

# Why Are Federal Arrangements not a Panacea for Containing Ethnic Nationalism? Lessons from the Post-Soviet Russian Experience

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## **Abstract**

Federal arrangements have been considered by some thinkers as a panacea for containing ethnic nationalism in the ethnically defined regions. This article challenges this view by arguing that federal institutions may enable ethnic nationalists in the ethnically defined regions to consolidate their power through the guarantees that they receive from the federal centre. Although the post-Soviet Russian leadership under Boris Yeltsin sought to use federalism as a tool for containing ethnic nationalism, Russia's this experiment with federalism demonstrates that federalism may serve not to contain but to strengthen ethnic nationalism. Disillusioned with Yeltsin's failed use of federalism in containing ethnic nationalism, the overwhelming majority of the Russian people supported Vladimir Putin's anti-federalist reforms since 2000 which made federalism redundant in Russia. While undermining the basis for Western style democracy in Russia, Putin's centralism proved to be more effective than Yeltsin's federalism in containing ethnic nationalism.

## **Introduction**

This article seeks to examine the rise and fall of federalism in post-Soviet Russia in terms of its capacity to contain ethnic nationalism in Russia's ethnic republics. Russia is a significant case for studying the link between federalism and ethnic nationalism since, as the largest country in the world in terms of its size, this country is inhabited by approximately a hundred ethnic groups. Non-Russian ethnic groups add up to almost one-fifth of Russia's total population. It is important to note that an overwhelming majority of these ethnic groups, such as the Nenets in Siberia, are too small to be

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considered as nations. Few others, such as the Tatars in the Middle Volga, however, insist that they should be considered as sovereign nations (Balzer, 1994: 56–88).

In fact, Russia's ethnic groups and their relationship to Moscow have been sharply affected by Russia's imperial territorial expansion since the sixteenth century. Russia had completed its expansion into the territories in the East by the end of the eighteenth century. At this stage, Moscow brought the Turkic, Mongolian, Finno-Ugric, and Siberian peoples under the Tsarist rule. The southward expansion, which took place in the nineteenth century, brought the North Caucasian peoples under the Russian imperial rule. In the twentieth century, only the Tyvanians became a part Soviet Russia or the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) (Iivonen, 1995: 62–3). Revival of ethnic nationalism among these groups has become a considerable challenge to Moscow as it had to handle ethnic nationalism with federalism which it also inherited from the RSFSR in the post-Soviet era.

Concerning the relationship between federalism and ethnic nationalism as well as the usefulness of federalism in handling ethnic nationalism, one of the widely taken for granted assumptions is that federalism was an antidote to ethnic nationalism in the ethnically defined regions. There are many scholars sharing this view. According to Donald Horowitz, for example, federal arrangements could be used to contain ethnic nationalism in federations since it shifts the focus of political actors to intra-ethnic conflicts rather than inter-ethnic conflicts in the ethnically defined regions. For Horowitz, in this manner, federalism weakens inter-ethnic conflicts and contributes to the stabilization of the political system (Horowitz, 2007: 953–66). In a similar vein, Mwangi S. Kimenyi suggested that an ethnic-based federalism may serve to contain the conflicting aspects of rival ethnic nationalisms in Africa by making political stability conditional on the realization of inter-ethnic settlement through federal negotiations. Kimenyi (1998: 45), then, even goes so far as to claim that 'African states are naturally suited for the establishment of federal systems of government.'

Contrary to this line of thinking, this article argues that the institutionalization of ethnic nationalisms through the ethnically defined units in federations could provide ethnic nationalist leaders with institutional resources that can be mobilized for ethnic nationalist objectives. In fact, the post-Soviet Russian experience shows that regional ethnic nationalisms could consolidate their power through federal arrangements. Besides, ethnic nationalism takes an institutionalized form through federal arrangements where ethnic nationalists could deploy their power, and use ethnicity as the basis of political legitimization in the ethnically defined federal units. Following David Brown (2007: 57), this article assumes that ethno-national federal arrangements may also hinder rather than advance the process of democratization since such federal arrangements privilege group identities rather than individual liberties and preferences, and make group identities central to the political processes.

Among the federal units of the Russian Federation, regions (*oblasti*) and territories (*kraia*) as well as the federal cities of Moscow and St Petersburg are not ethnically defined at all. Besides, districts (*okrugi*) that are created mainly for the indigenous

peoples of Siberia are too weak to pose any significant ethnic challenge to the federal centre. Therefore, republics (*respubliki*) are the main ethnically defined federal units in Russian Federation. These republics are created for the titular nations in these federal units regardless of whether they constitute the majority of the population in 'their' republics or not (Teague, 1996: 13–36). Such titular nationalities have special political privileges, socio-economic advantages, and ethno-cultural rights in the republics.

Non-Russian ethnic regional leaders and the political movements supporting them in these republics tend to justify their attempts at controlling 'their' republican state power with ethnic nationalist arguments regardless of the differences in the way that they use ethnic nationalism. Russia's post-Soviet federal arrangements have provided these ethnic nationalists with considerable guarantees and durable institutional frameworks that serve to strengthen the ethnic nature of the federal units, especially in the North Caucasus and the Middle Volga. This severely undermines the capacity of Russian federalism to contain ethnic nationalism.

