



## Territorial organisation and autonomy in Russian history

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### Abstract

This paper offers a broad historical and comparative analysis of territorial organisation and autonomy in Russia from the early modern age to the present. To what degree, when, and why did the Russian and Soviet authorities accommodate and even promote regional and national autonomies on their expanding territory? The paper reviews efforts at decentralisation (and in some cases federalisation) as a set of imagined, proposed, and (partially) implemented measures. In so doing, it identifies historical 'moments' at which autonomous solutions became particularly important. It also highlights commonalities and differences, continuities and ruptures in long-term perspective while tracing the specificities of the Russian case. While different forms of territorial autonomy co-existed throughout Russian history, most were short-lived or heavily constrained.

### Introduction\*

Forms of territorial autonomy have been a key part of Russian history for centuries; and yet, there are few analyses of it in comparative historical perspective.<sup>1</sup> How much diversity in the administration of territory was there at any given time, and what can explain it? To what degree, when, and why did the centre in Moscow and St. Petersburg accommodate and even promote regional and national autonomies? This article addresses these questions while reviewing the history of autonomous formations in the expanding Russian state from the early modern period to the present. In so doing, it identifies historical 'moments' at which such autonomies became particularly important. At the same time, it highlights the specificities of the Russian case in matters of territorial autonomy, which was dynamic but still set Russia apart from other state and imperial formations.

Russia's history of statehood goes back to the late medieval and early modern periods. The vast Russian state not only harboured much territorial diversity throughout its history, but also took on a dizzying array of forms of rule and state: from an expansionist but elusive early modern power (1547–1721), to an absolutist monarchy and

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empire (1721–1917), a deeply authoritarian one-party state (1922–1991), and an initially weak, but increasingly centralised federation with fewer and fewer remnants of democratic rule (since 1992). In each of these eras, many territorial units were governed by specific rules. Such diverse administrative solutions, in turn, had much to do with ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. This article can only hint at some elements of this diversity. Moreover, there is ongoing change. Russian-controlled territory is still in flux, with the most recent annexation (of Crimea) in 2014, continuing war in Ukraine, and unresolved territorial issues in the Caucasus.

And yet, amidst such uncertainty and change, there are also continuities in Russian history with regard to territorial organisation. Some have to do with the ways in which geographical expansion, cultural diversity, and territorial autonomy are interconnected. Others point to questions of communication and dependence, the limits of state power, and the need to seek compromises with local elites. I begin the discussion by exploring the historical trajectory of autonomy in Russia, reviewing the diversity of territorial autonomies and federalism as a set of imagined, proposed, and (partially) implemented measures. This is followed by a temporal comparison that identifies elements of continuity and change while also pointing out some of the most striking idiosyncrasies of autonomy in Russia. These relate to the role of democracy and representation, policies of colonisation, and the shift from regional to national autonomies.<sup>2</sup>

### Autonomy and federalism: Russia's complex trajectory under empire

As long as the Russian Empire existed, federalism was not an option. A decentralisation project aimed at endowing the regions with greater political power would have defied the unitary, monocentric logic of Russian autocracy. Thus, such a project existed only in the minds of some intellectuals, revolutionaries, and liberal politicians. The historian and Kazan University professor Afanasii Shchapov (1830–1876), for example, called the importance of 'centralisation' in Russian history into question in his lectures and

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1 While Oleg Kutafin's recent overview covers much of it in considerable detail, it is a descriptive account with little analytical interest: Kutafin (2014).

2 Throughout this article, I tend to speak of 'autonomies' in the plural to highlight the plural nature of autonomous arrangements in the Russian context.

rather explained this history in terms of *oblastnost*, that is, the power of regions.<sup>3</sup> More controversially, Shchapov also lobbied for an increase of such power in a future constitutional order: in the early 1860s, he invited select students to secret lectures in which he argued that the 'local identity' (*zemskaiia samobytnost'*) of the empire's regions would only reach their full potential "in a confederal union (*v konfederativnom soiuze*) of the whole land."<sup>4</sup> Shchapov stressed the idea of regional self-government, including economic and cultural autonomy in a federal or confederal system. He was inspired by revolutionary thinkers such as the poet Kondratii Ryleev (1795–1826), who had written about the confederal identity of Russian regional communities, and Nikolai Ogarev (1813–1877), an associate of the famous thinker and writer Alexander Herzen.<sup>5</sup> Ogarev had called for an "assembly of the land" (*zemskii sobor*) with "representatives from all districts, elected by all people without distinction of estates", and a federal state structure.<sup>6</sup>

Most people, however, remained unaware of these discussions. It was only thanks to the civil liberties, constitution, and parliament reluctantly conceded by the tsar after the 1905 Revolution that debates about federalism and autonomy reached a wider public. Polish, Ukrainian, and other activists and deputies in Russia's first parliament, the State Duma, now openly lobbied for autonomy and even federal solutions in writing and in parliamentary speeches.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, according to Russian liberals like Fyodor Kokoshkin (1871–1918), conservatives continued to denounce any call for regional autonomy as a "federalist" attack on Russia's territorial integrity.<sup>8</sup> Federalism remained a term of abuse even under the constitutional order.

Regional autonomy, by contrast, as a 'lighter' form of decentralisation, had long been part of imperial rule, albeit a reluctant one. Early modern Russian rulers came to agreements with Kalmyk and Muslim Tatar chieftains on Russia's southern and eastern borders, who would receive regular payments from the Muscovite state for their services in securing the border. Some of them were invited to establish more permanent territorial formations: as a territory granted by the Grand Prince of Moscow in 1452, for example, the Kasimov Khanate on the Oka River (now mostly in Ryazan' oblast', central Russia) was closely tied to Russian rulers in military, diplomatic, and eco-

nomic matters.<sup>9</sup> Over time, though, and decades before its dissolution, the khanate was gradually transformed from a semi-independent vassal state into an integral part of Russia, administered by the Kazan Chancellery, a Moscow-based proto-ministry. By the time the Kasimov Khanate was dissolved in 1681, the tsars no longer needed an autonomous state in this region; the frontier had moved elsewhere.

Early modern Russia expanded swiftly, particularly to the south and east. To make this possible, *voevody* (military governors) aided by troops and administrative staff were established throughout the expanding state. By 1625, the realm counted 146 such governors.<sup>10</sup> Many of them came from the noblest families of Muscovite society (as control over a province meant income in cash and kind). Some of them ruled like autocrats. Prince Boris Golitsyn, for example, as one of the tsar's favourites, is said to have governed the lower Volga region around the year 1700 "with such absolute power, as if he were a sovereign".<sup>11</sup> In other words, some provincial heads claimed degrees of territorial autonomy that were not so different from that wielded by co-opted khans. They also benefited from confusion at the centre, caused by the simultaneous emergence of competing Moscow-based chancelleries that claimed responsibilities in the provinces.<sup>12</sup> Most governors, though, had limited authority as they not only fought with other functionaries over power and resources, but also served for only short periods of time.

