
Russia's constitutional structure

Federal in form, unitary in
function



Flags of Russia's regions

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

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This publication describes the Russian federal system and the challenges facing it. It looks at the different levels of governance – federal, regional and local – and questions whether Russia can be considered a genuine federation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Constitutionally, Russia is a federation, as was the Soviet Union before it – a natural choice for such a large and heterogeneous country. The 85 federated states which make up the country (referred to as 'subjects of the Russian Federation', 'federal subjects' or 'regions') enjoy wide-ranging powers. At federal level they are represented by the upper house of parliament (Council of the Federation), giving them direct influence over federal law-making, at least on paper.

Russia's federal system faces numerous challenges. Of these, the most serious is the threat of separatism, particularly in the Northern Caucasus. Not only do Chechnya and its neighbours face high (though diminishing) levels of violence; they also suffer from severe poverty. There are huge economic and social disparities between, on the one hand, impoverished regions such as these, and on the other, Siberia, with its oil and gas wealth.

In some regions, economic problems are compounded by financing difficulties, with heavy dependence on federal subsidies and rising, though still relatively low, regional debt.

Although the constitution enshrines regional autonomy, Vladimir Putin's rule has seen a growing concentration of power in his hands. Legislative reforms, together with the dominance of his United Russia Party in regional parliaments and executives, severely constrain their capacity to pursue independent policies. Like the Soviet Union before it, Russia thus functions as a unitary state, despite its constitutional status as a federation.

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List of main acronyms used

FSB:	Federal Security Service (successor to the KGB)
GDP:	Gross domestic product
HDI:	Human Development Index
ISIL/Da'esh:	Self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
RUB:	Russian rouble

1 Structure of the Russian federal system

The Russian Federation has two main levels of government: the federal government and the governments of its 85 federated states ('federal subjects', also referred to here as 'regions').

1.1 Federal level

At federal level, power is exercised by the president, the Federal Assembly (parliament), the federal government and the courts (Constitution, Article 11). Since the adoption of the 1993 Constitution¹ following a showdown between then-President Boris Yeltsin and the Russian parliament, the balance of power is tilted in favour of the president, who holds wide-ranging powers.² For example, he appoints the prime minister and can dissolve the State Duma (lower house of parliament), whereas the parliament needs a two-thirds majority in both houses, validated by the Constitutional and Supreme Courts, to impeach him – almost impossible to achieve in practice.

The Federal Assembly comprises two houses, the lower one being the **State Duma**, directly elected by universal suffrage on the basis of proportional representation and dominated³ since 2001 by Putin's United Russia Party. While the State Duma is by far the more prominent of the two houses in national politics, it is not of direct relevance to the relationship between regions and federal government, and is therefore not discussed in detail here.

The upper house, the **Council of the Federation**, serves a similar purpose to the German *Bundesrat* (Federal Council), i.e. to represent the federated states in federal law-making. It has 170 seats, with two delegates per region. Originally, these two delegates were the regional governor/president and parliamentary speaker in person; however, since 2000, they may not sit directly on the Council. Instead, one of the two delegates is appointed by the governor/president and the other elected by the regional parliament.

The Council has important powers: for example Russian armed forces may only be used outside the country (for example in Syria), and borders between regions can only be changed, with the Council's consent.

It also approves federal laws adopted by the lower house (State Duma). If the Federation Council does not approve them (it cannot introduce amendments), a

¹ [Constitution of the Russian Federation](#).

² [The Problem of Executive Power in Russia](#), Shevtsova L., Eckert M., 2000.

³ [Russia: political parties in a 'managed democracy'](#), Russell M., 2014.

conciliation committee is formed; if agreement still cannot be reached, then the State Duma can overrule the Federation Council by a vote of two thirds.

In practice, the Council can hardly be said to effectively represent the regions or to play an independent role. Although political factions are forbidden, most of its members originate from United Russia, precluding any conflict between the Council and the lower house or the executive. It meets just twice a month, rubber-stamping⁴ legislation by large majorities.

A third body, the **State Council** (not part of the Federal Assembly, and not mentioned in the Constitution) comprises regional governors/presidents, and was set up in 2000 to compensate them for the loss of their direct membership of the Federation Council; it only has a consultative role, however, meeting four times a year to advise the president.

Legal bases for Russia's federal system

Russia's 1993 [Constitution](#) defines the country as a federation and lists the 85 regions, but is vague on most aspects of their functioning. This lack of detail has enabled Vladimir Putin to radically reform the federal system and limit regional autonomy without amending the Constitution (see below). Relevant secondary legislation includes Federal Laws [119](#) on the division of power between federation and federal subjects (since repealed), [184](#) on the division of power between federation and federal subjects, and [95](#) on political parties.