This article begins with a conceptual analysis of the ideas of federalism and ethnic nationalism. This will be followed by an analysis of the federal experience in post-Soviet Russia by focusing on the formative years of post-communist Russian federalism. Next, the article will examine Boris Yeltsin's strategy of containing ethnic nationalism through bilateral federal treaties between 1994 and 1999. Afterwards, the article will discuss Vladimir Putin's anti-federalist reforms since 2000 in terms of their capacity to contain ethnic nationalism in the ethnically defined republics of Russia. In the penultimate section, the article will briefly compare and contrast the Russian case with some other federal cases in the world. The article concludes by discussing how and why Russian federalism failed to contain but served to consolidate ethnic nationalism in the ethnically defined regions during the 1990s.

### **Conceptualization of federalism and ethnic nationalism**

Before conceptualizing the link between federalism and ethnic nationalism, it could be useful to clarify what is meant by these concepts in the academic literature. The concepts of federation and federalism have their etymological roots in the Latin word, *foedus*, which means 'an agreement or covenant based on trust' (Elazar, 1987: 5). Stemming from this etymological meaning, in modern politics, as William Riker (1975: 101) suggests, a federation refers to

a political organization in which the activities of government are divided between regional governments and a central government in such a way that each kind of government has some activities on which it makes final decisions.

This idea of federalism is based on the assumption that the federal centre and the federal units could agree on how to establish a common policy for the federation as a whole. Relying on this conjecture, many thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant, assumed that federal arrangements, which promote the idea of self-rule, could even put an end to the problem of war categorically, since it is assumed that common interests among

rational human beings necessitate peace through federal arrangements rather than self-destructive wars (Forsyth, 1981: 95–104).

However, these optimistic expectations from federalism have not been realized in practice. This is quite understandable since federalism may be adopted for various (sometimes conflicting) reasons by different political units in different parts of the world. In fact, not all federations share the same characteristics. In practice, federations could be centralized and decentralized depending on the influence of centripetal and centrifugal political forces in a federation (King, 1982; Vaubel, 1996: 79–102). This is why stability of federal arrangements is not only very difficult to realize, but also very unlikely to be sustained for a long period of time (Fry, 1988: 75–88).

The stability of federal arrangements may also be undermined further, especially in diverse cultural contexts dominated by strong ethnic nationalisms since the federalist desire to achieve political unity in cultural diversity could be very difficult to achieve when ethnic nationalism is institutionalized at the regional level. In this respect, the stability of federations in multiethnic contexts becomes contingent on the type of the nation-building process among ethnic communities in the regions. In essence, the process of nation building promotes loyalty to the notion of national identity, which is a particular form of social identity that associates individuals with the concept of nation (Calhoun, 1994: 5). Following Anthony D. Smith (1991: 14), in this article the term ‘nation’ denotes ‘a named human population’ who share the following characteristics as enumerated by Smith: ‘a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members’.

The process of nation building also involves the internalization of the national identity by a large group of people, making nationalism an effective force for mobilizing the masses (Connor, 1994: 185–210; Deutsch, 1963: 10). In this context, it is important to note that this article shares John Breuilly’s definition of nationalism. For Breuilly (1993: 2), nationalism could be defined as ‘political movements seeking or exercising state power and justifying such action with nationalist argument’.

However, nationalisms differ in the way that they justify their nationalist arguments, leading to different types of nationalism, including ethnic nationalism. Accordingly, as Rogers Brubaker argues, ethnic nationalism defines nations in terms of common ancestry, culture, language, and religion. In this type, nationalism is defined as a community of descent based on the law of blood (*ius sanguinis*) principle (Brubaker, 1992: 1–17). In fact, the term ethnicity, which has its etymological roots in the Ancient Greek term *ethnos*, refers, as Hutchinson and Smith (1996: 4) argue, to people that hold a common belief in their descent. In general, ethnic nationalists propagate the ideology that individuals from different ethnic communities in one state should differentiate themselves from the rest of the society in order to achieve their ethnic political autonomy (Greenfeld, 1992: 15–21).

Baogan He, Brian Galligan, and Takashi Inoguchi (2007) examined the relationship between ethnic groups and federal structures. Based on their very remarkable contribution to the study of federalism, it is possible to identify three models: multinational federalism, regional federalism, and hybrid federalism. In the case of multinational federalism, ethnic nationalisms in ethnically defined regions are given institutional recognition through federal arrangements. In multinational federalism, ethnic nationalists seek to consolidate their power in federal structures at the regional level so that regional state structures of federations could become the nests for the emerging ethnic nationalism. However, regional federations take territories that are not ethnically defined as federal units, and regulate their relations with the federal centre in non-ethnic terms. Alternatively, hybrid federalism combines the characteristics of both multinational and regional federalisms in one federal arrangement. Such federations may give ethnic nationalism an institutional representation in specific parts of the federation, but consider non-ethnically defined territories as main federal units in other parts of the federation.

In order to illustrate the capacity of federal arrangements in containing ethnic nationalism in the ethnically defined parts of a federation, this article will examine the post-Soviet Russian Federation in detail, and compare it with the other cases from different parts of the world.