The border was secured by ever more shifting fortification lines while, outside garrison towns, central rule remained elusive. In the open frontier space, formal agreements came to define relationships with allies, including different Cossack 'hosts' in the vast steppe and grassland regions north of, and between, the Black and Caspian seas. These hosts were partially nomadic communities of Eastern Slavic warriors and their families that offered military service (while also building fortresses and settlements and engaging in agriculture and fishing) in exchange for autonomous self-rule. The Zboriv Agreement (1649) between the Cossacks and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth first legally defined the territory of the Zaporozhian Host, as it existed under Polish-Lithuanian suzerainty, and divided it into 16 regimental units on both banks of the Dnipro/Dnepr; in so doing, it also created a single political and social structure, the Hetmanate (named after the term for a Cossack leader, *hetman*).<sup>13</sup> The agreement had a lasting effect insofar as it tied the Zaporozhian Cossacks to this land, who would henceforth regard it as theirs, no matter which external power took them under 'protection'. In 1654, the Zaporozhians exchanged Polish-Lithuanian for Russian suzerainty in the Pereiaslav Agreement, while initially retaining many of the rights and privileges they

3 Lavrskii 1876: 408–412.

4 These lectures were first published during the Soviet period: Shchapov 1926: 43.

5 Chernyshov 1951: 45, 46–47.

6 *Ibid.*, 46–47. The *zemskii sobor* had, indeed, existed in early modern Russia between 1549 and 1648, but only as an advisory body. It had not been representative of regions or the state's social structure in any substantial way.

7 For the example of a Ukrainian activist and Duma deputy, see: Hrushevsky 2002 [1905]: 303–311. Earlier Ukrainian calls for federalism had been printed abroad: Drahomanov 1996 [1884].

8 Kokoshkin 1906.

9 Martin 1992; Rakhimzyanov 2006.

10 Eroshkin 1983: 65.

11 Kliuchevskii 1902: 439.

12 Romaniello 2012: 55–56.

13 Kohut 2009–2010: 4.

had previously enjoyed.<sup>14</sup> These included the right to elect their own hetman and keep their decision-making assemblies, systems of taxation and justice, and a degree of sovereignty in foreign and military matters (with the 'Little Russian Chancellery' in Moscow, established in 1662, keeping a close eye on most). While the Zaporozhian Host had to accept Russian governors and military presence in nearby towns, Russian control in practice remained tenuous for decades. In particular, the thirty-year period from the late 1650s to the late 1680s – also known as 'The Ruin' (*Ruyina*) in Ukrainian history – was dominated by internal strife between Cossack leaders, frequent interventions by external powers, and general chaos.

While the Russian-Cossack agreement was frequently broken, changed, reinstated, and broken again, with new temporary allegiances formed on a regular basis, Cossack autonomy persisted into the final third of the eighteenth century. The declining power of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, along with Russia's continuing rise, helped to tighten the Russian grip. Catherine II (1762–1796) would no longer tolerate autonomous formations in her ever more centralised empire. She abolished the Hetmanate in 1764 and merged its districts into, or with, imperial provinces; in 1774, she disbanded the Zaporozhian Host and had many Cossacks forcibly resettled near the Black Sea and the Caucasus.<sup>15</sup>

Even earlier, in 1708, Peter I (1682–1725) had passed a far-reaching territorial reform in Russia to increase central control and revenues. It initially introduced eight 'governorates' (*gubernii*), later subdivided into 'provinces' (*provintsi*), across the tsardom, which he proclaimed to be an 'empire' (*imperii*) of the Western European kind in 1721. The number of governorates and provinces increased quickly over the following decades. Several governorates were grouped together and headed by governors-general. In 1766, Catherine II introduced 'noble assemblies' at the gubernatorial and provincial levels, allowing them to look into local matters. Her own provincial reform (1775) then increased the number of large territorial units to 53, with population size per unit as a key criterion for the division. Catherine's attempt to apply her Charter of the Nobility to the Baltic Sea provinces (*Ostzeyskie gubernii*) proved short-lived, however, as it was abandoned within a few years. The German-speaking elites of Estonia, Livonia, and Courland (most of today's Estonia and Latvia) continued to enjoy significant privileges after these territories were annexed by the Russian Empire in the 1720s and 1790s, respectively.<sup>16</sup> Not least, they were allowed to maintain their provincial assemblies (*Landtage*), which could legislate locally, albeit under the supervision of the governor-general appointed by the centre. While the Baltic Sea governorates did not have a monetary or fiscal system of their own, they were allowed to retain the *Ostseerecht* (Baltic Sea Law) – that is, their traditional civil

and administrative laws – and privileges for the local nobility, for most of the imperial period.

The empire's continuing geographical expansion led to a proliferation of territorial autonomies from the early nineteenth century. There were two basic types of autonomies: those that involved a significant degree of central intervention and those that did not, mainly for lack of access and resources. The former included most importantly, in order of annexation, Finland (1809), Bessarabia (1812), and Poland (1815). The latter covered territories such as the Principality of Abkhazia (1812–1864) that were integrated into the Russian Empire but remained autonomous, with the Russian presence barely noticeable outside their garrisons; they also included large parts of Siberia. Notably, the Siberian Reforms of 1822 introduced 'Steppe Dumas' for the nomadic Buriats, Yakuts and others (which persisted into the early twentieth century), and while these were tasked with the collection of state levies and tributes, and their heads had to be confirmed by the Russian governors-general, they were autonomous in most administrative, fiscal, and legal decisions.<sup>17</sup> In some ways, they were less affected by Russian rule than closely allied vassal states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, such as the Emirate of Bukhara or the Khanate of Khiva, where the Russian influence on internal affairs was substantial. The second type also included territories that achieved a *de facto* autonomy for a number of years (while insisting that they wanted to remain part of the empire) but were never formally recognised as autonomous: the Gurian Republic (1902–1906) in the South Caucasus, run by a local peasant movement and Georgian Mensheviks, is one such case.<sup>18</sup>