1.2 Nine federal districts: bridges between federal and regional levels

Federal districts were set up in 2000 to facilitate the federal government's task of controlling 85 regions. Originally seven, two districts were added (most recently, Crimea); each headed by a presidential envoy appointed by the Russian president. Federal districts are not mentioned in the Constitution, do not have competences of their own and do not manage regional affairs. Their tasks include monitoring consistency between federal law and the 85 regional bodies of law, and ensuring central control over the civil service, judiciary and federal agencies (e.g. tax offices, the police and the FSB) operating in the regions.

Added as Russia's ninth federal district in 2014, Crimea is not recognised internationally as part of Russia



1.3 Eighty-five federal subjects

Federal subjects, referred to here as 'regions', are the equivalent of the German *Länder*, or US states. There are currently 85 regions (including Sevastopol and the Republic of Crimea, annexed in 2014). The Constitution divides them into six categories, but is vague about the differences between the categories, other than stating that

⁴ [Law of no importance](#), Russia Law Online.

republics (as opposed to the other types of region) can adopt their own constitution and official languages.

Each of the **22 republics**, such as Chechnya, Tatarstan, or Bashkortostan is home to a titular nation (such as the Tartars in Tatarstan); although in many of them (e.g. Bashkortostan) the titular nation is outnumbered by Russians. In practice, they tend to enjoy more autonomy than the other types of region.

Usually named after their main city, the **46 oblasts**: e.g. Sverdlovsk, Volgograd, generally have a predominantly Russian population.

Similar to *oblasts*, **9 krajs**: e.g. Kamchatka, Krasnodar, are named differently for historical reasons, ('krai' means edge or frontier, referring to the fact that at one point these regions were on the borders of Russia).

Like the republics, **4 autonomous okrugs**: e.g. Nenets, are home to titular nations (e.g. the Nenets, an indigenous people in arctic Russia, distant relatives of the Sami in northern Scandinavia), but which are less autonomous, being not only regions in their own right, but in most cases also subdivisions of *oblasts* or *krais* (for example, Nenets Autonomous Okrug is part of Arkhangelsk Oblast). The exact relations between an autonomous *okrug* and the larger territory of which it forms a part are not defined by the Constitution, and are ambiguous. Six former *okrugs* have disappeared through mergers with other regions, while of the remaining four, Chukotka has become completely independent, and three are still partially subordinate to *oblasts*.

Three cities of federal importance: Moscow, St. Petersburg and Sevastopol.

One autonomous oblast: the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, created in Siberia by Stalin as a homeland for Russian Jews (although Jews currently make up less than 1%⁵ of its population).

Each region, regardless of its status, has an elected leader (in *oblasts* and *krais*: governors or heads of administration; in republics: heads or presidents of the republic; in cities: mayors). It also has a parliament (usually unicameral).

Federal and regional competences

According to the Constitution, **federal competences** include: foreign relations, currency, defence, the judiciary, financial regulation, citizenship, and federal transport.

Shared competences include: minority rights, environmental protection, health, education, science, culture, labour law, social security, family law, and natural disasters.

Regional competences: include areas not mentioned under the first two headings, e.g. local government (other than establishing 'common principles of organisation'), regional transport.

Healthcare is an example of a competence shared between federal, regional and local levels. At federal level, the federation is responsible for general policy, federal health programmes, the compulsory medical insurance scheme, medical research and training institutes, and a limited number of clinics (representing around 4% of total capacity). Regions and local authorities manage the remaining hospitals; most primary care facilities are managed at local level.⁶

⁵ 2010 [National Census](#) (in Russian).

⁶ [Russian Healthcare System Overview](#), Stockholm Region Office in St Petersburg, 2010.

1.4 Local government

The Constitution guarantees the right to local self-government (Article 12), and lists 'establishment of common principles of organisation of ... local self-government' as a federal competence. However, such common principles were largely absent until the 2003 law on local self-government,⁷ which brought a certain degree of standardisation to local government structures and competences:

- two tiers of local government:
 - upper tier – main types are the municipal *raion* (of which there are 1 815) and urban *okrug* (520);⁸
 - lower tier: urban and rural settlements (of which there are 1 660 and 18 525 respectively);
- municipal councillors are elected by universal suffrage; as, in most cases, are mayors;
- municipal responsibilities include local electricity and gas supplies, roads, public transport services, police, education, childcare, medical facilities, waste management, spatial planning, libraries, sports facilities, etc.

