1. Typologies of Regional Conflicts in Modern Russia

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Social development is impossible without contradictions and conflicts. To dream about getting rid of them is not just naive—it is dangerous and harmful because it demobilizes the society and engenders bitter disappointment in the state authority which is incapable to provide development without conflicts. Such dreams are typical for many nations in the world; however, as a rule, they are less common among peoples who have organized their societies along democratic lines. Democracy obliges its citizens to view conflicts as normal, to understand that the solution of one type of conflict takes the society to a new level, which is higher than the previous one but which also abounds in conflicts, albeit of a different kind. It seems that without such a perception of conflicts, democracy does not function—if only because a polity based on the choices of citizens who expect the state to do away with the conflicts once and for all is inherently unstable.

Alas, Russia is not one of the countries whose culture views conflicts as normal. On the contrary, Russian culture tends toward eschatology, toward a deep-rooted belief in the Divine Kingdom on Earth, a land of milk and honey, etc. This is accompanied by a belief that the Kingdom can only be attained at the cost of enormous efforts by the entire population simultaneously. Moreover, it is typical to think that it is only for the sake of this promised land that any public effort should be undertaken. This serves as the basis for the success of politicians such as Zhirinovsky, who “specialize” in making promises, and receive a great many votes—even though the unrealizable nature of their promises is obvious to the majority of those voting for them.

Regional Conflicts

The inevitability of conflicts is especially obvious in the regional context. At its basis lies a deep-rooted contradiction between the interests of the whole and the interests of individual parts. That which is advantageous to the country as a
whole may not always be advantageous to one of its regions, and vice versa. A typical example is environmental protection vs. nuclear energy development. Everyone wants the benefits of power from nuclear plants, but public opinion in any given region opposes building facilities in that region. On the other hand, each region is interested in attracting high wage industries that improve the entire economy of the region. As a result, regional authorities have begun to compete with one another, offering such industries preferential treatment and privileges. In doing so, they often prevent optimal placement from the point of view of benefits to the country as a whole.

Similar disputes can take on far more severe forms leading to distortions in the territorial structure of a country, and even to threats to its integrity. Under uncontrolled market conditions economic players avoid placing enterprises in less developed regions in favor of more developed regions. As a result, poor regions become even poorer, and rich ones still richer, tearing at the economic fabric and political integrity of the country. There are mechanisms in a market economy which soften this process—for example, the constant exchange of labor and capital between regions—but these mechanisms work slowly, and their short-term effectiveness is problematical.

Political leaders, including those in Russia, are constantly faced with a difficult choice: if they stimulate the economic growth of the country, interregional disproportions grow; if, in their opinion, these disproportions are too great and need to be leveled, they must sacrifice economic growth in the more developed/productive regions (where the return on investment is high) to increase the amount of capital investment in less developed regions where the return is lower.

Is the Regional Structure of Russia Truly Stable?

Interregional conflicts, which had decreased in the 1970s–1980s, began to grow faster at the beginning of perestroika and intensified sharply thereafter. In particular, the momentum of the USSR’s disintegration brought Russia’s integrity into question.

However, several factors interfered with the growth of moderated interregional antagonisms in Russia. Russia, as a country, has a rather monotonic physical geography—its parts differ from each other much less than one would expect, given the vastness of the territory (especially if moving latitudinally, where the majority of Russian settlements are situated). Russia is also culturally homogeneous; Russians who live thousands of kilometers from each other differ surprisingly little in their value systems and political cultures. The ethnic
diversity of the Russian Federation is far less than it was in the USSR: almost half of the USSR’s population was non-Russian; in present-day Russia that number is only 17 percent by ethnicity (and by language, 7-8 percent). As such, Russia looks like a Russian country with a sprinkling of non-Russian enclaves—a country where the “nationality problems” are relatively manageable.

The major binding factor in Russia is the political tradition of state centrism, fostered since the time of Ivan Kalita, and firmly ingrained in the consciousness of the Russian people. The threat of regional separatism had never been an issue for Russia (with the exception, perhaps, of the notorious Polish question), and the threat of disintegration in the 1980s and 1990s was due not to the aggrandizement of power by the regions, but to the weakening of central authority. However, the momentum of centrism was sufficient enough to avoid this danger by 1994.

