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Political transformation in Russia and the federalism development (the case of republics)

SUMMARY

The authors study the political transformation in Russia through the experience of democratic reforms in executive power, parliamentary and electoral systems in the republics of the Russian Federation. Republics differ from other parts of Russia with the right to establish their own official language alongside Russian and to have their own constitutions. By the way titular nationality and other ethnic groups of republics retain some traditional features in political and social life. Our research of post-Soviet experience of federal relations between center and republics allows to characterize one of variants of adaptation of democratic institutes in the social environment as not enough adapted for perception the democratic administrative principles. Such structural factors as multiethnic, territorial disputes and influence of religious communities make

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regional political processes dependent on ethnic and group preferences. We studied the main tendencies of development of the Russian federalism during the post-Soviet period: institutional changes of the federal relations between the center and republics of the Russian Federation, the administrative-territorial changes connected with integration of regions, and also development of the budgetary federalism. During the post-Soviet period there was transit from "parade of sovereignties" to "treaty model" federation, and then the constitutional federation with accurate institutional structure and vertical budgetary federalism. The federal center now has considerable impact on formation of the republican authorities, not only through legislative norms, not only by means of economic levers (subsidized dependence), but also a political, party and administrative resource. Though now direct elections of chief executives in regions came back to Russian law, we are inclined to predict that the federal center will continue to have essential impact on delegation authority in the republics of Russia

KEY WORDS: *Russian Federation, republic, federal district, executive power, legislature, electoral systems, parties, budget, subsidies.*

Ethnic factor mostly defines processes of the state construction of our country. Ethnographers unite indigenous (non-Russian) ethnic groups of Russia in some regional groups, close on geographical and cultural features. The share of the people of the Volga and Urals regions – the Bashkir, Kalmyks, the Komi, Maris, Mordvins, Tatars, Udmurts and Chuvashes – is about 7,5% of the country population. People of the North Caucasus: Abazins, Adyghes, Balkars, Ingushes, Kabardinians, Karachais, Ossetians, Circassians, Chechens, the people of Dagestan – make less than 3% of population. The people of Siberia and the North – Altaians, Buryats, Tuvinians, Khakas, Yakuts and nearly three tens of so-called small peoples of the North are 0,6% of all Russian population. Ethnic identity is institutionalized in Russia with the existing of republics and autonomic okrugs and oblast as the subjects of the Russian Federation. Russian federalism combines both territorial and ethnic principles of administrative division. Republics differ from other parts of Russia with the right to establish their own official language and to have their own constitutions. By the way titular nationality and other ethnic groups of republics retain some traditional features in political and social life. During twenty six years period of the federal relations after the USSR collapse our state met many contradictions and alternative ways of development: real or nominal federation, level of economic independence of regions and level of subsidies, difference between ethnic

republics and other territorial subjects, role of political parties in the regional politics.

In foreign transitology, a procedural approach is widely applied to the analysis of transformation processes. Its supporters consider that political changes are initiated by competing elites. As a result of their interaction, the power of individual leaders and certain elite groups is replaced by the supra-personal domination of official procedures and constitutional norms (Przeworski 1991; O'Donnel and Schmitter 1986).

The transformation of Russian Post-Soviet political system was linked with the federalism development concerning institutionalization the complex relations between federal center and subjects of the Russian Federation. Our research of post-Soviet experience of federal relations between center and republics allows to characterize one of variants of adaptation of democratic institutes in the social environment not adapted enough for perception of democratic administrative principles. Such structural factors as multiethnic, territorial disputes and influence of religious communities make regional political processes dependent on ethnic and group preferences.

