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Centre-Periphery Relations in Russia

The Case of the Northwestern Regions

Edited by

Geir Hønneland

Helge Blakkisrud



CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS IN RUSSIA



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The case of the Northwestern regions

Edited by

GEIR HØNNELAND

The Fridtjof Nansen Institute

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The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

First published 2001 by Ashgate Publishing

Reissued 2018 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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A Library of Congress record exists under LC control number: 2001086758

ISBN 13: 978-1-138-63563-0 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-315-20421-5 (ebk)

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Preface

This book is the result of several years of co-operation between the Centre for Russian Studies at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and the Polar Programme of the Fridtjof Nansen Institute (FNI). A joint project on centre-periphery relations in the Russian Federation started the formal co-operation in 1997, leading up to an international seminar on the same theme in Oslo in January 1998. The second co-operative project, carried out in 1999 and 2000, narrowed in on the northwestern periphery of the Russian Federation and its relations with the federal centre. It is the results of this project that are presented in this book. Both projects were financed by the Norwegian Research Council through its funds to further co-operation between the various Norwegian research institutes studying international relations. We would like to express our sincere gratitude for this support, without which this book would not have materialised.

The contributions to this volume are partly built on research previously conducted by the individual authors, partly on joint data collection during the project period. All the authors of the book visited Murmansk and Arkhangelsk together in September 1999. We would like to thank Tatyana Barandova, Jon Fredriksen, Lyudmila Ivanova, Vladimir Kozlov, Nataliya Kukarenko, Boris Ostistyy and Galina Sokolvyak for intellectual and practical assistance during the visit. Thanks to Jens Chr. Andvig, Andrew Bond, Anders Fogelklou, Mark Galeotti, Philip Hanson, Jakob Hedenskog, Lyudmila Ivanova, Pål Kolstø and Larisa Ryabova for commenting on various parts of the manuscript. Finally, thanks to Claes L. Ragner of FNI for producing the fine maps presented in the book, to Indra Øverland at NUPI for language assistance, to Jildou Dorenbos at FNI for help in the editing process and to Maryanne Rygg at FNI for producing the camera-ready copy of the text.

Chapter 5 and parts of Chapter 7 are revised versions of an article published in *Post-Soviet Geography and Economy*. Part of the background material in Chapter 6 has previously been published in articles in *Marine Policy* and *Society & Natural Resources*, as well as in another book by the author. Thanks to V.H. Winston & Son, Inc., Elsevier Science Ltd., Taylor

& Francis and Kluwer Academic Publishers for giving the authors permission to use the material also in this book.

In the transcription of Russian words into Latin letters, we have chosen to pay attention to both general practice and consistency. While attempting to give consistency the upper hand, we have occasionally allowed exceptions in order not to depart from what might be considered general practice. While Russian *ë* is generally transcribed as *yo*, we maintain customary English transcriptions such as *Gorbachev*. Russian *e* is written as *ye* at the beginning of words and after vowels. Nevertheless, we skip the *y* in proper names that already have a common spelling in English, e.g. *Karelia*. The Russian hard and soft signs are not transcribed.

Lysaker and Oslo
August 2000

Geir Hønneland
Helge Blakkisrud

PART I

INTRODUCTION



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1 Introduction

HELGE BLAKKISRUD AND GEIR HØNNELAND

The relationship between Moscow and the federal subjects has been one of the main issues of contention in Russian politics since the establishment of the Russian Federation in 1991. Whereas traditionally most attention has been paid to the political struggle between what popularly has been labelled 'Democrats' and 'Communists' or 'pro-' and 'anti-reform' groups in Moscow, a no less fierce battle is being fought out between the federal centre and the regions. The days when one could analyse Russian politics in terms of who stood next to whom at the top of the Lenin Mausoleum are long since gone. Today's analysts have to look further, even beyond Moscow's Garden Ring, to understand the dynamics of Russian politics.