**Standard Regional Disputes in Russia**

It is customary to single out four standard types of disputes in any country’s territorial structure: between the center and a region, between the regions; between the center and several (or all) of the regions; and the opposition of a single region to the country’s regional system as a whole. The severity ratio of these categories is different for every country. The same is true for Russia. The disputes which stand out there are found, so to speak, along the vertical axis—between the center (at the federal level) and a region—practically every one of the regions.

Verticality is generally a characteristic feature of Russian culture on many levels, even including religion (suffice it to compare the familiar “horizontal” attitude of a Protestant toward God to the extremely respectful, humble, upwards view of God in the Russian Orthodox faith). In the regional sphere, all disputes seem to be reduced to this verticality. Even when horizontal disputes arise between regions, they take on an entirely vertical form, as the leaders of contending regions or their citizens launch their appeals first to Moscow instead of to each other. Until recently, there was no direct political contact between the regions.

The extreme weakness of horizontal regional relationships reflects the disastrous state of the Russian territorial structure. Contact between neighboring areas is partial and intermittent; the inhabitants, as a rule, are poorly informed about the events taking place nearby, and, moreover, they show no interest in them. These kinds of communications are a little livelier in Siberia and in the Far East, but in European Russia regional self-isolation is very prevalent. Regional borders, as a rule, are overgrown with woods; highways terminate at them, making them easy
to distinguish even from satellite photographs. Nothing similar exists in any other developed country. It is because of this that the territorial fabric of Russia, woven only from vertical communications, is thin and precarious. To keep it intact requires the urgent activation of horizontal communications.

Disputes between the center and several regions are fairly widespread abroad, often threatening the territorial integrity of a state. However, they are rare in Russia. We could say “fortunately do not exist,” except that the reason for their scarcity is unfortunate due to the aforementioned weakness of contact between neighboring regions. It is true that in Russia, eight regional associations which unite the leaders of neighboring subjects of the Federation have been in existence for six years. Foreign experts assign them a great deal of importance and write about them frequently—far more often than Russian authors. This is with good reason, as it is clear to any Russian analyst that these associations are an artificial political invention. Ostensibly, they were created to coordinate efforts in socio-economic development, but, in reality, they are a concerted effort to extract additional power and funds from the federal authorities and do not assume any political functions. Remarkably, the federal authorities not only did not fear the creation of such associations, but tried to promote their development in every possible way. I have had a number of opportunities to participate in discussions about the possibility of transferring some part of federal powers and concerns not just to the regional level, but first to the interregional level—that is, to the associations. According to Kremlin analysts, this would have regulated the flow of funds and administrative functions from the center outward, expanded the regional strategies of the center, and stimulated cooperation between the subjects of the Federation. Alas! Each one these attempts failed. The associations’ leaderships refused to assume any additional responsibilities above and beyond those which the individual members of the association already possessed.

Thus, the associations did not succeed in evolving into comprehensive political structures. To this day, they basically play a decorative role, articulating only interregional interests and possessing no capability to realize them. The interests of the regions that make up the associations proved too diverse; the leadership of each was too absorbed by their own internal problems. Moreover, it is evident that disputes of the “region vs. region” type were forced to the surface here; the associations were amplifying disputes between their participants which would have remained latent had it not been for these associations in the first place.

At the end of 1996, a tendency was emerging to link regions, not by geographic factors, but by other factors. In particular, the mayor of Moscow, Yu. M. Luzhkov, and the governor of Samara, K.A. Titov, have tried to initiate the alliance of “donor regions”—that is, those regions whose budgets did not require
federal transfers. The initiators requested that the donors receive certain privileges in the budgeting process. The initiative has been smothered, but it has a future.

The fourth standard type of dispute is one region vs. the regional system, and is expressed by the attempts of a region (i.e., its leadership, entrepreneurs, or public) to improve its position within the regional structure of the country—to achieve unilateral favorable terms, privileges, etc., while using various objective advantages to this end (possession of an unique resource, an especially favorable geographical location, etc.). Conflicts of this sort develop only in the mature stages of the evolution of the territorial-political structure of a country, when regional leaders and organizations become especially aware not only of their interests, but also how to realize them. It is too early to speak about these types of disputes in Russia. Almost all of the appreciable disputes in Russia today are those between the regions and the center. However, when Russia begins to grow economically, regional leaders will start competing with each other to attract investments.