2 Challenges facing the Russian federal system

2.1 The threat of separatism

Despite its alleged support⁹ for eastern Ukrainian rebels, the Russian government firmly opposes separatism at home; in 2013 it became a criminal offence¹⁰ to advocate secession of Russian territories. In any case, there are now fewer separatist pressures than in the latter years of the Soviet Union, partly because ethnic minorities are now a much smaller percentage of the population: in the 2010 census,¹¹ 78% declared themselves Russian, compared to just over 50% in 1989.¹² However, pockets of resistance to federal rule remain.

2.1.1 Chechnya: Kadyrov's personal fiefdom

Chechnya declared independence from the Russian Federation in 1992, and Chechen rebels defeated the federal armed forces in the First Chechen War (1994-1996). After Vladimir Putin came to power, the country was eventually subdued during the Second Chechen War (1999-2009); since then Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's heavy-handed rule¹³ has largely restored stability.

⁷ [Federal Law 131](#) on General Principles of the Organization of Local Self-Government in the Russian Federation (in Russian).

⁸ [Federal State Statistics Service](#) data for numbers of local self-government territories.

⁹ [European Parliament resolution on the state of EU-Russia relations](#), 10 June 2015.

¹⁰ [Putin signs law criminalizing calls to separatism](#), The Moscow News, 30 December 2013.

¹¹ 2010 [National Census](#) (in Russian).

¹² [Growth and Diversity of the Population of the Soviet Union](#), Anderson B., Silver B., 1990.

¹³ ['Absolute Schizophrenia' Reigns In Kadyrov's Chechnya, Says Filmmaker](#), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 15 March 2015.

Kadyrov treats Chechnya almost as a personal fiefdom, threatening¹⁴ to have police officers from other parts of the country shot if they operate in Chechnya without his knowledge, ordering¹⁵ the expulsion of alleged terrorists' families and destruction of their property, in violation of federal law. Under his rule, the republic has become a mini-Islamic state, in which women must wear headscarves in public,¹⁶ alcohol sales are restricted and polygamy,¹⁷ while illegal under Russian law, is widely practised, with one recent high-profile polygamous marriage¹⁸ apparently enjoying Kadyrov's personal approval.

Although Putin's 'power vertical' has put a stop to such defiance of federal authority in other parts of the country, the Russian President has yet to openly criticise Kadyrov, apparently preferring to give him a free hand in keeping Chechnya under control, in exchange for his declared allegiance.¹⁹

2.1.2 *The restive Northern Caucasus*



Violence²⁰ continues in the rest of the Northern Caucasus federal district; it has steadily decreased over the past few years (from 749 casualties in 2010 to 341 in 2014),²¹ but levels remain high, particularly in Dagestan (which shares a border with Chechnya). Reasons for this situation include: long-standing resistance to Russian rule ever since the Caucasus was subdued, with great difficulty, in the mid-19th century; interethnic rivalry between some 40 groups inhabiting the region; religious fundamentalism, with militants (some of them ISIL/Da'esh supporters) calling for a Northern Caucasus caliphate; as well as poverty and severe unemployment (nearly 30% in Ingushetia, 20% in Chechnya,²² far more prevalent than anywhere else in the country).

2.1.3 *Tatarstan – some regions are more equal than others*

After Chechnya, Tatarstan was the second republic to initially resist joining the Russian Federation, only dropping its objections after a 1994 bilateral treaty²³ declaring it a 'State united with the Russian Federation', and giving it considerable autonomy.

¹⁴ [Kadyrov Authorizes His Police to Shoot Officers From Other Parts of Russia](#), The Moscow Times, 23 April 2015.

¹⁵ [A Return to Feudal Law?](#) Institute of Modern Russia, 16 January 2015.

¹⁶ [For Chechen Women, Modesty is the New Normal](#), Open Society Foundations, 19 September 2014.

¹⁷ [Putin is Down With Polygamy](#), FP, 24 July 2015.

¹⁸ [Will Moscow Allow Polygamy in Chechnya?](#) The Moscow Times, 13 May 2015.

¹⁹ [Chechnya's Kadyrov 'Volunteers' His Men to Defend Russia](#), Russia Insider, 7 January 2015.

²⁰ [Instability in Russia's North Caucasus Region](#), Laub Z., 6 February 2014.

²¹ Data from online news site [Caucasian Knot](#).

²² Data from the [Federal State Statistics Service](#) (in Russian).

²³ [Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tatarstan](#), 15 February 1994 (in Russian).