The objective of this book is to contribute to this growing literature on centre-region relations in the Russian Federation¹ by focusing on the power balance between Moscow and the Federation's northwestern periphery, here understood as Murmansk and Arkhangelsk Oblasts, the Republic of Karelia and Nenets Autonomous Okrug. Whereas a number of books have been published on transregional relations in the context of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR),² the position of Northwestern Russia within the new Russian federal structure is still largely unexplored. Among the questions we want to discuss are: Which framework conditions are laid down by the political and legal process of decentralisation? To what extent is the administrative and legal decentralisation followed by economic decentralisation in order for regional actors to achieve real decision-making power? How far has the decentralisation process gone within various sectors of particular importance to Northwestern Russia, such as fisheries, the offshore oil and gas industry and defence? Through a number of case studies we hope to answer these questions in order to reach our main objective: to depict the status and potential of Northwestern Russia within the Russian Federation.

Before we present our case studies, we would like to give a short introduction to the general framework of centre-periphery relations in the Russian Federation; its Soviet legacy and current formulation, as well as its main challenges.

Centre-Periphery Relations in the Russian Federation

The present federation is based on a framework inherited from the Soviet period, a heritage encompassing two diametrically opposite principles. On the one hand, Lenin had supported the principle of national self-determination, granting the plethora of ethnic groups within Soviet Russia administrative autonomy. On the other hand, the Soviet legacy consists of a system permeated by the principle of democratic centralism. When the two principles came into conflict, the latter always prevailed. In spite of the fact that both the Soviet Union and the RSFSR (The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) formally were built up as federations,³ the Soviet power structure was strictly hierarchic. Thus, in reality the Soviet Union represented a *pro forma* ethno-federal structure covering up a reality of extreme centralisation.

The RSFSR was by far the largest and administratively most complex of the Soviet republics. It consisted of no less than 16 autonomous republics, five autonomous oblasts, ten autonomous okrugs, six krais, 49 oblasts and two cities with federal status. While the first three of these categories belonged to the ethno-federal hierarchy, the latter three were purely administrative-territorial entities within the union republic. Furthermore, in the 1989 census more than 60 ethnic groups were recorded as having their traditional core area within the borders of RSFSR.⁴ The majority of these groups, however, were numerically insignificant: only six minority groups numbered more than one million members.

With the break-up of the Soviet Union, the question of the future organisation of the RSFSR became topical. Due to size, as well as historical precedence, there seems to have been a relatively widespread consensus on the need for retaining some kind of federal arrangement. As regards the number of federal subjects and the level of decentralisation within a new federation, however, there were widely differing views.⁵

In the end, the Russian authorities settled for a slightly modified version of the old Soviet structure. In the new Federal Treaty of March

1992, no territorial units were merged and no borders redrawn.⁶ Furthermore, the division between ethnically and territorially defined units was preserved. The most important formal change compared to the old Soviet structure was an upgrading in status for the former autonomous republics and four of the five autonomous oblasts.⁷ Although Russian authorities thus on the face of it opted for a model which resembled the Soviet structure, the Federal Treaty nevertheless introduced important changes: the Federal Treaty envisaged a federation that was not only federal in form, but also in content. For the first time in Russian history, central authorities accepted a *de facto* devolution of power – to match the former *de jure* asymmetric federal structure.

The federal principle was reconfirmed as the basis for the state structure in the new Russian Constitution adopted in December 1993. This document nevertheless envisages a somewhat different federal model from what had been foreseen in the Federal Treaty. Whereas the Constitution sustains the Federal Treaty's division into various categories of federal subjects, it simultaneously ascertains that all federal subjects are equal with respect to their status vis-à-vis the federal centre. The republics were no longer described as sovereign, and even if the Constitution confirmed the right to national self-determination this was undermined by the emphasis on the inviolability of borders and territorial integrity of the Federation. According to the Constitution, the Federation was thus to assume a more symmetric character.

With the adoption of the Federal Treaty and the Constitution, the general legal-administrative framework of the Russian Federation was in place. This did not, however, imply that the debate on the federal arrangement came to an end. As a result of the inherent inconsistencies and the different visions of the federal structure in the two documents, as well as the lack of basic mechanisms and traditions for devolution of power and regional self-government within the Federation, the discussion on how to fill the framework with a rational and meaningful content continues. The different approaches to Russian federalism can be divided into three main categories: strong regions, strong centre, and strong centre – strong regions.