**Other Typologies**

There are many other classifications of regional conflicts besides the “standard” one. For example, interregional conflicts are often separated by subject matter into: conflicts over resources; territorial conflicts; ethno-cultural and ethno-political conflicts; and so-called “non-realistic” conflicts—all of these are present in Russia today.

Conflicts over resources are especially prominent. First, there are a number of disputes over natural resources, as in the case of the protracted conflict between the governing bodies of the Tyumen oblast and the okrugs within it that are rich in petroleum and natural gas. More often, there are conflicts over financial (primarily budgetary) resources. The lion’s share of the present conflicts among Russia’s regions can be reduced to this type. Such conflicts are usually nameless, as the claims of the “deprived” regions are almost always addressed to the federal authorities, and not to those regions who received more than their share; therefore, externally, such disputes do not appear interregional in character.

Conflicts over investment resources, which are so widespread in the West, are much less common in Russia, where there are few interregional investments. Nevertheless, there have already been conflicts of this type. Probably the most vivid example is the disputes between the Stavropol krai and neighboring Ingushetia. When the latter obtained the right to establish a free economic zone with considerable tax breaks, many enterprises from Stavropol began registering
in Ingushetia. The discontent of the Stavropol leaders was caused by the fact that, in reality, these enterprises remained in the krai, and utilized its infrastructure, but their taxes (albeit reduced) were paid to Ingushetia. Such conflicts will increase.

**Territorial Conflicts**

The most egregious example here is Primorsky krai, whose governor, at different times, has made territorial claims on practically all of his neighbors—China, Khabarovsk krai, and Sakhalin. However, on the whole, such disputes are usually settled to the mutual satisfaction of both parties, although in each case one of the regions loses a part of their territory. This was the case in 1995, when the Sokolsky district of the Ivanovo oblast was transferred to Nizhny Novgorod. The district is cut off from the Ivanovo oblast by a wide reservoir while convenient highways connect it to Nizhny Novgorod, many of whose residents have built dachas (country homes) there. While the district was a burden to the Ivanovo authorities, it was an asset to the Nizhny Novgorod authorities, and the border negotiations between the two subjects—the first such negotiations in the new Russia—were completed successfully.

Similar negotiations are under way to transfer to two or three Novosibirsk districts to the Omsk oblast; these districts are much closer to Omsk than to Novosibirsk. In this case, however, the Omsk administration opposes the transfer because the western Novosibirsk districts are mostly undeveloped.

Ethno-cultural and ethno-political conflicts also exist in Russia, despite the modest percentage of ethnic non-Russians among the overall population. Such conflicts usually have two sides: mutual or unilateral ethnic hostility, and aspirations to political isolation on behalf of one of the groups. Although ethnic hostility is no more widespread in Russia than in other multinational countries, it is frequently the cause of regional conflicts, especially at the borders of national administrative entities. As we know, the administrative borders of the Russian “autonomies” poorly reflect the real distribution of non-Russian peoples; the titular nations, on the whole, constitute less than half of the local population in these “autonomies,” whereas about 40 percent of the non-Russian population live outside of their own ethnic “autonomies.” It is for this reason that there are periodic appeals to reconsider their borders and disputes about administrative jurisdictions.

The best-known conflict of this type involves the Tatars and the Bashkirs, and many other examples could be cited. However, the number of actual border disputes is insignificant in comparison with their potential number.
Far more widespread are ethno-political conflicts in which national leaders seek to secure political status for “their” nation, or raise the latter’s existing political status, and thereby increase their own national influence. For example, M. Shaimiev, the president of Tatarstan, has become one of modern Russia’s most influential regional politicians. It is possible to say that he is the only one among them who acts on “equal terms” with Yeltsin at meetings—both public and private. The President of Yakutia, M. Nikolaev, has obtained a large number of privileges for his republic due to his personal contacts with the Russian president. For other Russian regional leaders, both politicians, along with the President of Bashkortostan, M. Rakhimov, have became symbols of the benefits associated with playing the “nationalities card” in politics. At the same time, they have become embodiments of asymmetrical relations in the Russian Federation. Such relations, in turn, are a probable source of serious “horizontal” conflicts between Russia’s regions, as it is precisely the asymmetry of the federation that has become the main irritant of the mutual relations between its subjects. Most likely, the first conflicts will arise between neighboring regions and will acquire a territorial flavor.

