

Federalism and Unitarism in Russia

with Professor Elena Kamyanskaya on 08 June 2021

Federalism has seen many shades in Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the first post-Soviet years under President Boris Yeltsin, Russia became a very decentralized, and some people argue, dysfunctional state. Many republics that were home to ethnic minorities received a lot of concessions from the center and became autonomous, even de facto independent. Across the country, Yeltsin struggled to enforce decisions from Moscow and hold the state together after the Soviet Union collapsed. He thought that decentralization and giving autonomy to the different parts of the country would deter secessionism, a strategy that mainly worked with the exception of Chechnya

When Yeltsin had consolidated his own position and power in Moscow, he began to roll back on some of the autonomy provisions he had granted to Republics and other territorial units across Russia. He began to enforce more strongly financial and political control over the rest of country, a trend that continued with the appointment of Vladimir Putin, first as Prime Minister and later as the successor of Yeltsin as President. Putin's main ambition was to undo many of the decentralization agreements and bilateral pacts that Yeltsin had signed with different Republics, regions and cities in the country, in order to hold the country together in the early 1990s.

Instead, Putin wanted to assert central control, limit the influence of regional leaders and dampen any ambitions for secessionism – including, when necessary using force, as was the case in Chechnya. Putin used both legal and extra-constitutional measures to push for centralization, including financial control, arrests of local elites on corruption charges, and constitutional change that allowed him to appoint regional leaders. What emerged in the following years is a highly centralized system, in which loyalty to Putin and Moscow is the most important prerogative. Yet, neither the substantial decentralization of the 1990s, nor the current unitarism seems to be the answer to manage a large and diverse country such as Russia. What is needed instead is a new federal balance, in which the center is able to exert control over the Republics, regions and other territorial units in order to enforce its constitutional decisions, while at the same time respecting regional autonomy in areas that are constitutionally allocated to the different territorial units. Russia is still in search of such a balance, and the size and diversity of the country make it difficult to find this. In addition, the experience of the Soviet Union collapse and the war on secession in Chechnya all influence the thinking of central elites in Moscow and limit the options for federal and decentralized solutions.

Soeren Keil, 50 Shades of Federalism