### **Formation of post-Soviet Russian federalism (1991–93)**

Post-Soviet Russia's process of federalization took shape within the larger context of the post-Soviet processes of democratization. It was initially hoped that the process of federalization could limit the drive towards any form of authoritarianism in Moscow by strengthening regions. Moreover, Russian federalism was also expected to contain the role of ethnic identities in the federal structure of post-Soviet Russia (Teague, 1996: 13–36).

It is in this context that federalism became one of the key elements of Russia's post-Soviet state-building strategy (Shlapentokh *et al.*, 1997: 8; Shumeiko, 1996: 202–4). In its formative years, the post-Soviet Russian state demonstrated the characteristics of an extremely centralized state, rather than a federation where power is shared between the federal centre and the regions. Given the complexity of post-Soviet political transformation, the Yeltsin leadership found it very difficult to come up with a coherent strategy of federalization, and to implement it in a way that could promote the process of democratization in post-Soviet Russia.

In such a tricky political environment, Moscow had to respond to the pressing problems of the regions which needed to have their new status defined legally. To this goal, Moscow moved to sign a federation treaty with all of the federal regions in Russia. With this treaty, Moscow accepted the republics (*respubliki*) as sovereign, and recognized their right to have a president and a democratically elected parliament as well

as a constitution.<sup>1</sup> It is mainly in these republics that non-Russian ethnic nationalists gained political representation and used these republican state structures to consolidate their power. The Federation Treaty recognized also regions (*oblasti*), territories (*kraia*), districts (*okrugi*), and the Jewish Autonomous Oblast as well as the federal cities of Moscow and St Petersburg as other types of federal subjects in the Russian Federation (Federativnyi Dogovor, 1992: 17–32).

Nevertheless, the Federation Treaty did not contribute to containing ethnic nationalism in the ethnically defined republics since the rivalry between the executive and legislative powers in Moscow weakened the federal centre, and strengthened the republics. In this atmosphere, on 12 December 1993, Russia's first post-Soviet parliamentary elections were held, together with the constitutional referendum. The electoral victory of the pro-Yeltsin forces against the anti-Yeltsin coalition of the communists and nationalists in the parliamentary elections on 12 December 1993 enabled the Yeltsin leadership to take a more uncompromising position *vis-à-vis* ethnic republics by making the Russian Constitution of 1993 superior to the Federation Treaty of 1992, which treated the ethnic republics more favourably. In fact, although the new Russian Constitution permitted the existence of the republican presidents, democratically elected parliaments and constitutions as well as state language for the titular ethnic groups, it also standardized the status of ethnic republics with the status of the other subjects of the Russian Federation (Luchterhandt, 1995: 32–9). In other words, Russia's post-Soviet Constitution regarded all subjects of the federation uniform despite their diverse socio-cultural and economic characteristics. This idea of federalism characterized Boris Yeltsin's approach to Moscow's relations with the federal units.

In the same spirit, the 1993 Russian Constitution sought to counterbalance the centrifugal tendencies of ethnic nationalists in the ethnically defined regions by strengthening the federal centre. According to the Russian Constitution, the President of Russia could override regional laws if they were not in line with the principles of the federal constitution (*Konstitutsii Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 1993: 56–7). Thus, it is not surprising that the 1993 Russian Constitution was given a considerably low backing in almost half of ethnic republics. In exceptional cases, the constitutional referendum was declared invalid in Tatarstan due to a low turnout rate (14%), and it was not even held in Chechnya (Luong, 1998: 648). In order to justify the legitimacy of the post-Soviet Russian Constitution, Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Shakhrai stated that the 1993 constitutional referendum was legitimate as the majority of the voters throughout the Russian Federation (58.4%) supported the Constitution. As Shakhrai (*Rossia*, 19–25 January 1994: 3) claims:

<sup>1</sup> At present, there are 21 republics in Russia. This number increased from 20 to 21 on 4 June 1992 when the Supreme Soviet of Russia's Congress of Peoples Deputies accepted the regional referendum results for the split of the Checheno-Ingush republic into Chechnya and the Ingush Republic.

the constitution has been approved by citizens, not by the component units. As citizens have approved the constitution, it is now in force in all component parts of the Russian Federation.

These discussions concerning the constitutional referendum demonstrate that there was a considerable gap between the expectations of Moscow and the ethnic republics from post-Soviet Russian federalism.

### **Yeltsin's strategy of containing ethnic nationalism through bilateral federal treaties (1994–99)**

However, it should be noted that neither the Federation Treaty of 1992 nor the Federal Constitution of 1993 brought stability to the relations between Moscow and the federal units in Russia. Therefore, the Kremlin started to negotiate bilateral federal treaties between the federal centre and the non-Russian ethnic republics in 1994. This strategy was legitimized by the Kremlin as lawful since Russia's federal constitution of 1993 gave the President the right to conclude bilateral federal treaties with the federal units (*Konstitutsii Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 1993: 56–57).