If we follow Robert Dahl's classical definition, Russia is not ideal federation. For Dahl, federalism is "a system in which some matters are exclusively within the competence of certain local units – cantons, states, provinces – and are constitutionally beyond the scope of the authority of national government; and where certain other matters are constitutionally outside the scope of the authority of smaller units". (Dahl 1986, 144)

The peculiarities of Russian federalism were studied by foreign authors: K. Ross, A. Campbell (Ross, Campbell 2009), M. Burgess, A. Heinemann-Grüder, and others, who presented their own vision of political processes in our country. For example, M. Burgess believes that in such federations as Russia, with a pronounced socio-cultural differentiation, several constitutional and political strategies are required for successful governance. «What will work in the management of Tatarstan is not necessarily suitable for Chechnya» (Burgess 2009). In turn, A. Heinemann-Grüder, says: «The example of Russia shows that, probably, all attempts to institutionalize ethnicity are temporary.» After the phase of ethnic federalism in the 1990s, it was time of «de-ethnicization» of economic and political expectations. Heinemann-Grüder connects the further development of federalism in Russia with the assimilation of non-Russian peoples either through Russification or through the transformation of ethnic identity markers into civil (Heinemann-Grüder 2009, 76).

The most controversial issue remains the assessment of the prospects for the development of Russian statehood and the preservation of the ethno-territorial nature of the federal system. Some scientists from Russia (Abdulatipov, Mikhailov 2016) believe that it is necessary to constantly take into account the ethnic specifics and the needs for self-government of local communities, to develop the ethnic component of Russian federalism. There is also an opposite

point of view. Thus, Vilen Ivanov and Oleg Yarovoy consider the administrative-territorial principle of state structure dominant, noting that ethnic federalism in Russia has no strategic prospects (Ivanov, Yarovoy 2001). In turn, A.B. Zubov defines the ethno-territorial principle of federalism as "a bomb placed under the building of Russian statehood" (Zubov 2005, 14). Moderate position adheres to former President of Republic North Ossetia-Alania Taymuras Mamsurov. In his monograph devoted to the ethnopolitical features of the Russian federalism development, he noted that in order to avoid the disintegration of the community of peoples living on the territory of Russia, it is necessary to take into account and coordinate their interests, without ignoring the ethnic component in making political decisions (Mamsurov 2001).

Meanwhile, more and more often our scientists see the problems of Russian federalism in accentuation of ethnicity. So, V. Streletsky points out the complexity of the federal system: a combination of ethnic and territorial origin and a combination of constitutional equality with the actual inequality of the subjects of Russia (Streletsky 2010, 9–34).

So the problem of forming democratic institutions in subjects of the Russian Federation in connection with complex social and political situation is a very painful question.

Nowadays the Russian Federation comprises 85 federal subjects including 46 oblasts, 22 republics, 9 krais, 4 autonomous okrugs, 1 autonomous oblast and 3 federal cities. The republics occupy 28,55% of the actual territory of Russia, 17,92% of the country's population live in them. The republics of the Russian Federation (nominally states) have their constitutions, chiefs of executive, legislatures and their own official language alongside Russian.

The only federal district where ethnically Russians are in minority comprises six republics (Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Dagestan) is North Caucasian Federal District. At the same time the development of democratic power institutions in the North Caucasian republics was accompanied with fight of various political forces, both on regional republican, and at the federal level: the ethnic conflicts, mobilization of national movements and radical Islamic groups («Wahhabites»), acts of terrorism. So in our investigation we will pay some more attention to these republics.

In the early 1990s the autonomous republics of Russia joined to «parade of sovereignties». As a result they raised their political status and became the republics (states) of the Russian Federation. Further democratic transformations led to foundation and mobilization of numerous national and social movements, each ethnic group formed its organization. Most of the republics in Russia installed the position of the president – chief executives (the highest official). They also transformed their own legislative assemblies – parliaments. And national elections were entered in the political practice of formation of regional executive and representative.

The analysis of post-Soviet political process and transformation leads us to a conclusion that institutional changes in subjects of the Russian Federation keep within three stages:

The First stage (1991–1996) was characterized by spontaneous change of “game rules” when new institutes had been organized in the struggle of competing elite for the power and legitimacy, thus political actors preferred force strategy.

During this period republics in Russia “imported” some democratic institutions (institute of presidency and parliamentary structures). We suppose that the main advantage of the «import» of institute of presidency was legal fixing by regional elite their claims for the sovereignty. Further more the regional Communist leaders of republics tried to preserve their positions in new democratic institutions. New “formal rule” – the election of the republican chief executive – allowed the former leaders of the republics to raise their status in the relations with the federal center, and also limited actions of their political opponents (leaders of ethnic movements and organizations).