Although Tatar statehood is no longer mentioned in the current treaty between the Russian Federation and Tatarstan²⁴ (signed in 2007), it is still celebrated on Republic Day, a public holiday on the anniversary of the republic's 1990 declaration of sovereignty.²⁵ Moreover, the current treaty still provides for certain privileges not enjoyed by other regions, such as joint management of the republic's oil by Tatar and federal authorities, the right for its inhabitants to have a special insert in Tatar language included in their federal passports, and a requirement for Tatarstan presidents to speak Tatar, thereby potentially excluding the republic's non-Tatar inhabitants (47% of its population). Although this special status has helped to keep Tatar separatism at bay, it contravenes the constitutional requirement that 'in relations with federal bodies of state authority all the subjects of the Russian Federation shall be equal among themselves'.²⁶

2.1.4 Separatist movements in other parts of Russia

In the Karelian Republic, there have been calls²⁷ from the Karel minority for independence, or at least greater autonomy. Ethnic differences are not the only reason why some parts of Russia would like more autonomy. For example, some inhabitants of the western exclave of Kaliningrad are more familiar with neighbouring Poland and Lithuania than Russia proper, and feel that federal policies (e.g. on countersanctions against the EU) do not take their interests into account.²⁸ The end of customs exemptions enjoyed by Kaliningrad's Special Economic Zone²⁹ in 2016 is expected to severely affect the *oblast's* economy. Disaffection in Kaliningrad resulted in an unprecedented defeat for Putin's United Russia Party in the May 2015 elections to the Baltiysk District Council.³⁰ Only 35% of respondents to an April 2014 poll³¹ by Kaliningrad Monitoring Group were satisfied with Kaliningrad's current status.

At the other end of the country, Siberian regionalism has its roots in the *oblastnichestvo*³² (regionalist movement) of the 19th century. Many Siberians (who are mostly ethnic Russians) resent³³ the flow of oil and gas wealth out of the region and in August 2014 the authorities had to ban an independence march in Novosibirsk.

Although such movements are sometimes seen as threats³⁴ to Russian unity, most remain marginal. Karels are outnumbered by ethnic Russians eleven to one in their own republic. In Siberia, figures³⁵ (from an unnamed source, cited by a Ukrainian news

²⁴ [Treaty on the delimitation of powers between the authorities of the Russian Federation and of the Republic of Tatarstan](#), 2007 (in Russian).

²⁵ [Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic](#), 1990.

²⁶ [Russian Constitution](#), Article 5.4.

²⁷ See [website](#) of the 'Free Karelia' movement.

²⁸ [Authorities fear separatism with a European face](#), Russia Beyond the Headlines, Oxford Analytica, 25 September 2012.

²⁹ [Why Kaliningrad Hasn't Transformed into the 'Singapore' of Russia](#), EastBook.eu, 4 July 2013.

³⁰ [Rumblings of Dissent In Russia's West](#), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 27 May 2015.

³¹ [Survey of residents of Kaliningrad Oblast](#), Kaliningrad Monitoring Group, 22 April 2015 (in Russian).

³² [The Sibiriak Movement and the Roots of Modern Siberian Regionalism](#), Charron A., 2014.

³³ [Russia bans Siberia independence march](#), The Guardian, 5 August 2014.

³⁴ [Separatism in Karelia More Serious than Many Think, Petrozavodsk Deputy Says](#), Window on Eurasia, 17 December 2014.

³⁵ [Siberians do not consider themselves to be Russians and want to separate from Russia](#), joinfo.ua, 25 July 2014.

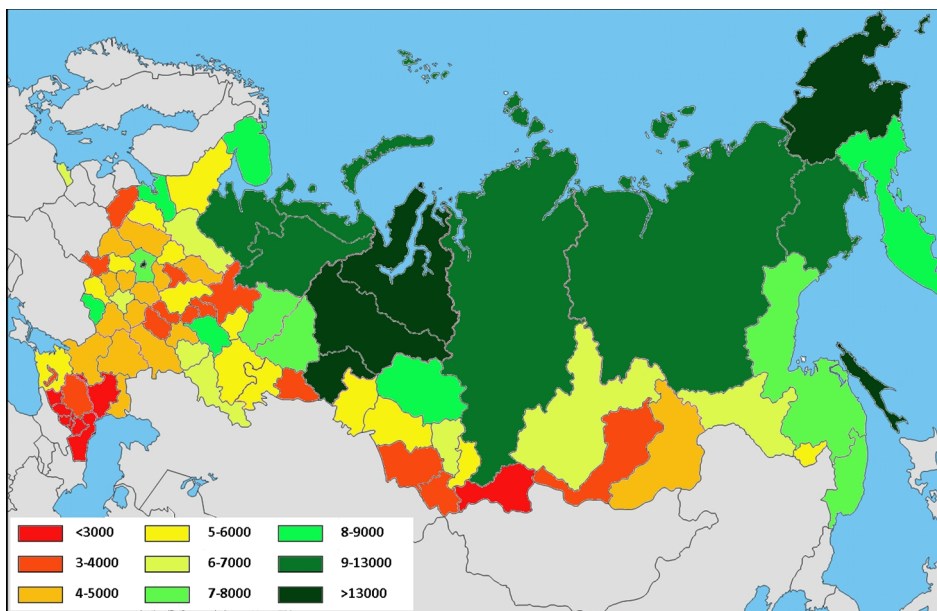
portal) suggesting that as many as 25-30% of Siberians would like their region to separate from Russia, are probably overstated; despite encouragement³⁶ by regionalists for respondents to the 2010 census³⁷ to declare their nationality as 'Siberian', only 4 000 (0.02%) actually did so. In the above-mentioned Kaliningrad poll, though support for the *oblast* to be given a special status was strong (53%), a mere 4% of respondents felt that the exclave should become either independent or be administered by the EU, down from one fifth ten years earlier.