The designations 'Kingdom of Poland' and 'Grand Duchy of Finland' are somewhat misleading as it was the Russian tsar who also bore the titles of King of Poland and Grand Duke of Finland. Regardless, Finland achieved a substantial degree of autonomy, even if it remained closely supervised by a Russian governor-general. Crucially, it was granted a number of local institutions that guaranteed this autonomy. The Senate of Finland was established shortly after incorporation into the empire as a body of local (mainly Swedish-speaking) elites in charge of government. Contact with the emperor was mainly through the State Secretary for Finnish Affairs (usually a citizen of Finland), rather than through the central ministries, which had no jurisdiction in Helsingfors (Helsinki). Further, the Diet of Finland was established as a legislature for regional matters in 1809 and included the four estates of nobles, clergy, townsfolk, and peasants in equal share. It was convened regularly from 1863, after which it quickly developed into a powerful institution. This was part of the reason why the State Duma introduced in 1906 had no deputies from Finland: Finland already had a parliament, and while different models of coexistence were debated for years (including ones in which the Finnish parliament would elect delegates to the Imperial Duma), none of

<sup>14</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the different steps of the agreement and its controversial interpretation in the centuries that followed, see Basarab 1982.

<sup>15</sup> For a distinctly Ukrainian view of Russian imperialism: Bagalei 1889. For a 'classic' Russian account, see Skal'kovskii 1846.

<sup>16</sup> Thaden 1984; Haltzel 1981.

<sup>17</sup> Borisov and Dameshek 2011

<sup>18</sup> For details: Jones 1989.

them were ever implemented.<sup>19</sup> Instead, in 1906 the Diet was transformed into the Parliament of Finland (*Eduskunta*), whose members came to be elected on the basis of universal suffrage, and remained separate.

In the south-eastern part of the empire, Bessarabia (covering large parts of today's Moldova) was less able to maintain its autonomy over time. Initially, Bessarabian leaders lobbied successfully for self-rule and the establishment of a civil government based on local laws, partly rooted in Byzantine tradition.<sup>20</sup> Tsar Alexander I (1801–1825) also granted tax and military privileges and exemptions to the territory, 'ceded' by the Ottoman Empire in 1812. The formal creation of an autonomous region (*Bessarabskaia oblast'*) in 1818 confirmed that the administration would mainly rely on locals and could operate in both the Russian and Moldovan languages.<sup>21</sup> Comparable to the Senate of Finland, the Supreme Council of Bessarabia came to be chaired by the (Russian) governor but was otherwise staffed mostly by local dignitaries. It took charge of regional political, economic, and judicial matters.<sup>22</sup> The autonomy, however, lasted for only 16 years. Under the more conservative tsar Nicholas I (1825–1855), a statute adopted for the region in 1828 effectively ended the period of self-rule: the 'Supreme Council' was downgraded to a 'Regional Council' with little more than local economic responsibilities.<sup>23</sup> Russian was made the sole language of administration, with Moldovan translations admitted only where strictly necessary. Still, as most territorial units in Russia had no such council, its continued existence is noteworthy; it was only in 1873 that the council was dissolved and that the autonomous region formally became an 'ordinary' governorate.<sup>24</sup>

While Polish autonomy was just as short-lived, it was more profound. After its appropriation by the Russian Empire at the Congress of Vienna (1815), Poland was granted a constitution, almost a century before Russia proper acquired this privilege.<sup>25</sup> While the tsar, as King of Poland, received strong executive powers and control over key appointments, the kingdom enjoyed substantial autonomy: it briefly had its own parliament (the *Sejm*) and government, judiciary, civil service, and army (under Russian supervision).<sup>26</sup> The lower house of the *Sejm* was elected rather than appointed, though all deputies had to possess land. Thus it differed from the Finnish Diet, which

was closer to the estates-general assemblies that existed across Europe in the medieval and early modern periods. Many of the civil liberties granted by the Polish Constitution also did not reach the rest of the empire until the early twentieth century.

However, the *Sejm* repeatedly defied tsarist legislation. Unlike Finland, which had been part of the Swedish Empire before Russian annexation, Poland had enjoyed hundreds of years of independent statehood, and the determination to bring it back remained strong. Whereas Finnish elites were not dissatisfied with their autonomy, partly because Finland's status in the Russian Empire seemed to stave off revolutionary trends (which were threatening the elites in neighbouring Sweden),<sup>27</sup> the Polish leadership continued to challenge the tsar. In 1830–31, Polish elites rose against Russian hegemony. The ferocious Russian clampdown that followed this uprising largely eliminated Polish autonomy (and abolished key institutions such as the *Sejm*). Attempts to re-introduce it under the more liberal Alexander II (1855–1881) in the 1860s were accompanied by another uprising, which consolidated the view in St. Petersburg that Poland was to be kept under firm central control. Massive campaigns against the Polish language followed, and even the term 'Kingdom of Poland' was soon replaced with the more subservient 'Vistula lands', which, in some ways, came to be seen and administered as ordinary parts of the empire (while also being subjected to harsh, repressive measures as a 'seditious' frontier region).<sup>28</sup>

Under tsarist rule, then, territorial autonomy was mostly an expedient arrangement, a transient or experimental concession granted for as long as the reach and power of the centre remained limited, or to see whether such a concession would help to stave off revolution. During the early modern period with its mostly open frontier regions and poorly defined borders, the transformation from the *de iure* or *de facto* autonomy of territories to their integration into the general administrative structures was a protracted but also very common process. By the eighteenth century, the empire's expansion to the west, where it met powerful local aristocracies and traditions of statehood, representation, and privilege, made more institutionalised territorial autonomies necessary. There were still important differences. The Polish case went the furthest but did not last. While the Baltic governorates had more modest forms of self-rule (that benefited its German-speaking elites, rather than the Estonian or Latvian-speaking rural masses), these forms persisted into the late imperial period. Bessarabia and Finland initially received comparable degrees of autonomy, but whereas the former were cut back after a decade, the latter's autonomy remained strong until the end of empire. In Finland, even the elites barely spoke Russian as the state administration continued to function almost entirely in Swedish and Finnish.<sup>29</sup> All cases were affected by the fact that early nineteenth-century Russia was open towards an institu-

<sup>19</sup> Jussila 1988: 241–248.

<sup>20</sup> Kasso 1907.

<sup>21</sup> *Ustav obrazovaniia Bessarabskoi oblasti (1818)*, esp. sections 'O Verkhovnom Sovete oblasti' and 'Ob oblastnom pravitel'stve'.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* For a discussion, see Taki 2014; Morozan 2015. See also Zaffi 2006: 125–129.

<sup>23</sup> *Vysochaishe utverzhdennoe utverzhdenie dlia upravleniia Bessarabskoi oblasti 1828*, see esp. §54, 62–79.