The installation in the majority of the North Caucasian republics the institution of presidency, the executive regional power started to dominate the legislative. For example the dictatorship of Dzohar Dudaev in Chechnya in June 1993 turned the Parliament of Chechen Republic into the bearer of interests of the executive power, unable to possess legislative and control functions. In other republics the domination of the executive power was not enforced but became the result of “rutins”. We studied and revealed the main social and professional groups which became deputies of republican parliaments of the first and second convocations. It showed that in the second half of the 1990th in formation of legislature the social practices of the Soviet period still affected the North Caucasus elections: voting for the directors of the large enterprises and heads of local (municipal) administrations, shift from legislature in executive and vice versa, numerically *small* representation of institutes of democracy (parties and social movements) (**Table 1**), “patron-client” relations, nepotism, ethnic quoting. In my opinion, the weak legislative power was favorable to the leaders of the republics as it strengthened their own positions.

However «import» of institute of presidency had some essential expenses: independence and responsibility to solve regional social and economic problems, without any assistance to stand up to the impact of internal opposition, to follow the rules of democratic elections and principles. And in fact regional elite didn’t have enough moral and economic resources for these.

TABLE 1.
Members of parties in legislature republics of the North Caucasus, 1995–1997³

Republic	Total of deputies	Number of members of parties	Share of members of parties in total of deputies, (%)
Republic Adygeya	45	22	49
Karachaevo-Circassian Republic	73	15	21
Kabardino-Balkarian Republic	36	5	14
Republic North Ossetia-Alania	73	7	10
Republic Dagestan	121	0	0

The Second stage (1997–2000) when institutional balance between the basic political subjects was established as a result of application of conciliation procedures and “auction” tactics.

Signed in 1992 Federal Treaty (it was not signed by Chechnya and Tatarstan) initiated the formation of «treaty model» relations between the Federal center and regions. In this period the republics of Russian Federation were adopting their own constitutions and announced themselves sovereign republics free to terminate the Federal Treaty. The Constitution of the Russian Federation was adopted in December 1993, but it did not become the legal imperative limiting regional politicians at once. After then the prevailing political and legal practice was the signing of the bilateral agreements between federal and republican authorities. In fact this practice still supported the positions of regional elite (such treaties with the federal center was signed by the authorities of Tatarstan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Bashkortostan, the North Ossetia-Alania, Republic Sakha (Yakutia)). The agreements signed between the Russian Federation and Chechen Republic Ichkeria (The Treaty of Peace, May 12, 1997) and between North Ossetia and Ingushetia (The treaty on economic and cultural cooperation, September 4, 1997) were the part of “treaty model” political relations. Thus, thanks to a choice of the compromise and «bargaining» tactics by main political actors in the Russian Federation shaky institutional balance was established. No one of the political actors (neither the federal center, nor regional elite) could not find enough resources to change the achieved agreements and correlation of forces.

At the same time the “treaty model” relations created threat of decentralization of the power and emergence of the new conflicts in the Russian Federation.

3 Ross, Cameron. 2002. “Political parties in regional democracy”. In: Cameron Ross (ed.). *Regional Politics in Russia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press: 50–52.

The Third stage (2000-present time) – the federal center has entered institutional restrictions for regional elite and the general rules of the organization of republican executive and legislative authorities.

In early 2000 started by the President Vladimir Putin reform of federal relations changed the correlation of the political forces. First of all he instituted the system of federal districts. So the Plenipotentiary of the President in each federal district are put over republican executive power. The next step was the reform of the Council of Federation. The highest officials of the republics and deputies of legislative institutions could not form the Council of Federation any more, and they were discharged of the direct participation in lawmaking. Many significant amendments were introduced in the law «About the general principles of the organization of executive and legislative (representative) public authorities of subjects of the Russian Federation». They provided responsibility of the highest officials of the republics for breaking the federal laws, possibility of their dismissal according to decision of the Russian Federation President or as a result of vote of the republic citizens. At last, in December 2004 direct elections of the highest officials of all subjects of the Russian Federation were cancelled. Such delegation of authorities between the federal center and the republics and the requirement for regional powers to comply with federal laws became important positive shifts and put a barrier for decentralization of our country. The republican authorities inspected their own constitutions and laws and redacted them in the compliance with the federal Constitution and laws.