2.2 Economic issues – huge regional disparities

Stark economic inequality between regions potentially threatens national cohesion. For example, in 2011, per capita GDP in the oil and gas rich island of Sakhalin was €30 000; 20 times higher than in impoverished Ingushetia. This is a much larger disparity than in the United States or Germany, where the ratio between the per capita GDPs of the richest and poorest regions is 5 and 2.5 respectively.³⁸ While the gap between Russia's wealthiest and poorest regions has narrowed slightly since 2002, when oil-rich Tyumen was 26 times wealthier than Ingushetia, it is wider than in 1995 (18 times),³⁹ making it impossible to identify any clear overall trend towards greater economic equality.

Unemployment also varies enormously, from 1.5% in Moscow to 29.8% in Ingushetia, according to official Russian statistics.⁴⁰ Here too, there is no evidence that the gap has narrowed over the past two decades.

Per capita GDP, in thousand euros, 2011



Data: [Federal State Statistics Service](#) (in Russian), based on December 2011 exchange rate €1 = RUB40.

Per capita GDP is highest in oil- and gas-rich Siberia, in Moscow and St Petersburg. It is lowest in the Northern Caucasus.

³⁶ [The Sibiriak Movement and the Roots of Modern Siberian Regionalism](#), Charron A., 2014.

³⁷ 2010 [National Census](#) (in Russian).

³⁸ Data for Russian regions: [Federal State Statistics Service](#) (in Russian); United States: [Bureau of Economic Analysis](#); Germany: [Statista](#) statistics portal. Rouble conversion based on exchange rate €1=RUB 65.

³⁹ Data from [Federal State Statistics Service](#) (in Russian).

⁴⁰ 2014 data, [Federal State Statistics Service](#) (in Russian).

The gap is slightly narrower when other factors, such as life expectancy and education, are taken into account, for example those measured by the Human Development Index.⁴¹ In 2013, Moscow had an HDI of 0.931 ('very high', similar to Australia), compared to 0.750 for the Tuva Republic, which had the lowest score ('high', similar to Mexico), or 0.790 for Ingushetia.⁴² This remains a large difference, but is similar in numerical terms to the difference between the best and worst-performing US states (Connecticut's HDI is 1.6 times higher than that of Mississippi).⁴³

2.3 Financing issues

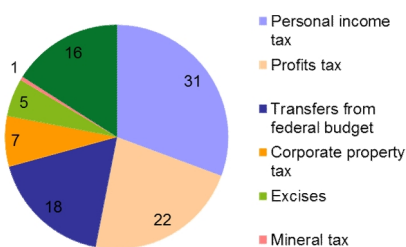
2.3.1 Regional revenue and expenditure

The regions get most of their funding from personal income tax (31% of total revenue),⁴⁴ followed by a share of tax on profits (22%), and transfers from the federal budget (18%). In contrast, the federal government derives around half of its revenue from mineral taxes on oil and gas (only a small part of which goes to the regions –0.5% of regional revenue), VAT and the remainder of tax on profits.

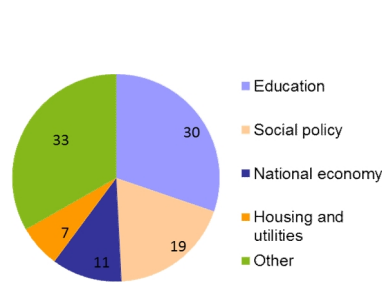
The main areas of regional expenditure are: education (30% of total expenditure); health and welfare (19%); the economy (11%); followed by housing and utilities (7%).⁴⁵

In 2014, the combined budgets of all of Russia's regions amounted to RUB8.7 trillion (€135 billion, 17% of GDP), compared to RUB14.5 trillion (€220 billion, 28% of GDP) at federal level.