<sup>24</sup> *O pereimenovanii Bessarabskoi oblasti v guberniiu i ob uprazhnenii Oblastnogo Soveta 1873*.

<sup>25</sup> On the constitution: Wandycz 1975: 74–79.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* See also Davies 2005: 227; Jedruch 1998; and Andreyanova, Vashchenko and Zvonarev 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Yegorov 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Rolf 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Thaden 1984: esp. 207–209, 226–227.

tionalisation of diversity. Strikingly, this was not a sign of weakness, for the empire's role in defeating Napoleon (1812–1815) had brought much international power and prestige; still, the resulting geographical expansion also required interim solutions and compromises. From the 1830s, centralising trends became prominent again, and as the century progressed, the focus shifted to secular citizen-building (*grazhdanstvennost'*) and societal integration. The empire's subjects were no longer to be left to their own devices but to be treated in ever more similar ways. The standardisation of administrative procedures and the spread of the Russian language through schools, offices, and courts were among the measures used to pursue such citizen-building. At the same time, lawmakers in St. Petersburg remained wary of separatism, and from the 1880s, the centralisation policy came with a pronounced promotion of 'Great Russian' culture, at the expense of all others. Even the Baltic Germans, who had perhaps most consistently enjoyed privileges, saw their education, administration, and judicial sectors being transformed from regionally distinctive and German-speaking to standard, Russian-speaking institutions between 1882 and 1895. Voices in favour of curtailing Finnish autonomy also became louder around the turn of the century, but never got their way.

At the same time, and especially during the mobilisation around 1905, the pro-autonomy activists became bolder and more outspoken again. A small number of Polish moderates would lobby for autonomy in the State Duma, while the more numerous, radical Polish forces could imagine no future in the empire and accepted, at best, temporary compromises.<sup>30</sup> Strikingly, the Polish parliamentary group (*Koło* or 'circle') was the only explicitly 'national' Duma faction and as such had far better conditions for their political struggle than, for example, Ukrainian or Belarusian deputies, who were tied into other political parties.<sup>31</sup> In 1906, up to 150 mostly non-Russian deputies from various parliamentary groups formed the cross-factional 'Union of Autonomists' (*Soiuz avtonomistov*) to advance a common agenda for greater regional autonomy across the empire (and potentially federal solutions).<sup>32</sup> The dissolution of the first Duma after only a few months, however, and the slump in non-Russian deputies in later elections, prevented this platform from achieving many concrete results.<sup>33</sup> Polish autonomy never returned under Russian imperial rule.

### Regional and national autonomies: Soviet and post-Soviet developments

In one of the rare existing overviews of autonomy in Russian history, Oleg Kutafin begins his account with an inter-

esting observation. He reminds us that, whereas different kinds of regional autonomies indeed coexisted in imperial Russia, none of them used the term 'autonomous'.<sup>34</sup> Conceivably, this was due to the centre's insistence that the tsars' power was divine and indivisible and that all terms should be avoided that could be seen as questioning the integrity of the unitary state. It was Fyodor Kokoshkin who then introduced the notions of *avtonomyi krai* and *avtonomnaia oblast'* ('autonomous region') in a book on Russian state law in 1908, as territorial entities somewhere between provinces with self-rule and non-sovereign states.<sup>35</sup> Both notions were adopted in the early Soviet Union, where the regional meaning, however, was replaced by a national one (see below).

The First World War and the Russian Revolution brought a flurry of autonomies and declarations of independence.<sup>36</sup> Finland, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, among others, became independent states. Others, such as the Ukrainian People's Republic and the Moldavian Democratic Republic, first declared their autonomy within the Russian Empire (June and December 1917), and ultimately their independence (January 1918). The Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic existed as an independent entity for only a month in 1918 before its constituent parts – Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia – each declared their independence. This independence lasted, along with Ukraine's, until 1920–21, when the Bolsheviks emerged victorious in the Civil War. The Belorussian People's Republic existed for less than year (in 1918) before its leadership was forced into exile. Further east, the 'Alash Autonomy' came to control much of today's Kazakhstan from late 1917 to the middle of 1919, while the self-declared 'Turkestan Autonomy' lasted for a little longer than two months in the winter of 1917–18. All these tentatively democratic territorial formations were absorbed by the nascent Bolshevik state. Moldavia, by contrast, was annexed by Romania in 1918, and would later be re-appropriated by the Soviet Union in 1940.

The argument that Soviet power was an alien Russian imposition with little local support is understandably popular across the former Soviet republics, but it is also contested. There is growing archival evidence, certainly in Central Asia, that indigenous activism was key to the establishment of Soviet power, with Moscow often being in no position to do more than mediate local demands.<sup>37</sup> Since Lenin and the Bolsheviks famously branded the old empire a 'prison of nations' and needed local support against the tsarist forces during the Civil War, they advocated 'national self-determination' for many groups along the empire's fringes and made irresistible offers of local autonomy. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), established in December 1922, was therefore a quasi-federal structure, with its own brand of federalism

<sup>30</sup> For a moderate stance, see Lednicki 1905; for more radical positions, see the programme of the National-Democratic Party: *Program stronnictwa Demokratyczno-Narodowego w zaborze rosyjskim* 1903: 724. By 1905, the National Democrats would also accept compromise, at least temporarily: B. 1905.

<sup>31</sup> Khripachenko 2015. On the Polish parliamentary group: Janus 1971.

<sup>32</sup> Obninskii 1913; Topchubashov 1932.

<sup>33</sup> Usmanova 2005: 245–255.

<sup>34</sup> Kutafin 2014: 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*: 10–11.

<sup>36</sup> This time, most of the declared autonomies actually used the term *avtonomiia*.

<sup>37</sup> For example, on the creation of Soviet borders in Central Asia: Koi-chiev 2003; and Khalid 2016.

enshrined in the constitutions of 1924, 1936, and 1977. At the same time, at least during the early Soviet period, the central leadership saw this federalism as no more than a temporary concession.

Most strikingly, and in contrast to many other federal systems, Soviet federalism was organised along ethnic lines. The Soviet Union established a complex, multi-tiered system of ethno-nationally defined territories that enjoyed different degrees of autonomy.<sup>38</sup> Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), also known as 'union republics', formed the first tier. In some of these, there were 'Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics' (ASSRs), 'Autonomous Regions' (AOs: *avtonomnye oblasti*), and other nationally-defined territories, whose exact titles and numbers fluctuated over time.<sup>39</sup> Both SSRs and ASSRs were framed, though often not treated, as states of their own, and so they had separate state apparatuses including ministries and their own constitutions (which differed from each other, for example as to their 'national languages'). Either way, the ethno-national definition of territory under Soviet rule completed a shift from *regional* autonomies under empire to *national* autonomies under socialism, even if the centre always retained the final say.<sup>40</sup> It was accompanied by the policy of 'indigenisation', which brought large numbers of locals into regional positions of authority, especially in the 1920s and then again from the late 1950s. That said, while Soviet citizens formally all had the same rights, in practice some national and social groups enjoyed privileges while others experienced discrimination and repression.