Strong Regions

First, there are the supporters of strong regions, i.e. a further devolution of power from the federal centre. Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia is still the world's largest state with a total area of 17 million km². From east to west it spans 11 time zones, and from north to south a spectrum of climatic zones – from tundra and permafrost along the reaches of the Arctic Ocean to the monsoon belt in the Far East and the steps and semi-desert along the southern border. There is also great variation among the federal subjects both with respect to population (which ranges from 20,300 in the Evenk Autonomous Okrug to 8.5 million in Moscow City) and in area (from 7,600 km² in Adygeya to 3.1 million km² in Sakha). Because of the vast differences in population, size, ethnic composition, wealth, climate, etc., the interests of the federal subjects could, according to this position, best be taken care of through enhanced self-government.

The champions of strong regions usually support the kind of treaty-based federalism that emerged in 1994 when Tatarstan concluded a bilateral agreement with the federal centre. Tatarstan had refused to sign the Federal Treaty in 1992, and to formalise the republic's relationship with Moscow, a treaty on the delimitation of power and responsibilities was negotiated. This, the supporters of strong regions have claimed, changed the Russian Federation from a top-down to a bottom-up type of federation. In their view, power and responsibilities should be understood as delegated from the regions to the centre and not vice versa. So far, 46 federal subjects have concluded this type of bilateral treaties with the federal centre. Not surprisingly, most heads of ethno-federal subjects are to be found within the group of supporters of strong regions (the most prominent being Tatarstan's Mintimer Shaymiyev and Bashkortostan's Murtaza Rakhimov), but also a number of oblast and kray governors have taken up similar positions.

Strong Centre

The second group of arguments can be lumped together under the heading 'strong centre'. Born out of a process of fragmentation, the new state was itself vulnerable to separatism. The advocates of a strong centre wanted to prevent the Russian Federation from sharing the fate of the Soviet Union.

Upon closer examination, however, the 'strong centre' group embraces disparate ideological leanings. First, there are the traditionalists, who argue that Russia has always been a centralised state formation. To them, history has proven that Russia needs a strong centre to be a strong state.

Second, there are Russian nationalists who oppose the asymmetric, ethno-federal basis of the present state. Although more than 80 per cent of the total population are ethnic Russians, more than 50 per cent of the territory is currently subject to some form of ethno-federal autonomy. According to nationalist rhetoric, ethnic Russians have always had to pay for the development and support of the other nationalities within the Russian state. The state has neglected the interests of the Russian people, they claim. The nationalists therefore want the ethnic autonomies to be abolished and the state to be Russianised.

Third, there are reformists who argue that the present structure is too fragmented to form a viable basis for an effective state. A rationalisation and centralisation through a merger of federal subjects is deemed necessary to streamline the federal structure. A number of central Russian politicians (e.g. Yevgeniy Primakov, Yuriy Luzhkov, and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy) have openly supported a re-centralisation through reducing the number of federal subjects from the present 89 to about a dozen. Some reformists also argue in favour of a strengthening of the centre to facilitate the redistributive function of the state.

Strong Centre – Strong Regions

The reformists are in some respects close to the intermediate position taken up in this debate, which covers arguments that can be subsumed under the heading 'strong centre – strong regions'. This group consists of those who claim that without strong regions, Russia as a state cannot return to her former might. In their view, a certain degree of decentralisation is not a threat to, but rather a precondition for the development of a strong, viable Russian state formation. Soviet centralism, although undoubtedly an effective model for large-scale industrialisation in the 1930s, has proven incapable of addressing the problems Russia is currently facing. On the other hand, decentralisation is neither a goal in its own right, nor a process that should continue *ad absurdum*. The purpose of decentralisation must be to facilitate economic recovery at the regional level.

Today, only about a dozen of the federal subjects do not receive transfers from the Federal Fund for Support of the Regions. The federal centre's scarce resources are thus spread thinly over some 75 entities, resulting in the centre not being able to fulfil its economic obligations neither at the federal, nor at the regional level. Without prospering regions, their argument goes, Russia as a whole will not be able to prosper.