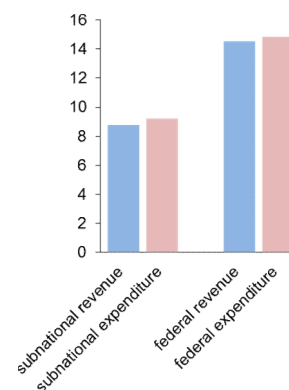
Subnational (regional + local) revenue sources (%)



Subnational expenditure (%)



Subnational/federal budgets, RUB trillion



Data: [Russian Finance Ministry](#), 2014 (in Russian).

2.3.2 The regions' limited influence over their own finances

The regions do not have powers to raise their own taxes or to set the rate of taxes from which their budgets are funded. Much of their expenditure is dictated by federal policy decisions, for example on public sector salaries.

⁴¹ [Human Development Index \(HDI\)](#), United Nations Development Programme.

⁴² [Report on Human Development in the Russian Federation](#), UNDP, 2013 (in Russian).

⁴³ Data from [Measure of America](#). However, the methodology used to calculate HDI for US states is different to that used by the UNDP for comparisons between countries or Russian regions.

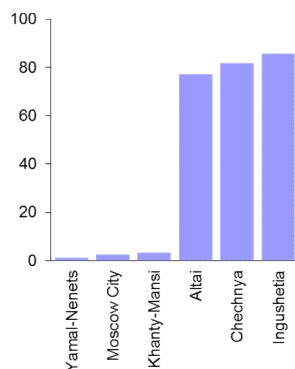
⁴⁴ All data in this section refer to 2014, are sourced from the [website](#) (in Russian) of the Russian Finance Ministry, and include local authorities (which get most of their revenue from the regions). Euro figures have been calculated using an exchange rate of €1=RUB65.

⁴⁵ The Ministry of Finance, which is the source of these figures, does not provide separate figures for the regions and local authorities, nor does it explain what constitutes spending on 'social policy' or the 'national economy'.

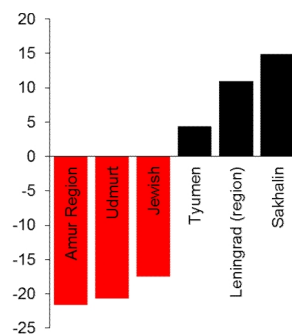
2.3.3 Growing dependence on transfers from the federal budget

Only a few of the wealthier regions are financially self-sufficient, with most deriving a substantial share of revenues (an average of 18%) from transfers. The least self-sufficient are Ingushetia and Chechnya, whose budgets are respectively funded at 86% and 81% by federal transfers. A further nine regions get half or more of their revenues from the federal level. Inefficient tax collection is often a problem.⁴⁶ While the two Crimean regions are not included in the Ministry of Finance 2014 data, their difficult economic situation⁴⁷ indicates they too are heavily reliant on federal support.

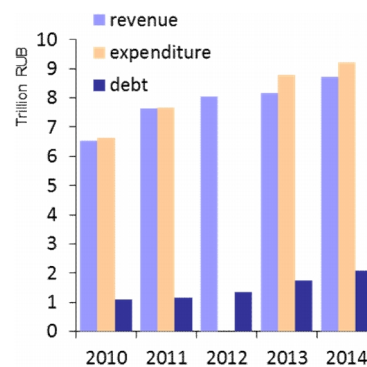
Regions with lowest/highest share of budget from federal transfers (%)



Regions with highest budget deficits/surpluses (%), 2014



Total regional budget deficit and debt



Data: [Russian Finance Ministry](#) (data on total federal expenditure for 2012 are not available).

Note: the oblast surrounding St. Petersburg is still named Leningrad.

2.3.4 A deteriorating financial situation

Over the years, regional revenues have not kept pace with rising expenditure, and as a result the regions have seen their financial situation deteriorate, with growing budgetary deficits and levels of public debt.⁴⁸ In 2014, all but nine regions were in deficit (even after taking into account the above-mentioned federal transfers), with a combined regional budgetary deficit of RUB469 million (€7.6 billion, 5.3% of total regional revenues, 0.9% of GDP). Debt was RUB2.1 trillion (€37 billion) – still a relatively small percentage of total regional revenue (24%) and of GDP (4%), but one that is likely to rise, and potentially troublesome given the financial strains caused by the current economic downturn. In its April 2015 Financial Stability Review,⁴⁹ the Russian Central Bank warned that regional deficits were likely to rise in the context of an economic downturn, and urged the federal government to ease the burden on the regions by increasing federal co-financing rates of federal programmes.