Boris Yeltsin's new strategy of federalization has been labelled as asymmetrical federalism as Moscow started to conclude various types of federal arrangements with the federal units by giving each one of them special privileges (Tadevosian, 1997: .63–6; Ivanov, 1997: 77–91). One of the leading scholars on federalism, Daniel Elazar (1993: 190–5) branded this type of federalization strategy as *foralistic federalism*, deriving from the Spanish word for special privileges (*fueros*). In Russia, the federal centre started to practise asymmetrical federalism by granting special privileges to specific federal units in return for their loyalty to Moscow. It seems that with this selective strategy of federalization, Yeltsin sought to accommodate the non-compliant ethnically defined regions (Mendras, 1997: 7–11). From the perspective of ethnic nationalists in the ethnically defined regions, however, this strategy gave them a golden opportunity to consolidate their power in 'their' political units.

In this atmosphere, the Kremlin under Boris Yeltsin also hoped to use its asymmetrical strategy of federalization in order to equalize the autonomy levels of ethnic republics with the predominantly ethnic Russian federal units. Yeltsin explained his federalization strategy in his election programme of 1996 as follows:

What do I mean by real federalism? Real federalism is the territorial form of democracy; the democratisation of public life in Russia requires the federalisation of relations between the centre and the regions . . . Federalism is the guarantee of the state's integrity, since the regions have no reason to seek to secede from Russia if their independent development is already guaranteed. At the same time federalism is the means of constructing a unified state, not a confederation, because special measures are here envisaged to guard against the federation's being shaken apart into some kind of union of autonomous states. (*Rossiiskie vesti* 1 June 1996)

This quotation from Yeltsin demonstrates that he had 'great expectations' from federalism's capacity to contain ethnic nationalism as if ethnic nationalists would use the guarantees granted by Moscow in order to integrate their political structures fully into the Russian political system. In practice, however, these guarantees enabled them to discover the benefits of playing the 'ethnic card' against Moscow so that Moscow's authority would be a limited one in a potential conflict between Moscow and 'their' republics. However, the Russian federal centre under Yeltsin was not strong enough to impose its will on Russia's non-Russian republics. That is why Yeltsin was eventually compelled to adopt the policy of giving such regional leaders guarantees that could strengthen their ethnic privileges in the ethnically defined republics.

It is important to note here that during Moscow's negotiations for bilateral federal treaties with the non-compliant non-Russian republics, the federal centre hoped to use its carrots and sticks selectively to reward compliance and to punish non-compliance of the ethnically defined republics. In response, ethnically defined republics attempted to use the ambiguity concerning their federal status very pragmatically in order to get more tangible concessions from Moscow (Teague, 1996: 30). The ethnically defined federal units considered this as an opportunity to consolidate their newly found autonomy and ethnic infrastructures so that they could resist the pressures of Moscow strongly in the future.

Moscow signed the first bilateral federal treaty with Tatarstan on 15 February 1994. According to this Treaty, Tatarstan was given the privileges of having its own budget and establishing relations with foreign governments, while Moscow gained dominance over Tatarstan's economy as well as security (Teague, 1994: 19–27). It could be argued that the signing of this bilateral federal treaty effectively made Russia an asymmetrical federalism since Tatarstan's special privileges were not enjoyed by the other federal subjects in Russia (Polishchuk, 1998: 3–29).

For almost two years since 1994, the federal centre had continued the practice of signing analogous bilateral federal treaties only with the non-Russian ethnic republics. Moscow changed this practice by signing such treaties also with Russian regions in 1996. Yeltsin signed this type of bilateral federal treaty first with the Sverdlovsk Oblast on 12 January 1996. Most of the ethnic Russian regions that were able to sign such bilateral federal treaties with Moscow were donor regions. In other words, these ethnic Russian regions were net contributors to the federal budget. Another important characteristic of the Russian regions that were able to sign similar bilateral federal treaties with the federal centre was that their cooperation was essential for Yeltsin to succeed in his electoral campaign for a second presidential term in 1996. Consequently, Yeltsin gave some privileges to some of the strategic regions in return for their allegiance to the Kremlin (Guboglo, 1997: 110–11).

After winning the 1996 presidential elections with the help of ethnically both Russian and non-Russian regional leaders, Yeltsin attempted to strengthen the federal centre in June 1997, when he decided to strengthen the roles of presidential representatives in administering the federal officials and property in the regions



(*Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 16 June 1997).<sup>2</sup> Yeltsin's attempt was not very successful in the case of ethnic republics, such as the resource-rich republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, since the Presidents of these non-Russian ethnic republics, Mintimer Shaimiev and Murtaza Rakhimov respectively, had already developed informal relations with the presidential representatives in order to keep them within their, rather than that of Moscow's, sphere of influence (Turovskii, 1998: 11–61).

With the failure of Yeltsin's attempts to strengthen the federal centre via Presidential Representatives, ethnic republics have emerged as the main beneficiary of the process of federalization through bilateral federal treaties. Not surprisingly, several experts on Russian federalism started to portray these treaties as a destabilizing development for the territorial integrity of Russia. For example, M. Filippov and O. Shvetsova (1999: 61–76) supported this line of thinking by arguing that the bilateral bargaining between Moscow and the federal units had a strong 'path dependence' component, as such treaties were necessitated by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, the growing public criticism of these treaties forced Yeltsin to stop signing them at the end of 1998.<sup>3</sup> This outcome demonstrated that the bilateral federal treaties are not a panacea for containing the ethnic desire for gaining greater sovereignty in the ethnic republics (Solnick, 1995: 101–7). Consequently, the ethnic challenge to Russian federalism proved to be very resilient during the Yeltsin era, when federalism was seen very optimistically as an antidote to the growing ethnic nationalist tendencies in non-Russian ethnic republics in Russia.