'Strong centre – strong regions' was originally a slogan formulated by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, but has resurfaced in the debate in the 1990s. Former presidential advisor on regional affairs Leonid Smirnyagin is one example of a supporter of this position. In many respects, 'strong centre – strong regions' can be seen as a *status quo*-oriented position, an attempt to justify the course Russian centre-region relations have taken over the past decade in the face of harsh criticism of excessive decentralisation.

Almost a decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian federal structure is still a matter of negotiation and re-negotiation. The overall picture is a process characterised more by *ad hoc* solutions than guided by a formal legal framework. The aim of this book is to examine this process through a case study of one region: Northwestern Russia. Before we delve into the discussion, however, we should briefly present the region.

Russia's Northwestern Periphery – An Introduction

This section is devoted to an initial presentation of the northwestern periphery of the Russian Federation. First, the geographical concept 'Northwestern Russia' is discussed and defined for further use in the book. Next, a brief historical background is provided. Finally, some main characteristics of the region are presented. These characteristics will function as points of departure for various hypotheses about the region's relations with the federal authorities.

Northwestern Russia – A Concept Definition

In Russia, there are several 'official' definitions of the country's northwestern part. The Russian *Northwestern economic region*, for instance, is defined as the oblasts of Novgorod, Leningrad and Pskov as well as the city

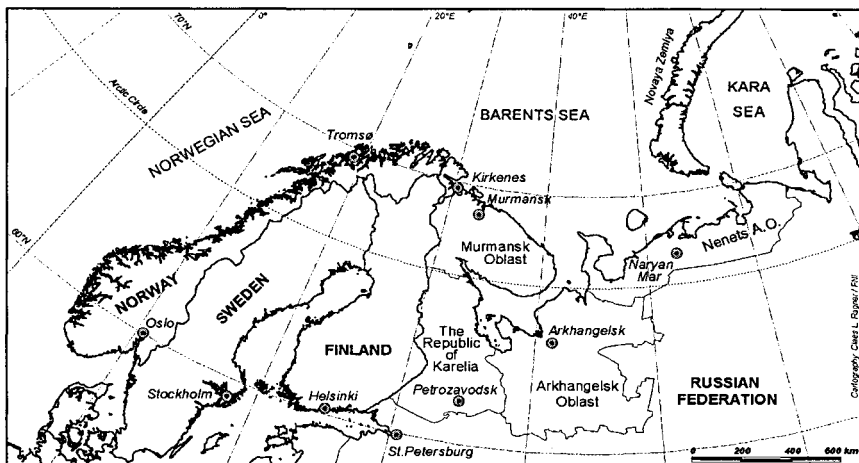
of St Petersburg; whereas Murmansk, Arkhangelsk and Vologda Oblasts, the Republics of Karelia and Komi and Nenets Autonomous Okrug are defined as the *Northern economic region*.⁸ The *Northwestern Association*, on its part, was established in early 1993 to facilitate co-ordination of the northern regions' relations with the federal centre and to draw Moscow's attention to its particular problems.⁹ It includes the Republics of Karelia and Komi, as well as Arkhangelsk, Vologda, Kaliningrad, Kirov, Leningrad, Murmansk, Novgorod and Pskov Oblasts, Nenets Autonomous Okrug and the city of St Petersburg.

The Russian conceptions of 'Northwestern Russia' are all either significantly broader than – or totally different from – those found in the West, in particular in the Nordic countries. In the West, the term 'Northwestern Russia' is normally used when referring to the Russian part of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region, i.e. Murmansk and Arkhangelsk Oblasts, the Republic of Karelia and Nenets Autonomous Okrug. As already mentioned, this is also the definition used for the purposes of this book. However, there is a tendency at least in Norway to understand the term even more narrowly; people occasionally speak of Northwestern Russia even if they primarily have in mind the Kola Peninsula or Murmansk Oblast. In practice, there is an inclination to pay particular attention to Murmansk Oblast in this book too, which probably reflects the Norwegian background of the authors.¹⁰