2.3.5 Federal measures to support regional finances

To help the regions make up their deficits, the federal government provides them with low-interest loans, but only when their finances meet certain conditions; for example, their predicted debts at the end of 2017 may not exceed 50% of revenue. To address the current financial difficulties, Russia's Ministry of Finance recently relaxed⁵⁰ this

⁴⁶ See for example [Dagestan expenses may become problem for Russia](#), Oxford Analytica, 30 July 2015.

⁴⁷ [Now Joined to Russia, Crimea's Economy Is Sliding Downhill](#), Bloomberg Business, 2 June 2014.

⁴⁸ [Russian regions' financing problems will grow](#), Oxford Analytica, 10 April 2015.

⁴⁹ [Financial Stability Review](#), Central Bank of Russia, April 2015 (in Russian).

⁵⁰ [Regions unable to pay off debts as quickly as planned](#), Vedomosti, 29 July 2015 (in Russian).

criterion, with a higher ceiling of 70%. Proposed legislation⁵¹ on public-private partnerships should also help regions and local authorities find alternative sources of investment funding.

3 Russia – a genuinely federal state?

Despite its constitutional status as a 'voluntary association' of equal republics, the Soviet Union functions as a unitary state. During the chaotic period which followed its dissolution, some parts of Russia enjoyed semi-independent status. However, since 1999, Vladimir Putin's top-down 'power vertical'⁵² has concentrated powers in his hands, subordinating regional and federal institutions to his personal authority. These developments parallel those in other areas, such as party politics,⁵³ the media,⁵⁴ and civil society,⁵⁵ with a return to authoritarianism after a period of relative freedom.⁵⁶

3.1 Putin reins in the regions

3.1.1 Pre-Putin: national unity under threat

Under Yeltsin, Russian unity was under threat – not just in Chechnya, which declared independence from the Russian Federation, but also in many of the other ethnic republics, where authoritarian rulers such as Murtaza Rakhimov⁵⁷ of Bashkortostan enjoyed a free hand in exchange for nominal allegiance to Moscow. Although the Constitution clearly identifies foreign policy as a federal competence, Tatarstan contradicted Russia's pro-Serbia stance in 1999 by threatening to support Kosovo; it also concluded its own international agreements.⁵⁸ Regional legislation was literally a law unto itself, with an estimated 20 000 legal acts⁵⁹ in conflict with federal law.

3.1.2 1999-present: Putin's reforms

After becoming Prime Minister in 1999, Vladimir Putin introduced a series of reforms designed to impose central control over the regions. These included:

- legislation requiring the regions to ensure consistency between their laws and those of the federation;⁶⁰
- the establishment of federal districts to facilitate supervision of the regions;
- restoration of the Soviet practice of rotating federal civil servants from one part of the country to another every few years, to prevent the regions from exercising undue influence over federal institutions operating in their territory;⁶¹

⁵¹ [Partnerships between the State and state banks to be limited](#), Vedomosti, 30 June 2015 (in Russian).

⁵² [Putin's Power Vertical Stretches Back to Kursk](#), The Moscow Times, 17 August 2010.

⁵³ [Russia: political parties in a 'managed democracy'](#), Russell M., December 2014.

⁵⁴ [Russian media – under state control](#), Russell M., May 2015.

⁵⁵ [Organised civil society in Russia](#), Russell M., June 2015.

⁵⁶ See e.g. [Freedom House](#), which notes growing authoritarianism over the past few years in a variety of areas.

⁵⁷ [Putin redraws the map of Russia](#), The Guardian, 15 June 2000.

⁵⁸ 'Russian Politics and Society', Sakwa R., 2008.

⁵⁹ [Putin redraws the map of Russia](#), Guardian, 15 May 2000.

⁶⁰ Federal Laws [119](#) on the division of power between federation and federal subjects, and [184](#) on the division of power between federation and federal subjects (in Russian).

⁶¹ Sakwa, op. cit.

- curbs on the powers of governors/presidents: since 2000, governors may no longer be members of the Federation Council; in 2004, they lost the right to recall their representatives to the Federation Council, further weakening their influence over federal law-making.

In a similar spirit, the Constitutional Court ruled against regional declarations of sovereignty, as adopted by several republics during the 1990s.⁶²

Many of these reforms were justified by the need for Russia to function as a unified country, by creating a single legal space and preventing regional leaders from treating their territories as semi-feudal fiefdoms. However, in 2004, Putin went further by abolishing⁶³ gubernatorial elections; instead, governors/presidents were to be nominated by the Russian president and approved by regional parliaments, under the pretext of 'strengthening the state' through 'a unified system of executive power'⁶⁴ in response to the Beslan massacre; this was a direct threat not only to regional autonomy but also to democratic governance.