Soviet federalism was highly specific. Nuanced analyses, which mostly emerged only after the end of the Cold War, foreground central control but acknowledge the powers that the different territories did enjoy.<sup>41</sup> A specific feature of socialist federalism, applicable in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia after 1968, was that whereas in most federations, some powers are reserved for either the states/republics or the centre, in these cases *all* powers were shared between the centre and the republics.<sup>42</sup> There were no republican rights and privileges over which Moscow did not exercise a degree of control. Admittedly, this is how the division of power developed over time, for at least until the mid-1930s, policy sectors such as health, education, justice, internal affairs, and matters related to 'mode of life' including agriculture were indeed the responsibility of the republican 'people's commissa-

riats' (re-named 'ministries' in 1946).<sup>43</sup> By comparison, the centre was (mostly) responsible for internal security, defence, and key parts of the economy. In foreign policy, power sharing re-emerged during the Second World War (after it had briefly existed in the early 1920s): from 1944, the union republics re-opened their own ministries of foreign affairs, and especially after Stalin's death, they pursued bilateral policies towards other countries, mainly but not exclusively in economic and cultural matters.<sup>44</sup> The chairman of the Uzbek SSR's Council of Ministers, for one, proudly told Indian and Pakistani journalists in 1966 that, following separate economic agreements, his republic was now exporting 30 different kinds of industrial products to India and 15 to Pakistan.<sup>45</sup> By the early 1970s, Uzbekistan had established cultural links and exchanges with 107 countries.<sup>46</sup>

That any attempt by republican elites to promote secession from the union would be crushed from above has often been cited as evidence that Soviet federalism was only a veneer.<sup>47</sup> Yet, the Soviet specificity lay more in the fact that the USSR constitutionally granted the right to secede, however vague and illusionary, in the first place (Art. 17). Virtually none of today's federal states provide for secession in their constitutions (Ethiopia is one of the very few exceptions), which constitutional lawyers have tended to interpret as a ban: if there is no legal way to do it, you cannot do it (especially since constitutions also tend to hail territorial integrity). The only cases in which secession has been broadly accepted and even promoted internationally concern former colonial territories and responses to ethnic cleansing and genocide.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the (theoretical) right to secede, another specificity of Soviet federalism was that it gave the centre the extraordinary power to transfer territory from one republic to another, even if, formally, the republics had to consent. Crimea is a well-known example, which was transferred from the Russian union republic (RSFSR) to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954.

Soviet federalism was also selective. Since the USSR was home to a large number of nationalities (175 according to the census of 1926), there were many national groups that did not receive their own territory. Some of those that had initially been given territorial rights also fell out of favour: as Stalin accused various nationalities of mass collaboration with Nazi Germany during the Second World

<sup>38</sup> Brubaker 1994.

<sup>39</sup> 15 union republics became independent in the early 1990s. The highest number of such republics (16) was reached between 1940 and 1956 when the Karelo-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic also enjoyed this status. The highest number of ASSRs was 20. At different points, there were over 20 AOs, and many other nationally defined territories.

<sup>40</sup> Imperial-era autonomies in Russia could focus on modern nations, but they were not framed as 'national'. Rather, they were seen as concessions to privileged social strata in specific regions. When imperial administrators spoke of 'Poles', for example, they tended to mean Polish aristocrats, intellectuals, and Catholic clergy, rather than the large rural population in the Polish lands.

<sup>41</sup> Hodnett 1967; Bunce 1999: esp. 38–55; Stepan 2000; Kahn 2002: 69–82.

<sup>42</sup> Bunce 1999: 46.

<sup>43</sup> Gleason 1992: esp. 117.

<sup>44</sup> See Appendix II to the 1936 Constitution, adopted on 1 February 1944. One field in which, for example, the Foreign Ministry of the Armenian SSR became highly active was the 'repatriation' of Armenians. Soviet ambassadors to Middle Eastern countries would organise the implementation of this policy at least partly with the Council of Ministers and Foreign Ministry of the Armenian SSR in Yerevan (while keeping the All-Union Foreign Ministry in Moscow informed). On the bilateral policies of union republics: Kirmse 2022.

<sup>45</sup> "Uzbekistan prezhde i teper' [Uzbekistan Earlier and Today]", *Pravda vostoka*, 6 January 1966: 2.

<sup>46</sup> Shukurova 1974: 225.

<sup>47</sup> For example: Kux 1989.

<sup>48</sup> On secession in international law, see Fisch 2012: 33–37.

War, the Volga German, Kalmyk, Checheno-Ingush, and Crimean ASSRs were all disbanded between 1941 and 1945. Hundreds of thousands perished during mass deportation to Central Asia. While at least the Kalmyk and Checheno-Ingush republics were restored during de-Stalinisation in 1957/58, the titular nationalities would subsequently make up smaller shares of the population and find key positions occupied by others in “their” ASSRs. In total, 13 national groups were repressed under Stalinism as entire peoples (in other cases, including the Ukrainians, Kazakhs, and Baltic peoples, more specific parts of the population were targeted).<sup>49</sup> Some of the 13 groups temporarily lost their territories while others had never had any territorial autonomy to start with (for example, the Soviet Koreans or Pontic Greeks). Crimea was only turned back into an ASSR in the spring of 1991.