It is not difficult to identify other types of conflicts in the territorial structure of modern Russia. For example, we can take goals as a basis for classification. In Chechnya, the aim is secession; in all other “autonomies” privileges are the objective; in conflicts between the regions and the center the goal is additional rights for one, several, or all of the regions.

It is also possible to distinguish conflicts by their duration, differentiating between the acute, the chronic, and the continuous (so-called “eternal”). Disputes between the federation and the regions belong to the “eternal” category since their roots lie in the intrinsic contradiction between a part (or parts) and the whole. It is impossible to hope for this type of contradiction to outlive itself; it can only be limited, translated to other forms, and softened as much as possible. Ethno-cultural conflicts must be considered chronic for Russia; their resolution requires long-term measures. In particular, it would be extremely dangerous to try to completely equalize the status of the regions and the “autonomies.” However, it is possible to assist the evolution of the country’s territorial structure in this direction. Finally, it is necessary to stop the acute conflicts as quickly as possible using tactical means.

When designing policies, it is important not to confuse these types of conflicts. The Chechen crisis looks acute because it has become very extreme, and there are many people who wish to end it as quickly as possible. However, this is a chronic crisis that requires patience and caution to settle; the use of quick measures “to put out the fire” can only be detrimental. Another example: the
dispute between the Tyumen oblast and its okrugs has been going on for several years and looks chronic, but, in reality, it is a typical acute conflict whose settlement should not be delayed unnecessarily.

Finally, there is one additional typology of conflicts, and it sheds light on the situation in Russia. This is the division of all conflicts into the categories: urgent, potential, and dormant. From this perspective, it is possible to say that in the Russian territorial structure today there are no urgent conflicts except the Chechen conflict, and that all other conflicts are potential or dormant.

In fact, strictly speaking, conflict as a concept can be defined as a dispute which cannot be resolved within the existing legal framework, and which compels the parties to use force. If we are to adhere to this definition, urgent conflicts involve violent actions. In the meantime, the overwhelming majority of regional disputes, which in Russia are called “conflicts,” amount only to threats.

A good illustration of this phenomenon are the words of Boris Fedorov, spoken at the end of 1993, when he was Russia’s Minister of Finance. He pointed out that, in 1993, there were 37 cases of leaders of federation subjects who, unhappy with the behavior of the federal authorities, threatened to stop making tax payments to the federal treasury. One could say that there were 37 conflicts present here! However, in reality, none of these threats was carried out, if only because the tax collection bodies are not subordinate to the administrative leaders in the oblasts. Therefore, even if they could be called conflicts, they would only be classified as dormant, and by no means urgent.

A conclusion inevitably rises: it is necessary to typologize not only the conflicts themselves, but the ways in which they can be resolved or minimized—shifted from an urgent to a dormant phase.

**Resolving Regional Conflicts**

We should begin with objective circumstances, some of which have been mentioned above. First of all, there is the tradition of the rigid centralization of state life. This engenders many disappointing defects in the political culture of the Russian people, such as a habit of seeing “real authority” only in the leadership of Moscow, making it responsible for everything, and resigning oneself to the tyranny of local authorities. However, this tradition also involves the extreme mistrust of local politicians who lobby for too much regional independence from Moscow. People are naturally afraid that in such cases there is no keeping the local leaders in check. It is permissible for local politicians to scare Moscow with their independent actions, but there are boundaries, and
crossing those boundaries puts political careers at risk, especially in the aftermath of the disintegration of the USSR. This strongly limits the regional authorities in their opposition to federal authorities. In addition, the ghost of “the momentum of disintegration” constantly kept the federal authorities in a state of high attentiveness toward eliminating conflicts with the regions.