### **Resilience of the ethnic challenge to Russian federalism**

In fact, it turned out that Yeltsin's use of federalism to contain the rise of ethnic nationalism in Russia failed to produce its expected results by the end of his presidency in 1999. Instead of promoting inter-ethnic relations between ethnic Russians and non-Russians, Yeltsin's use of federalism served to consolidate the ethnocratic regimes in the non-Russian republics (Gorenburg, 1999: 245–74). Rather than opposing ethnic nationalists categorically, the leaderships in these non-Russian republics have co-opted some of the ethnic nationalists in order to broaden their social support base against Moscow. This made ethnic challenge to Russian federalism very strong.

In this context, it is very important to explore the dynamics behind the strength of this ethnic challenge to Russian federalism. For example, Tatarstan's President Mintimer Shaimiev co-opted the leading members of the Tatar ethnic nationalists from the All Tatar Public Centre (VTOTs) into the ranks of state-sponsored cultural

<sup>2</sup> Presidential Representatives were appointed first after the failed military coup in August 1991 to all of Russia's non-ethnically defined regions (*oblasti*) and territories (*kraya*). The practice was extended to non-Russian ethnic republics only after the October 1993 political crisis (see Petrov, 1998; Zlotnik, 1996: 26–34).

<sup>3</sup> Moscow signed bilateral federal treaties with only 46 federal units until the end of 1998. (For the texts of the treaties and agreements signed on the delimitation of powers by the federal centre with the various subjects of the Russian Federation, see *Sbornik dogovorov*, 1997).

intelligentsia. Former members of the Tatar ethnic nationalist movement such as Rafael Khakimov, Damir Ishakov, and Rafael Mukhammetinov, also became supporters of President of Tatarstan Mintimer Shaimiev. They were quite instrumental not only in promoting ethno-cultural programmes in Tatarstan, but also in opposing Moscow's authority in this non-Russian ethnic republic. A distinguished Japanese expert on Russian federalism, Kimitaka Matsuzato (2001: 43), thinks that Tatarstan's political system can be conceptualized as a 'centralized *caciquismo* in which rampant local boss politics is camouflaged by constitutional unitarism and by appointment systems of local chief executives'. In fact, such ethnocratic regimes weakened the authority of the federal centre in the regions.

Dynamics behind the resilience of the ethnic challenge to Russian federalism are manifold. To begin with, it is important to note that Russian federalism under Boris Yeltsin was characterized by the lack of a coordinated policy-making network in Moscow. In fact, under Yeltsin's presidency, the federal centre instituted various institutional mechanisms for controlling the activities of regional actors. In addition to the Ministry for Nationalities and Interregional Policy, Moscow also used the Presidential Administration and the Russian Parliament to this purpose (Kirkow, 1998: 184). However, the ministry responsible for the nationalities policy had been reorganized too frequently (see Guboglo, *Jamestown Foundation Prism*, 5 May 1998). For example, although this Ministry was originally labelled as the State Committee for Nationality Policy (*Goskonnats*), it was later named as the State Committee for the Affairs of the Federation and Nationalities (*Goskomfederatsiia*), and then it became the Ministry for the Affairs of Nationalities and Regional Policy (*Minnats*) in 1993 (Barsenkov *et al.*, 1993: 16–17). This confusion displays Moscow's difficulty in developing a clear vision for dealing with the non-Russian ethnic republics.

Another important factor is the Soviet heritage because political orientations of ethnic groups in Russia have their roots in the Soviet process of nation building that promoted cultural differentiation among various ethnic groups. Although the original Soviet idea sought to prevent the non-Russian ethnic groups from forming strong coalitions against Moscow in the Soviet system, these ethnic communities learned how to resist Moscow with their own social-cultural organizations that were developed during the Soviet era too (Tismaneanu and Turner, 1995: 4–8). For example, although Moscow divided the very close ethnic groups of Tatars and Bashkirs successfully, the Soviet-created titular republics of Tataria and Bashkiriia produced an unexpected result of individual ethnic revival movements against Moscow among the Tatars and Bashkirs in the post-Soviet era (Treisman, 1997: 212–49).

An additional factor behind the resilience of the ethnic challenge is that ethnic particularism in Russia's ethnic republics has led to calls for making the regional state structures instruments for the realization of the national aspirations of the titular ethnic groups in these ethnic republics (Walker, 1996: 9–10). For example, the ethnic nationalist movements in the Middle Volga and the North Caucasus have benefited

from the ideological and institutional power vacuum created by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, since ethnic nationalism does not require for its emergence a pre-existing formal institution. It derives from shared culture, and rapidly creates its own formal and informal institutions (Schaeffer, 1998: 51–4). It is in this context that Russia's post-Soviet federalism gave an opportunity to non-Russian ethnic nationalists in Russia such as Tatars, Bashkirs, and the Ingush to consolidate their powers in the ethnically defined regions.