However, most nationalities that had received their own republics made ample use of their territorial privileges: they established their own national academies of science, national intelligentsias, and national theatres. From the early 1960s, the ‘flourishing’ (*rastsvet*) of nations became an explicit aim of Soviet policy, with each recognised and favoured nation having their own indigenous elites and national culture promoted by the state (albeit to different degrees). They drew up their own school curricula and history books, with differences in historical interpretation causing disputes, for example, in the South Caucasus.<sup>50</sup> As Jeremy Smith concludes, “By the time of Gorbachev’s *glasnost*’, in many respects the republics resembled modern nation-states.”<sup>51</sup> That Soviet nations were gradually but consistently cultivated during the Brezhnev years (1964–1982), rather than only awakening under *glasnost*’ and *perestroika*, is indeed a relatively recent, but important insight.<sup>52</sup>

Asymmetry is a common trait in federal systems, but Soviet asymmetry bore distinctive features. While every Soviet republic had its own state and party apparatuses, the RSFSR had only truncated forms of these. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) admittedly maintained separate departments for dealing with party organs in the RSFSR in its Central Committee; however, a Communist Party of the RSFSR only emerged in 1990. Separate Russian ministries existed, but in many ways, they served as subsidiaries to the all-union institutions. Whereas the foreign ministers of the Uzbek and Armenian SSRs, for example, were touring the world, signing bilateral treaties and representing their ‘countries’ for much of the post-Stalin period, the Russian foreign ministers had more mundane responsibilities (and were barely even known inside the RSFSR). Further, while the Russian language

was chosen as the “language of interethnic communication” (*iazyk mezhnatsional’nogo obshcheniia*) across the union, other languages were promoted, or attacked, to very different degrees (and not widely learned by Russian native speakers). The further down in the multi-tier hierarchy a territorial unit found itself, the more it was usually subject to pressures to strengthen the use of Russian (or the language of the SSR in which the unit was located). In sum, Soviet federalism was not about equality.

It was in the heady years from around 1988 to 1993 that centre-periphery relations were once again redefined in dramatic ways. Once the CPSU had lost its ‘leading role’ and competitive elections began to take place, nationally-minded elites rose to the top in the republics. In what some have called the ‘Parade of Sovereignties’, not only the 15 union republics but also 24 autonomous regions and republics declared their ‘sovereignty’ (widely seen as a first step towards independence).<sup>53</sup> Sometimes it was the General Secretary of the CPSU and later President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, sometimes it was the newly elected President of the RSFSR, Boris Yeltsin, who supported them, depending on whom it would help against the other.

When Gorbachev established a ‘Federation Council’ in December 1990, he included both the union republics and the autonomous republics in this institution. His main intention was the conclusion of a new union treaty, and ultimately, a renewed, more democratic federation on Soviet territory.<sup>54</sup> In practice, though, his institutional reforms not only accelerated the disintegration of the Soviet Union but also reinforced calls for independence in the ASSRs and AOs: Chechnya, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, among others, pushed for independence from former union republics (Russia and Georgia), which in all three cases led to war. Others, like Tatarstan in central Russia, were very close to taking such a step. That regional leaders had been involved in preparing the Russian declaration of sovereignty from the Soviet Union in 1990 had not only emboldened them but had also given them a model to copy. Yeltsin did not see that national and regional scepticism was not so much directed at Gorbachev and Soviet power but at central power in general.

Following the formal disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Yeltsin, as elected President of the newly-founded Russian Federation, which faced a myriad of economic problems and struggles over power and resources, was forced to make concessions towards the regions. The 1990s were thus largely about decentralisation, albeit out of central weakness.<sup>55</sup> Many of the over 80 territorial ‘subjects’ (*sub’ekty*) of the Russian Federation struck bilateral deals with the centre in Moscow. Tatarstan, Kalmykia, Dagestan, and many others thus ended up with specific, temporal agreements, that granted them privileges. The federal arrangement written into the first post-Soviet Russian Constitution (1993) reflected this ambiguity: formally, all ‘subjects’ of the federation were

<sup>49</sup> Pohl 2000.

<sup>50</sup> In the mid-1960s, historical accounts by the Azerbaijani scholar Buniyatov were heavily criticised, for example, by the Armenian historians Mnatsakanian and Sevak. The publication of historical atlases with controversial borders also caused friction between Armenian and Georgian scholars: see, for example, National Archive of Armenia, fond 1 (Communist Party of Armenia), op. 45, del. 44, 1965: 20–28.

<sup>51</sup> Smith 2013: 244.

<sup>52</sup> In addition to Smith 2013; see also Rolf 2014; Kirmse 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Kahn 2000.

<sup>54</sup> Brown 1996: 252–305.

<sup>55</sup> Kirmse 2019b.

equal. However, the constitution also granted the federal territories the right to pass their own laws. Much remained vague and was left to be clarified by later legislation, which paved the way for bilateral treaties. The 'Parade of Treaties' that began in spring 1994 was therefore a form of regionalisation outside of and beyond the constitution: between 1994 and 1998, 46 of Russia's then 89 subjects – some of them regions with governors, others 'republics' with their own 'presidents' – concluded such treaties with the federal centre in Moscow.<sup>56</sup> The simultaneous 'War of the Laws' resulted from the fact that nearly all of the 21 constitutions that had been adopted by republics within the Russian Federation openly contradicted the Russian Constitution, not least by placing republican law over federal law or stressing a merely 'associative' relationship with Russia.<sup>57</sup> That many local leaders were elected by popular vote at this time helped them gain legitimacy and power vis-à-vis the centre.

Putin's accession to power in 1999/2000 put an end to the decentralising trends of the 1990s. Soon he developed a campaign, which he termed 'the dictatorship of the law' (*diktatura zakona*), to bolster central (presidential) power.<sup>58</sup> As most concrete agreements contained in the treaties were subject to revision after a number of years, with every re-negotiation Putin turned them more in favour of the centre, or simply refused to renew them. Rulings by the Russian Constitutional Court that republican constitutions could not contradict the Constitution of the Russian Federation accelerated this process. By 2008, only Chechnya and Tatarstan still had separate deals specifying privileges with the federal centre – and in July 2017, the last such bilateral arrangement (with Tatarstan) expired. While the presidents and governors of Russia's federal 'subjects' are once again popularly elected (after they were appointed by the centre between 2005 and 2012), these elections have neither boosted democracy nor regional power under Putin's new federalism. The candidates tend to be screened and handpicked by the Kremlin, and as a result, the independently-minded regional leaders of the early post-Soviet period have been replaced by more docile politicians. The resurgence of an authoritarian centre has not only put an end to decentralised rule but also to what 'deficient' democracy may have existed before.

### Between similarity and difference: organising territory throughout Russian history

Which elements of continuity and change in the organisation of territory and autonomy does this historical account reveal, then? How similar was this organisation to other (imperial and post-imperial) cases, and what is specifically Russian or Soviet about it?