The means by which the federal authorities dealt with regional conflicts deserve the closest attention. Experience has shown that these means have been highly effective; thanks to them Russia has overcome the immediate danger of disintegration, which at the outset was rather acute.

Analysis allows us to distinguish five kinds of strategies used by the federal authorities. Certainly, we do not mean to suggest that all such strategies were entirely comprehended, expressed in documents, or known to all politicians or the country at large. On the contrary, the major trends consisted of a sequence of tactical steps, taken rather intuitively, and based on medium-term goals. It is worth pointing out that a large role was played by Boris Yeltsin, whose unusual combination of resoluteness in critical moments and extreme caution during quiet periods demonstrated an effective use of his considerable political intuition and skills. He accelerated the institutionalization of federalism because it was the only way to preserve Russia’s integrity, not because he was a federalist in principle.

The most obvious strategy of the federal authorities was to minimize the scale of the conflicts; the Kremlin strove to reduce many basic political disputes to specific events in order to resolve them separately. The clearest illustration of this strategy was the bilateral agreements that were made with the subjects of the federation, wherein similar problems facing all subjects were dealt with separately, region by region. Mutual concessions, promises, and guarantees were offered, in many respects, according to the danger posed by a given region’s leadership to the tranquillity of the country’s regional structure. In many cases, the results of these negotiations have remained hidden from the public. Only the text of the agreements appeared in the press; the substance of the agreements, found in their numerous appendices, remained “behind the scenes.”

The inclination to reduce conflicts through “fragmentation” is seen in many other steps taken by the Kremlin and by the Yeltsin himself—in fact, in almost all instances. For example, the President has built his monthly meetings with the governors into a tradition; however, he meets with only with five or six of them at a time, and the governors have to “earn” such meetings by showing loyalty to the federal authorities. Meetings with all the regional leaders simultaneously are
extremely rare; even when they have occurred, they have been mainly ceremonial, with no opportunity for the governors to express a collective point of view.

Another discernible strategy involved “stretching time.” A textbook example of this tactic is the notorious phrase, “take as much independence as you can swallow.” It was said at a time when the federal authorities had practically no power to resist the separatist dispositions of the “autonomies.” Yelstin removed the immediacy of the conflict with this slogan, thereby deferring the need for action until a stronger Russian state could speak with separatists on an equal footing. The Kremlin’s subsequent strategy was also one of compromise, aimed primarily at avoiding having to make a “cardinal” decision at an ill-suited time.

The third strategy used by the federal authorities was to transform conflicts from one type to another—that is, from the kind that are not easy to resolve to more manageable types. This strategy is very widespread in federalist states. In some ways, federalism itself is a means to such transformations. Much has been written about the longtime practice used in the United States of transferring class conflicts and other social conflicts into territorial or interregional conflicts, because the country has learned to deal efficiently with these conflicts (after the Civil War).

Federalism in Russia has not yet become such an effective weapon. Here we may talk about transforming regional conflicts into other kinds of conflicts. A good example was the severe crisis in Russia’s state system in October 1993. There was a danger that the split between the branches of federal authority and the resultant decline of central authority would sharply activate separatist feelings among regional leaders. Thus Russia might have found itself on the threshold of territorial disintegration—or, if we may, “semi-disintegration.” However, this did not happen. The breach between the President and Russia’s Parliament affected the regions as well, by separating the governors from local legislatures. Thus, the opportunity for the regional leaders to unite was eliminated.

It is possible to suspect that this was not a deliberate strategy or calculated measure on the part of the Kremlin; however, that is absolutely not the case. At that time, practically all of the governors were appointed by the President, and their appointments were constituent upon maintaining their loyalty to him, while the legislatures had a rigid system of vertical subordination, and for this reason they inevitably expressed solidarity with the central Parliament. Therefore, a regional conflict did not occur because it was supplanted by the conflict between the branches of power.
Federal authorities have also come to understand that they can use conflicts to their advantage. In this manner, the contentions between the okrugs and the Tyumen oblast have been used to raise the importance of the federal authorities as supreme arbiter. The same is true of conflicts between governors and mayors of regional capitals. Federal leaders see mayors as valuable allies in dealing with regional governors, not least because they see the large cities as “bastions” of reform and sources of votes in federal elections.