On the whole, Russia's experiment with federalism between 1991 and 1999 under Boris Yeltsin proved to be ineffective in undermining the power of ethnic republics. On the contrary, Moscow's federal arrangements with the ethnic republics enabled the ethnic leaders in Russia's republics to strengthen the ethnic basis of the republics at the expense of the federal centre (Treisman, 1997: 212–49). It is important to note that in the post-Soviet era, non-Russian elites emphasized their ethnic differences in order to receive more favourable treatment from Moscow (Warhola, 1996: 90). In fact, the post-Soviet process of federalization has provided the ethnic republics with an opportunity to embark upon a nation-building process as well as a process of state building through their national sovereignty claims.

Yeltsin's attempts at using federalism to contain ethnic nationalism produced an intensified ethnic nationalist resistance from the ethnic republics in Russia since the national sovereignty claims of ethnic republics clashed with the political calculations of the federal centre. In fact, Yeltsin criticized various articles of the republican constitutions for violating Russia's federal constitution (Sarycheva, 1997: 121–42). Besides, the republics that are rich in natural resources have also proclaimed the supremacy of their republican laws over the federal laws. For example, Bashkortostan asserted its legal supremacy especially in economic and fiscal matters during the 1990s (Treisman, 1997: 212–49).

Encouraged by the weakness of the federal centre towards the end of Yeltsin's rule in 1999, most of Russia's ethnic republics started to call even for a loosely united confederation rather than a centralized form of federation. This demand was quite threatening for Moscow since it was short of only calling for outright independence. Obviously, Moscow saw this as a serious challenge to Russia's territorial integrity fuelled by ethnic nationalism. Paradoxically, however, the dissolution of the Russian Federation altogether in the short-term was not in the interest of ethnic nationalists, since they needed the federal centre to fund their ethno-cultural and socio-economic projects and consolidate their ethnic infrastructures in 'their' own republics (Gorenburg, 1999: 245–74).

In this respect, Yeltsin's failed use of federalism to contain ethnic nationalism enabled republics, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, to sign bilateral federal treaties with the federal centre under which their contributions to the federal budget had been lowered. Consequently, the economic concerns of ethnic republics led them to seek economic advantages through a loosely united confederation, while continuing their

ethno-cultural revival programmes in order to strengthen the ethnic basis of 'their' republics.<sup>4</sup> It was this sort of threat to the territorial integrity of Russia that led to the formation of a strong anti-federalist coalition led by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in 1999.

### **Fall of federalism and the rise of centralism in Vladimir Putin's Russia (2000–2008)**

Following his replacement of Boris Yeltsin as Russia's Acting President on 31 December 1999, Vladimir Putin has targeted the privileges granted to specific regions, especially ethnic republics through Yeltsin's strategy of federalization. To this purpose, Putin made it public that he will make the country more centralized in order to avoid territorial disintegration. Putin had already sent a clear message to non-Russian ethnic republics, such as Tatarstan, with the Second Chechen War that their post-Soviet federal autonomy was over. This message was also made public during Putin's trip to the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in March 2000 (*Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 24 March 2000).

Thanks to his very high popularity in the eyes of the Russian people after the Second Chechen War in 1999, Vladimir Putin started to implement his centralizing anti-federalist reforms with significant social support in May 2000. His main goal was to weaken especially non-Russian ethnic leaders in the regions first by creating seven federal districts over the federal units so that the non-compliant ethnic republics could be kept under control. Putin specified these federal districts and their capitals as follows: Central (Moscow), Northwestern (St. Petersburg), Southern (Rostov na Donu), Volga (Nizhnii Novgorod), Ural (Yekaterinburg), Siberia (Novosibirsk), and Far Eastern (Vladivostok) (Kistanov, 2000: 18–30).

As part of his strategy of weakening the regional leaders especially in the non-Russian ethnic republics, Putin also changed the composition of the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Russian Parliament, by replacing the elected regional leaders (heads of the executive and legislative organs of regional state structures) with their own appointees. Furthermore, if the heads of the executive and legislative organs of regional state structures were found guilty of breaching the federal laws twice by the Supreme Court, the Russian President could replace them with new ones until the early elections. In addition, Moscow also started to cover the expenditures of the regional courts and the police from the federal budget rather than regional budget in order to minimize the influence of regional governments over the courts and the police (*Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 16 May 2000).

These anti-federalist centralizing reforms of Vladimir Putin enabled him to keep the non-Russian ethnic republics and their leaders under the strict control of Moscow. Consequently, Moscow seems to have gained the upper hand in its relations with the

<sup>4</sup> My Interview with Leokadiia M. Drobizheva, Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology, Moscow, 24 July 1998.

federal units. In fact, Putin's re-centralization of political power compelled Russia's regional leaders to be accountable more to Moscow than the local people. These dramatic changes were felt more strongly in the ethnic republics as their leaders became worried about the survival of themselves and their ethnocratic regimes (Orttung and Reddaway, 2001: 110).

In addition to his earlier anti-federalist measures, Vladimir Putin has continued to implement his strategy of federal reforms to strengthen the federal state structures since 2004. These complementary federal reforms included the adoption of new electoral and party laws which made it extremely difficult for the regional political forces to be represented in the State Duma. In order to legitimate the rationale behind these anti-federalist reforms, Putin underlined the need to strengthen the vertical system of power in Russia against a very high risk of destabilization by centrifugal forces (Slider, *Russian Analytical Digest*, 17 June 2008).