Like many other modern states, Russia was reluctant to grant territorial autonomy, whether it was to cultural,

social, or regional 'Others' (or a mixture of these). Where such autonomy came about, it was often a pragmatic concession, a temporary measure to be scrapped again once the central state had gained full control over a region. Under Soviet rule, territorial autonomy, then defined in national terms, became more permanent but, somewhat paradoxically, remained under central control. The Russian imperial state would accommodate earlier forms of administration in its new organisational structures, provided such accommodation did not pose a threat to the new authorities. Such arrangements existed, for example, in the Baltic Sea provinces from the 1720s, in Crimea after 1783 (where the Ottoman judicial positions of *qadi*-*asker* and five district *qadis*, along with the mufti, were left in place for decades), and in Finland after 1809. At the same time, autonomy always had to be negotiated. Numerous sparsely populated areas in which local resistance was broken, or limited to start with, were absorbed without any attempts at making them autonomous. Territorial autonomy was thus a privilege and mainly for those who lobbied successfully.

Such autonomy was often first introduced during periods of territorial expansion, which drained the centre's resources and forced it to negotiate. This expansion was ever-present under empire and continued into the Soviet period. In the 1920s and 1930s, a large number of Soviet territorial units were formed, the relationship of which was expressed in the Soviet constitutions of 1924 and 1936 (with a discrepancy between formal powers and the realities of authoritarian centralism). Further annexations of territory in Europe in 1939–40 (taken from Poland, the Baltic States, Finland, and Romania) and also in 1945/46 (taken from Czechoslovakia) expanded the reach of the Soviet system of territorial administration but did not alter its basic principles, notably the fact that territorial units were defined in ethno-national terms. The framework that had emerged in the 1920s persisted for most of Soviet rule while also laying the groundwork for the organisation of territory in the Russian Federation.

At all times, the centres and their multiple peripheries were connected by complex routes of communication. During the imperial period, some territories reported to the chancelleries or ministries of war, the interior, or even foreign affairs; others reported to state institutions in adjacent territories, or directly to the central government. Some were ruled by civilian governors, others by governors-general of military rank, a few by both at the same time (who could also be the same person). In the Soviet case, a dual structure of state and party institutions existed at the local, district, republican, and central levels, which made communication and the implementation of decisions more complicated. In 2000, Putin created a super-structure of seven 'federal districts' (eight since 2010) and presidential plenipotentiaries reporting directly to the central executive, mainly to curtail the power of regional leaders.<sup>59</sup> At no point in time, then, did territorial expansion deliver a single organisational structure with consistent hierarchies. There were always multiple layers of responsibility and dependency.

Crucially, autonomy always remained an exception. Throughout Russian history, there were 'standard' territo-

<sup>59</sup> For details: Petrov 2002.

<sup>56</sup> Kahn 2001: 380.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>58</sup> He strategically employed this term during his presidential campaign in the spring of 2000, after which it was widely debated in the press. See, for example, Stupishin 2000; and Koriukin 2000. See also Kahn 2002: 238–239.

rial units ('provinces', 'regions', 'republics' etc.), which led any other arrangement to take on the quality of an administrative exception. The number of non-standard territorial units was always double-digit and included kingdoms, viceroalties and duchies, autonomous districts, and others. Some of these exceptions were so numerous that, in a way, they formed a second standard. The 20 'autonomous republics' within the Soviet Union's 15 union republics, for example, were written into the Soviet constitution (articles 22–29b of the 1936 Constitution), but they were also unevenly distributed, with 80 percent of their number located in Russia. Most republics therefore did not have them, and even in Russia, the standard regional unit was not 'autonomous'. These units were therefore both 'normal' and 'exceptional' at the same time.

Many large imperial and authoritarian states experienced the contradiction that the organisation of territory showed not only a continuing lack of control, forcing central forces to negotiate with local elites, but also the effective containment of autonomy as a broader political phenomenon. This was certainly true in Russia as well. Imperial power was often elusive, and even Soviet central power was usually mitigated and partly counterbalanced by local elites. And yet, this local leeway translated into actual autonomy only to a limited degree.

The continuities concerning autonomy in Russian history should therefore not be neglected. However, there are many specificities. These concern, notably, the organisation of territory and its administrative diversity through democratic institutions. Popular regional representation was non-existent at the centre, or it was short-lived. After the introduction of the State Duma in 1906, such representation lasted for little more than ten years. For most of the Soviet period, it existed in non-democratic form, with local and regional representatives serving in various state and party organs. The Supreme Soviet, as the Union's highest legislative body, had many regional representatives, but in practice its power was limited to rubber-stamping decisions made by the government or Communist Party. Contested elections for legislative bodies with major regional representation only came to be held from 1989, such as for the new 'Congress of People's Deputies' (1989–1991). The 1990s were then the height of regional power, with locally elected politicians across the Russian Federation defying a weakened centre in numerous ways, but again, this phenomenon proved to be ephemeral. As we have seen, in the course of his first two terms of office as president, Putin did away with most of the regional privileges and powers.

At the same time, the lack of democracy did not necessarily mean illiberal rule. A ban on religious faiths other than the state religion, as practised in many nineteenth-century states, imperial or not, would have been unthinkable in the Russian Empire, where the enlightened absolutism of Catherine II institutionalised religious tolerance and diversity. Despite pressures on religions other than Russian Orthodoxy at certain times and in specific regions, this principle was never abandoned until the end of empire. Under Soviet rule, virtually all religions faced repression, though in the mid-1940s, and again from the mid-1960s, the authorities also re-established, promoted, and used

select Christian, Muslim, and other religious institutions to bolster their own legitimacy and communicate with different religious communities at home and abroad. Post-Soviet Russia, in turn, has re-introduced a religious arrangement not wholly dissimilar from the imperial era, in which many religions are formally tolerated, and partly promoted, as tokens of the country's cultural diversity, while the Russian Orthodox faith is clearly positioned as guiding and predominant.

Colonisation policies and colonialism left a specific mark on Russia's organisation of territory. Russia has been a colonial power for most (some say all) of its history, and while the imperial age was formally limited to the years 1721–1917, imperialist ambitions and realities were present before and after. Under empire, St. Petersburg generally extended citizenship with every new annexation (using an 'attract and hold' policy towards the populations of newly conquered territories).<sup>60</sup> Composite polities and layered sovereignties played less of a role in Russia than in other modern empires. Still, people's rights and privileges differed by religion, social position, and other factors. At the same time, before the 1905 Revolution, virtually all subjects, regardless of faith or ethnicity, did not enjoy even the most basic civil and political rights.<sup>61</sup> Put differently, while subjects in Russian colonial territories such as Central Asia or the Caucasus were ruthlessly exploited by central and local elites, so were most Russians across the empire.