Finally, it is worth mentioning a strategy which we will call “underfederalism.” Contrary to the widespread opinion among foreign Russian “experts,” the federalization of Russia has come about primarily on the initiative of the federal authorities, and not at all because of pressure from the various oblasts and krais (the autonomous republics are a special case). While moving toward federalism, however, federal authorities have been careful to maintain many elements of a unitary state.

The epitome of this underfederalism was the institution of the governors, appointed by the President of Russia. Even after 1997, however, when all governors became elected officials, “underfederalism” was kept alive in many other forms. Many of these forms are well-known, but one requires separate mention since it has been neglected by most analysts.

Since Russia’s independence, its regions have achieved considerable financial self-sufficiency; if, previously they accounted for only 45 percent of the consolidated budget (all-Russian plus all regional), now that figure is about 55 percent. However, in reality, the expenditures are in many respects controlled by the Ministry of Finance, and keeping the financial independence of regions in check in this way restricts regional leadership in its opposition to Moscow. Since Stalinist times, there has existed in Russia a so-called common budgetary system, according to which all budgetary departments report to the Federal Ministry of Finance. This means that part of each oblast’s administration, which seems rigidly subordinate to its leadership, contains one department which receives its salary from the Ministry of Finance—the department of budget administration. Although it acts only on the regional budget, which is composed by other departments of the administration, and voted on by the regional parliament, the employees of this department unquestioningly report to the Ministry of Finance; if the governor’s wishes or orders come into conflict with these instructions, all the worse for the governor.
Conclusion

In the past several years the Kremlin has been rather successful in eliminating regional conflicts. However, changes that promise to produce many difficulties, and shock the Kremlin, as well as Russia, are imminent. Regional conflict management, which has been one of the most successful undertakings of “Yeltsin’s team,” now threatens to become a major source of headaches, beginning imminently.

The main reason for this is not that the federalization of Russia has gone awry, much less that, as some have claimed, it is inherently un-Russian. The main reason is that the federal authorities are not ready to deal with the consequences of freeing regional governors from presidential control. In effect, the rate of federalization has outpaced the ability of the federal authorities to control it. As a result, conflicts which yesterday looked merely dormant or potential are becoming actual and acute.

Disputes, and even conflicts, among Russia’s regions are also on the rise and could become quite serious. Paradoxically, however, such horizontal conflicts promote Russia’s unity. Thus, the escalating inter-regional struggle for limited investment resources leaves no room for anti-Moscow demagoguery, let alone real confrontation. Such complaints worsen a region’s image and indicate a leader’s inability to resolve local problems without help, thereby discouraging potential investors and decreasing a region’s competitive chances.

A striking example of the renewal of interregional relations is the story of the agricultural bonds, into which a considerable debt (9 trillion rubles) from almost all of the regions to the federal authorities was transferred, and which arose due to the inability of regional authorities to repay loans against the 1996 crop. The Ministry of Finance planned to issue these bonds at a flat initial price, hoping that prices would be self-determined in the secondary market. This was not the case. Potential buyers who submitted their applications to Oneksimbank (the depository), quickly withdrew them as soon as they learned about the flat price. It was clear to them that the risks involved in purchasing the bonds of, for example, the Adygeya and the Sverdlovskij oblasts, were absolutely different—consequently, the price should have been different as well. Since the real parity of the risks remained unknown, the buyers simply preferred to avoid making the transactions.

In sum, we are likely to see the aggravation of two types of conflicts: between the center and the regions as a whole; and between the regions themselves. The ways in which these conflicts will evolve will most likely be different. Center-
regional conflicts are going to have to be diverted from the budgetary to the purely political sphere if they are to remain manageable, whereas inter-regional conflicts will probably assume a purely economic form. If the conflicts of the first type are replete with serious dangers to the stability of the country’s development, conflicts of the second type promise numerous positive consequences—the most important of which is the interaction among regions which has been so lacking in the territorial development of Russian society.