Cancellation of the direct elections of the highest officials of the Russian Federation subjects allowed the federal center to endue chief executive of the republics with authority. The status of presidents (the highest officials) of the republics was considerably lowered after reforms undertaken by the federal center, and they from elected and trusted by citizens persons turned into officials of the bureaucratic system where over them there is the Plenipotentiary of the President of the Russian Federation in Federal District. The new «appointees» who have replaced old elected regional leaders now don't think any more about «sovereignty» and returning the "treaty model" relations with the federal center. So we can say that the new institutional restrictions enforced by the federal center showed us the failure of the «import» of institute of presidency and other democratic institutions. The reason is the subsidized character of local economies.

Here is the list of republics of the Russian Federation which had the share of subsidy from the federal budget on alignment of the consolidated budgets more than 40 % in 2015⁴.

4 Ministry of Finances of the Russian Federation Official Website. URL: http://info.minfin.ru/subj_analytics.php

Ingushetia – 85,5%;
Chechen Republic – 81,6%;
Tuva – 75,3%;
Altai Republic – 77,0%;
Dagestan – 70,0%;
Karachevo-Cherkessia – 64,2%;
North Ossetia – 56,2%;
Kabardino-Balkariya – 54,1%;
Kalmykiya – 53,7%;
Buryatia – 50,4%;
Republic Sakha (Yakutia) – 46%;
Adygeya – 42,3%;
Mari El Republic – 40,8%

Now about two thirds of budgetary funds (tax revenues) concentrate in the federal budget. And by world practice it is proved that if proportions of distribution of budgetary funds between the federal budget and budgets of subjects of federation make 60% and 40% respectively, the budgetary system of this country is considered functioning as the budget of the unitary state (Avetisyan 2011, 126).

So, today in Russia there is a centralized system of intergovernmental fiscal relations to the detriment of the interests of the regions. As a result, their financial dependence on the federal center is very high. It turns out that the principle of independence of the budgets of the subjects of the Russian Federation is declarative in nature. This situation has its pros and cons, both politically and economically. Politically, vertical budget federalism ensures the integrity of the Russian state and the loyalty of regional leaders deprived of economic independence. On the other hand, vertical budgetary federalism makes our country similar to unitary states. On the economic level, of course, control over the budgetary system, which, to some extent, is designed to limit arbitrariness and economic abuse on the ground, is positive. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that it is the vertical federalism that causes the fact that most of the regions of Russia are currently subsidized.

Further more chief executives of republics of Russian Federation refused the president title, so they showed their loyalty to the Federal center.

TABLE 2.
*Political parties in legislature of the North Caucasian republics
 (share of parliamentary factions members)⁵*

Party	Popular assembly of Karachaevo-Circassian Republic 14.09.2014	Popular assembly of Republic of Ingushetia 18.09.2016	Parliament of Kabardino-Balkarian Republic 14.09.2014	Parliament of Republic of North Ossetia-Alania 14.10.2012	Parliament of Chechen Republic 08.09.2013	Popular assembly of Republic of Dagestan 18.09.2016
"Edinaya Rossiya"	74%	81%	71%	64%	90%	80%
Communist Party of RF	9%	9%	11%	7%	4,8%	9%
Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia	3,9%	3%	2%	—	—	—
"Spravedlivaya Rossiya"	5 %	6%	11%	7%	4,8%	11%
Patriots of Russia	5%	—	—	21%	—	—
Others	—	—	2%	—	—	—

Accepted in July, 2001 the Federal law "About political parties" and in June, 2002 the Federal law "About guarantees of electoral rights and the rights to participation in a referendum of citizens of the Russian Federation" were directed on strengthening of multi-party system and democracy in regions. The first results of electoral reform in the North Caucasus showed that in electoral processes the local administrative resource is still actively used in election campaign. The majority of seats in republican parliaments are received by the representatives of one party "Edinaya Rossiya". As the regional offices of this Party are headed by the highest officials of the republics, we can see not democratization but bureaucratization of legislature. Membership in "Edinaya Rossiya" party provides the regional elite access of the power and resources (Table 2). We can also observe the restriction of the social and professional groups forming legislature of the republics of the North Caucasus: the majority of parliamentary seats is occupied by representatives of business and public service.