Putin put the last nail into the coffin of federalism in Russia in 2005 when he gained the right to nominate the heads of federal units, including the presidents of ethnic republics. With this reform, Putin ended the practice of electing the ethnic republican presidents directly by the republican constituency. This has reduced the powers of non-Russian Presidents greatly not only *vis-à-vis* the republican constituency and parliament, but also *vis-à-vis* the federal centre in Moscow. Besides, Putin also forced almost all heads of federal units, including ethnic republics, to support the United Russia party in the 2007 State Duma elections. Following its success in these elections, the United Russia party succeeded in becoming the dominant party of power, not only in the State Duma, but also in most of the regional parliaments, including the parliaments of non-Russian ethnic republics (Slider, *Russian Analytical Digest*, 17 June 2008).

Vladimir Putin's policies clearly marked the end of federalism in Russia, although the Russian state will continue to be labelled as 'the Russian Federation' as well as 'Russia' in accordance with the article 1 of the Russian Constitution (*Konstitutsii Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 1993). Yeltsin's failed use of federalism to contain ethnic nationalism turned the majority of ordinary Russians against the idea of federalism, which they considered was not an appropriate instrument to cope with ethnic nationalism. This explains why Putin's anti-federalist reforms since 2000 have been supported by the majority of the people in Russia. Although these reforms have also led to the weakening of the basis for Western style democracy in Russia, it seems that Putin's centralism has been appreciated by the overwhelming majority of voters in Russia. It is also widely considered more effective than Yeltsin's federalism in containing ethnic nationalism.

### **Comparing the Russian case with other federations**

In order to explain the link between federalism and ethnic nationalism, it could be very useful to evaluate Russia's experience with federalism and ethnic nationalism comparatively rather than as an isolated phenomenon. Actually, Russia is not the only case where federalism failed to contain ethnic nationalism in ethnically defined regions.

In fact, the federal structures of the Communist states of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia disintegrated due to the strength of the region-based ethnic nationalist movements in the constituent units of these socialist federations (Leff, 1999: 231). The 15 Union Republics of the Soviet Union gained their independence in 1991 when the Soviet Union disintegrated. The Czechoslovak federation ceased to exist when the Czech and the Slovak republics were established in 1992. Yugoslavia even gave birth to seven new states: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and, very recently, Kosovo (see Popovski, 1995: 196–201; Wolchik, 1996: 75–6).

The collapse of the Soviet Union did not extinguish the fire of ethnic nationalist movements. On the contrary, the post-Soviet space has been characterized by the existence of very strong ethnic nationalist movements and ethno-territorial conflicts. These ethno-territorial conflicts include Chechnya and Tatarstan in Russia, Crimea in Ukraine, Transdnistria and Gagauz-yeri in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan (Beliaev, 1998: 56–71). Among these post-Soviet states, however, only the Russian Federation under the Presidency of Boris Yeltsin instituted federalism in order to contain ethnic nationalism, while other states suspected that federalism could strengthen ethnic nationalism in the ethnically defined regions. So, Russia became the only exception in the post-Soviet space.

It is possible to observe the weakness of federalism in coping with ethnic nationalism, even in the developed Western countries. Canada, which was formed by the British North America Act of 1867, is an example of federation where ethnicity has shaped the evolution of the federal system, especially in Quebec. In Canadian federalism, intergovernmental bargaining between the federal centre and some of the ethnically defined regions, such as Quebec, determines the outcome of the process of federalization. In fact, the French-speaking people in Quebec not only consider themselves as a sovereign nation, but also view the Quebec regional state as the guardian of this Quebec nation (Cook, 1986: 48–59). The growing strength of institutionalized ethnic nationalism in Quebec, thus, weakens the claim that federalism could be effective in weakening ethnic nationalists in Canada.

Another comparable case is Belgium which was transformed from a unitary state into a federation in 1993 in order to contain ethnic separatism of the Flanders and Wallons. In the federal structure of Belgium, the federal units of the Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels were given autonomy mainly in the areas of economic development, public services, and foreign trade, while the federal government was given responsibility mainly in the areas of defence and foreign affairs (Peeters, 1994: 195–7). Despite the existing federal arrangements, the Flemish Community Parliament called for the creation of a confederal system in March 1999. In response, all the francophone political parties threatened to block the formation of a new federal government. As these deep-rooted tensions in the Belgian federalism demonstrate, it is not clear yet whether Belgian federalism will survive the challenges of ethnic nationalism or not.

It is not surprising that successful federations are those that do not take ethnicity as a defining characteristic of the federal regions. The main characteristic of the German federal system, for example, is that federalism serves to prevent the re-centralization of power. As compared to Russia, Germany lacks comparable ethnic nationalist movements and their ethnically defined regions. Germany has also been characterized by ethno-cultural homogeneity. Thus, unlike Russian federalism, German federalism is not challenged by powerful centrifugal forces (Boase, 1994: 99). These factors explain why the success of federalism in Germany cannot be attributed to the representation of ethnic groups through federal arrangements.