Remote and embattled borderlands were generally integrated into the empire's administrative structure. Some were put under military administration for a number of years, and some were promoted by the state as destinations for Russian and other European settlers. All territories were governed by a mixture of universally applicable 'general laws' (*obshchie zakony*) for the empire and more specific, regional regulations. As a result of the latter, Russian imperial rule remained deeply 'territorialised'. Members of the same religious, ethnic, or social group were subject to different laws depending on where they lived.<sup>62</sup> Many articles in the empire's Law Code, which was organised chronologically and thematically, began with territorial qualifiers such as "in the Western provinces, ...", "in the Kingdom of Poland, ...", or "in the Transcaucasus region, ...". While territories promoted for colonisation, including Turkestan and the vaguely defined 'New Russian region' north of the Black Sea, adopted specific laws and institutions to regulate settlement, this practice was another facet of territorialised rule.<sup>63</sup> It did not imply a separate legal status for such territories (which were composed of governorates and most other 'ordinary' institutions of territorial administration). The Pale of Settlement (1791–1917), a large region

<sup>60</sup> Lohr 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Crisp and Edmondson 1989.

<sup>62</sup> Kirmse 2019a: 51.

<sup>63</sup> To give just one of numerous examples, the following law provided runaway serfs with personal freedom in New Russia and Bessarabia and allowed them to stay and work as hired laborers: "O pravilakh, po koim sleduet postupat' s beglymi pomeschchich'imii liud'mi, zashedshimi v Novorossiiskii kraj i v Bessarabskuui Oblast'" 1827.

in the western part of the empire where Jews were allowed to settle but outside of which they could only reside with special permission, was both exceptional and ordinary in this context: while certain laws only applied within its changing territory, it had no administrative structure beyond the governorates and autonomous regions that formed part of it. Most laws concerning it also began with territorial qualifiers such as “in the New Russian region” or “in the Western region”, that, among other territories, were part of the Pale.

In short, unlike other nineteenth-century powers, the Russian Empire did not institutionalise ‘colonisation territories’ as a legal status. It was only during the Soviet period that broader categories of territorial units – republics, autonomous republics, autonomous districts etc. – were granted specific rights and obligations. Closed cities and (border) regions would form a separate territorial category, full of privileges and accessible only by special permit. Territorial privilege came to the fore again after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the position of individual republics in the Russian Federation was renegotiated.

That Russia, for hundreds of years, was quick to impose subjecthood on the populations of recently appropriated territories was related to the significance of the state. Unlike many maritime empires in their overseas possessions, modern Russia rarely relied on private companies when pursuing its policies of colonisation and colonial exploitation (while it had done so regularly in the early modern age, especially in Siberia). A small number of companies became active in Siberia again from the mid-1770s to take charge of the fur trade. To combine the ends of economic gain and colonisation, the Russian government cooperated most consistently with the Russian-American Company (from 1799). With Alaska sold to the US in 1867, the Russian state’s presence and control along its own Pacific coast diminished, which increased the tsars’ local dependence on commercial companies in administrative matters.<sup>64</sup> However, in most parts of the empire, chartered companies played mainly economic roles (for example, in the oil business in and near Baku from around 1870) and had far less of an impact on colonisation and administration than they did in the British, Dutch, Portuguese and many other empires.

## Conclusion

If we want to think of particularly impactful ‘moments’ of territorial organisation producing autonomy and diversity, we could propose the periods 1810–1830, 1917–1936, and 1988–2000.

In the first of these, a strong centre granted autonomies to recently conquered territories that they saw as highly ‘developed’, mainly to co-opt the local elites and stave off future disturbances (which worked in some of these locations and failed in others). The second period started with a prelude around 1905 and then developed its full force with the Russian Revolution and Civil War; it led to massive territorial reorganisations by the new Soviet authorities, initially out of the need to find allies, but from the late 1920s, increasingly from a position of consolidated central power. The 1936 Stalin Constitution created a framework,

<sup>64</sup> Kindler 2022.

the national-territorial principles of which would barely be touched until the late 1980s. That said, sustained nation-building efforts from around 1960 not only prepared the decentralisation drive during *perestroika* but, in fact, made it possible. With some justification, the starting point of the final period could also be moved into the early 1960s. By 1988–89, a weakened and beleaguered centre could do little but watch the system unravel. Territorial expansion was only one of many contexts in which increased autonomy came about.

Either way, territorial autonomies have always existed in Russia, partly by design, but mostly out of necessity. At the same time, the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and Russian Federation have been characterised, for the most part, by powerful centres, certainly in design and ambition if not always in practice. Decentralisation and democratisation processes were ultimately limited and short-lived.

Unlike in many modern empires, in Russia the centre did not seek, or even grudgingly concede, composite polities and sovereignties, especially under tsarism. It did promote the territorialisation of rule, with many rules only applicable in certain territories; these rules, however, were largely decided upon and monitored by the centre. They implied divided sovereignties only to a limited degree. A division of powers temporarily emerged in which the centre either operated from a position of strength, fearing no serious challenge to its hegemony, or in which it had limited resources. During the Soviet period and especially in the 1990s, national and regional autonomies then reached their high points, and the division of power between Moscow and various national and regional autonomies was promoted, or at least explicitly accepted. At the same time, there were many unwritten rules and conventions about how much local leeway the centre would tolerate.

While expansion and colonisation were constant elements in Russia’s approach to territory, so was accommodation. In practice, Moscow and St. Petersburg tended to accommodate and mediate regional demands, and local actors, in turn, would often accommodate the centres’ interests. Central repression and local resistance were part of the picture, but they tended to be less consistent; accommodation usually won out, especially over time. In the end, this created a situation in which autonomy under Soviet rule was diverse, widespread, contested, and elusive, all at the same time.

In the longitudinal perspective, *de facto* and *de iure* autonomies first shifted from regional to national, and then, in the 1990s, back to a mixture of regional and national. Ethnographically defined republics, such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Sakha, and Chechnya posed some of the strongest challenges to central rule under Yeltsin, but so did many heads of ordinary ‘regions’. Bilateral treaties with the centre were not only signed by republics but also by dozens of Russian districts (*krais* and *oblasts*), which thus managed to achieve a substantial degree of (temporary) regional autonomy. Interestingly, many republics opposed this extension of territorial rights and privileges to Russian regions. With their thinking shaped by the Soviet experience, they considered these rights to be a national prerogative.

As far as decentralisation is concerned, there are currently

no efforts that might help overcome the monocentric logic. Far from it, Russia under Putin has once again become a centralised power in which the constituent parts of the Federation have limited influence. While Russia formally retains democratic institutions such as the State Duma and the Federation Council, there are no longer any independent voices, regional or other, in these chambers. Territorial autonomy formally persists, but only where (and because) it does not defy the centre's political agenda.

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