The geographical focus of the different chapters of the book varies somewhat with the particular theme under discussion. The three general chapters – on legal, political, and economic preconditions for regional autonomy – cover the entire geographical area of Northwestern Russia to a larger extent than the three branch chapters focusing on the offshore oil and gas industry, fisheries, and the military.¹¹ The geographical bias of the three latter chapters will naturally have to reflect 'real world biases'. Hence, the chapter on oil and gas will focus on Murmansk, Arkhangelsk and Nenets since these regions are closest to where the offshore hydrocarbon reserves are found. Similarly, although the northern fishery basin of the Russian Federation is defined as including the fisheries of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk Oblasts, the Republic of Karelia and Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the vast majority of fishing enterprises are located in Murmansk Oblast, and subsequently this federal subject is given most attention in the chapter on fisheries management.¹² Murmansk and Arkhangelsk Oblasts

will also be in focus in the chapter on defence-related matters since the military presence is far heavier here than in the other federal subjects under discussion.

Map 1.1 Northwestern Russia



A Brief Historical Background

Northwestern Russia is a micro-cosmos of Soviet and Russian administrative-territorial engineering. The four federal subjects that represent the focus of our study include the three main categories of Russian federal entities: Karelia is a republic, Nenets an autonomous okrug, and Arkhangelsk and Murmansk are oblasts.¹³ A brief historical background to these regions, as well as some of the main present day characteristics, are provided in the following. Population figures are from 1998.

The Republic of Karelia Karelia is an ethnically defined federal subject built up around the existence of an autochthonous population – the Karelians. The Karelians traditionally populate the southeastern part of present-day Finland (Northern and Southern Karelia), the southwestern part of Arkhangelsk Oblast (Dvina-Karelia), and the northern part of Leningrad Oblast (the Karelian Isthmus), as well as the territory of the present repub-

lic (Ries, 1994, p. 2). The Karelian language, which belongs to the Finno-Ugric language group, is closely related to Finnish.

Since the Middle Ages, the area populated by Karelians has constituted a disputed border region at the intersection between the Nordic and Russian spheres of interest and between Western and Eastern Christianity. The first official partition of Karelia occurred in 1323 as a result of the peace treaty of Nöteborg, which was concluded between the Swedish king and the Republic of Novgorod. With Novgorod's fall in 1478 and the ascent of the Muscovite Principality, eastern Karelia for the first time came under Moscow's influence. Over the next century, Sweden and Russia fought several wars over the Karelian territory (1473-97, 1555-57, 1570-95). During the Livonian war (1570-95), the border was pushed eastwards and Moscow closed off from the Baltic Sea. In 1617, Russia, seriously weakened by internal upheaval (*smutnoye vremya*), had to reconfirm her losses in the peace treaty of Stolbova.

Towards the end of the 17th century, however, Moscow had acquired sufficient strength to challenge Swedish hegemony in the Baltic region. Peter the Great sought an outlet on the Baltic Sea, a 'Window on Europe', and during the Great Nordic War (1700-21), the Swedes were forced back from the southern shores of the Gulf of Finland. As a result of the Swedish defeat, most of Karelia was ceded to the Russian tsar. New concessions were made in 1743, and in 1809 Russia annexed the remaining Swedish possessions in Finland. Hence, for the first time the whole of Karelia was assembled under the jurisdiction of one state. Already in 1812, however, the Karelian Isthmus as well as large territories northwest of Lake Ladoga were transferred to the nominally autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland through an administrative reform, whereas the eastern part of Karelia became part of the Russian *guberniya* Olonets.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917 and Finland's subsequent secession, eastern Karelia remained under Russian control.¹⁴ During the Soviet era, Karelia's status within the hierarchy of ethnically defined entities changed several times. A Karelian Workers' Commune (an equivalent to an autonomous oblast) was established in 1920. Three years later its status was upgraded to that of an autonomous republic (ASSR) within the framework of the RSFSR. In the 1920s, Karelia was politically dominated by Finnish Communists who had fled to the Soviet Union after the Red lost the Finnish Civil War in 1918, and Finnish was introduced as the language