Likewise, another successful example of federation is the United States of America. Not surprisingly, it is not designed to accommodate ethnic nationalist movements controlling their own ethnically defined regions. Its guiding principle is very different. In *The Federalist Papers*, the founding fathers of American federalism, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, anticipated that the US federal government should be both strong enough to maintain political stability, and balanced by diverse federal units so that the federal centre could not threaten the fundamental human rights and liberties of individuals in the federal units (Madison *et al.*, 1999: 165). It is in this spirit that ethnicity is not a defining characteristic of the federal units in American federalism, but a trait of individuals. Therefore, American federalism is more successful than Russian federalism since it does not give ethnic nationalism an institutional recognition through federal arrangements.

Comparatively speaking, the overwhelming majority of the federations in the developing countries of Asia and Africa have been very ineffective in coping with ethnic separatism just like the Russian Federation under the Yeltsin administration. It is also not surprising that the majority of modern federations in the developing world have collapsed either by disintegrating into independent states or by becoming fully centralized unitary states (Mawhood, 1984: 521).

Taking into account the fact that the developing states are overwhelmingly authoritarian, it seems that the federations in the developing world have maintained their territorial integrity against the pressures of the ethnically defined regions, not because of the genuine use of federalism to contain ethnic nationalism, but due to the authoritarian practices of their central elites (He, 2007: 1–32). It should be stated here that China has been a federal state since 1979 for economic purposes. Beijing makes sure that federalism in China serves mainly to justify the existence of special economic zones in the country rather than sharing state power – which is still controlled exclusively by the Communist Party of China – with autonomous areas, such as Tibet or Xinjiang (Montinola *et al.*, 1995: 53).

Japan which is characterized by a high level of ethnic homogeneity, has also been introducing quasi-federal arrangements very successfully in order to make the political system even more efficient. As in the United States, Japanese quasi-federalism serves to promote economic efficiency and the liberties of individuals. Takashi Inoguchi (2007: 266–89) demonstrates that the practices of quasi-federalism play an important role in

balancing the need for central administration with the need for accommodating the growing regional differentiation in Japan, as exemplified in the process of privatizing the Japanese postal service.

Another important example of Asian federalism is Indonesia, which gave the Aceh people significant autonomy in 2005. In this way, Indonesian federalism is based on a hybrid model, where multinational ethnic federalism and regional federalism are practiced together in one federal arrangement as in Aceh and other parts of the federation respectively. Nevertheless, to what extent, Indonesia's attempt at combining multinational and regional federalism will be successful remains to be seen (He, 2007: 1–32; Reid, 2007: 144–64).

This comparative assessment demonstrates that whenever ethnic nationalism is given institutional recognition through federal arrangements, it is very likely that ethnically defined regions could use this opportunity to consolidate their power in 'their' own republics. In cases where ethnicity is understood as a defining characteristic of an individual rather than a region, the likelihood that the federal arrangement could survive the challenges of the region-based ethnic nationalisms may increase.

### **Conclusion**

This article has explored the capacity of federal arrangements to contain ethnic nationalism at the regional level by discussing Russia's experience in the post-Soviet era. It has sought to answer the question of how and why Russian federalism failed to contain but served to consolidate ethnic nationalism in the ethnically defined regions during the 1990s. It is observed that the main lesson from the Russian experience in using federalism to contain ethnic nationalism is that federal arrangements may not offer a sustainable solution to the challenges of ethnic nationalism, since federalism offers an institutional framework for the consolidation of ethnic nationalism at the regional level.

In this article, it is also pointed out that Russia's republics have become increasingly more assertive against the federal centre under the Presidency of Boris Yeltsin between 1991 and 1999. It seems that Yeltsin's failed use of federalism in containing ethnic nationalism is closely related to the fact that the federal system created room for a nation-building process at the republican level.

It is also important to underline the relationship between the processes of federalization and democratization. The existence of democratic regimes may influence the stability of federal arrangements significantly. In other words, whether Russia is democratic or authoritarian determines the effectiveness of Russian federalism. In this sense, the Yeltsin administration benefited from the existence of a quasi-democratic regime throughout the 1990s as it served to ameliorate ethnic nationalist movements considerably.

Otherwise, under an authoritarian rule, ethnic nationalist movements might have challenged the federal centre and its regional power bases more effectively. Presumably, if Moscow both promoted an authoritarian regime as it did after Vladimir Putin's



rise to the Russian Presidency, and continued Yeltsin's use of federalism to contain ethnic nationalism in ethnically defined regions, the outcome would be more chaotic and unstable centre–periphery relations in Russia. It could be claimed that although Vladimir Putin could be criticized for promoting authoritarianism, his policy of not using multinational federalism to contain ethnic nationalism at least prevented the outbreak of instability and dangerously chaotic centre–periphery relations in Russia.

All in all, although there was a genuine attempt at instituting federalism for the first time in modern Russian history during the Yeltsin era, this process ended with Vladimir Putin's anti-federalist centralizing reforms in 2000. Russia's post-Soviet experience has demonstrated that federalism is not a panacea for containing ethnic nationalism in ethnically defined regions. On the contrary, it can even serve to strengthen ethnic nationalisms at the regional level. This is valid mainly for multinational federalism. As the comparative analysis in this article demonstrates, regional federalism could be very stable and effective as in the United States and Germany. Nevertheless, whether hybrid federalism can be effective in containing ethnic nationalism, as in Indonesia, remains to be seen.

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