Thus, we can conclude that the new institutional restrictions aimed at development of multi-party system and democratization of the power lead to strength of the federal power. As the regional elites assure the Federal power to be faithful and loyal our government does nothing to change this situation.

5 According to information from official Websites of the legislative structures of North Caucasian Republics.

The results of various sociological surveys conducted in the republics of the North Caucasus in 2013–2014, revealed a weak public trust in political parties (77% of the population are not supporters of any of the political parties) and regional elections (about 40% are inclined not to trust the election results). Not trusting the objectivity and fairness of the elections, about 15% of the population of the region never participate in elections, and 27% rarely participate in elections, which is at odds with the official figures for the turnout in the North Caucasus region (Popov, Haykin 2014, 124–155).

So the loyalty of regional authorities to the federal center yet doesn't increase their effectiveness in the solution of social problems. For example the republics of the North Caucasus according to the socio-economic indexes are in the end of the list of the Russian Federation regions.

This region shows very low rate of social and economic development. The official unemployment rate is also very high: more than 40% (in the age from 15 to 70) in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia. Furthermore, because of traditionally high birthrate in these republics most (in Dagestan 43%) of the unemployed people is youth from 20 to 29 years old.

High birthrate during last 15 years brought problems into regional school education. In Dagestan and Ingushetia some schools have three sessions a day.

Economic and employment problems caused high crime rate in the region.

Weakness and inefficiency of the republican authorities in solution of regional problems are connected with high level of corruption. Political elite of the North Caucasian republics continues to keep essential for the mountain people mentality features which serve as an obstacle in a way of formation of values, institutes and the relations of modern democratic society: commitment to group, ethnic, related, and hierarchical interests.

Corruption in authorities causes the growth of mistrust of citizens to official governmental institutes. So the population has negative attitude to officials and some people especially young can become the object of Islamic extremist, separatist and terrorist propaganda. As a result the North Caucasus is known as the source of terrorist acts in the Russian Federation.

All these social, economic and political problems provoke instability in the region. That's why the course to modernization should be accompanied with deep social and economic reforms.

In April, 2013 President of Russia V. V. Putin granted the subjects of the Russian Federation the right to decide independently whether to hold direct elections or to elect the head of the region by voting of deputies of representative institutions. But we think that political practice indicates that this measure would not change composition and quality of political elite in the regions of the Russian Federation. Currently, direct election procedure is applied in 75 Russian regions. The heads of the other ten subjects (mostly republics) of

the Russian Federation are elected by local parliaments – Adygea, Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, the Republic of Crimea, the Kabardino-Balkarian and Karachay-Cherkessian Republics, and the Khanty-Mansiysk, Yamalo-Nenets and Nenets Autonomous Districts.

So, the evolution of the federal relations in Russia was interfaced some essential changes in interaction of regional and central authorities. There was difficult way from «parade of sovereignties» and considerable independence of republican elite in distribution of powers of authority through «treaty model» relations to full loyalty of the regional power to the federal center. In our opinion, important results of development of the federal relations are: preservation of the republics in a legal framework of the Russian Federation and embedding of their authorities in a nation-wide control system. The federal center has considerable impact on formation of regional authorities, not only through legislative norms, not only by means of economic levers (subsidized dependence of the region), but also a political, party and administrative resource. Though now direct elections of chief executives come back to regions of Russia, we are inclined to predict that the federal center will continue to have essential impact on vestment with powers in the subjects of the Russian Federation.

For carrying out a course on complex social and economic development of North Caucasus federal district Vladimir Putin issued the Decree «About the Ministry of the Russian Federation for the North Caucasus» in May 12, 2014. Taking in attention recent foundation of the Ministry of development of the Far East (June, 2012) and the Ministry of affairs of the Crimea (May, 2014, existed till July, 2015) it is possible to make a conclusion that the Federal Center turned to direct territorial government of boundary and remote areas of Russia.

The evolution of federal relations between center and republics came from “parade of sovereignties” through “treaty model” to full loyalty of the regional power institutions to the federal center.

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