2007, p. 616.

<sup>43</sup> Elena Chebankova, “The Limitations of Central Authority in the Regions and the Implications for the Evolution of Russia’s Federal System,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 57 (7), 2005, pp. 941-942.

<sup>44</sup> Their replacement was only accomplished under Medvedev’s presidency.

<sup>45</sup> Yulia Latynina, “Khoziain Chechni: Odin den’s prem’erom” *Novaya gazeta* Sept. 25, 2006 (<http://2006.novayagazeta.ru/nomer/2006/73n/n73n-s11.shtml>).

<sup>46</sup> Alexei Malashenko, Ramzan Kadyrov: *Rossiiskii politik kavkazskoi natsional’nosti* (Moscow Carnegie Center, 2009).