3.2 Dominance of regional executives and parliaments by Putin's United Russia

3.2.1 Dominance of regional executives

Direct gubernatorial elections were reinstated after anti-Putin protests⁶⁵ in 2011 and 2012. However, although regional leaders are once again elected, this does not mean that they are likely to challenge federal authorities in the foreseeable future. Most candidates are effectively excluded by a requirement⁶⁶ to collect the signatures of 10% of a region's municipal councillors, who are of course dependent on administrations headed by incumbent candidates (mostly appointed by Putin before the recent reinstatement of elections), thereby giving those candidates a head start in the electoral race. At present, no fewer than 70 of the 85 regional leaders (governors, presidents of republics, etc.) are from United Russia; 12 are independent, two are Communists, and one is a Liberal Democrat.

In order to further tip the balance in their favour, incumbent governors often follow the federal practice⁶⁷ of calling early elections, before the end of their terms of office – 19 did this in 2014, while 8⁶⁸ stood in early elections on 13 September 2015. This practice happens for various reasons⁶⁹ – to prevent opposition candidates from having time to prepare their campaigns, or to take advantage of Vladimir Putin's currently high approval ratings.

⁶² 2000 Constitutional Court [ruling](#) on the Altai Republic, which declared that only the federation possessed sovereignty.

⁶³ [Russia: Putin Signs Bill Eliminating Direct Elections of Governors](#), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 13 December 2004.

⁶⁴ [Speech at the Enlarged Government Meeting with the Government and Heads of the Regions](#), Putin V., 13 September 2004.

⁶⁵ [A Russian awakening](#), The Economist, 11 December 2011.

⁶⁶ [Russian Governors Rush to Early Elections](#), Institute of Modern Russia, 25 June 2014.

⁶⁷ [Russian lawmakers back bill holding 2016 parliamentary election to several months earlier](#), US News, 19 June 2015.

⁶⁸ According to the [website](#) of the Russian Central Election Commission (in Russian).

⁶⁹ [Russian Governors Rush to Early Elections](#), Institute of Modern Russia, 25 June 2014.

3.2.2 *Dominance of regional parliaments*

During the 1990s, national parties only played a very limited role in regional politics; in 1995-97, just 19% of regional parliamentary seats level were held by such parties. As a result, regional executives and parliaments paid more attention to local elites than to federal authorities. That changed in 2001 with Federal Law 95 on Political Parties,⁷⁰ which effectively abolished regional parties by requiring parties to have branches in at least half of Russia's regions in order to qualify for registration.

A subsequent amendment to the same law in 2003 required at least half the members of regional parliaments to be elected from party lists,⁷¹ thus strengthening the representation of national parties at the expense of independents. By September 2014, the four national parties represented in the Federal Assembly held 96% of seats in all regional parliaments; the biggest beneficiary of this change being Putin's United Russia, with 73% of total seats and a majority in 83 out of 85⁷² parliaments (in the remaining two, coalitions were formed by the Communists, A Just Russia and Yabloko).

Furthermore, the more outspoken opposition parties are usually excluded outright from running in regional elections. In the September 2015 elections, the RPR-PARNAS opposition coalition, of which Alexei Navalny is one of the leaders, was barred⁷³ almost everywhere, due to the alleged forgery of the signatures collected by the coalition for registration, in an apparent attempt to prevent a recurrence of the 2013 Moscow mayoral elections, when Navalny came close to beating the United Russia candidate.

3.2.3 *United Russia enables federal Russia to function as a unitary state*

United Russia is a highly centralised party⁷⁴ with little internal democracy; regional representatives of the party are therefore unlikely to challenge federal policies. As a result, the party's dominance of parliaments and executives limits the scope for genuine regional autonomy. United Russia plays a similar role to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in ensuring centralised governance, despite the country's federal structure.

3.3 Local self-government also under threat

In 2014 and 2015, amendments to Federal Law 131⁷⁵ on Local Self-Government introduced the option for mayors to be elected by local councillors from among their own number instead of directly by the populace – an option that has been taken up by several regions. Several complaints against the abolition of direct mayoral elections have been lodged with the Constitutional Court, including one concerning Irkutsk mayoral elections backed by 90 members of the State Duma, mostly from opposition parties, but also from United Russia Member of Parliament, Anton Romanov.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, newly proposed legislation will, if adopted, enable governors to dismiss elected mayors for 'improper use' of regional funding transferred to local authorities –

⁷⁰ [Federal Law 95](#) on Political Parties (in Russian).

⁷¹ In 2013 the minimum proportion of parliamentarians elected from party lists was reduced from 50% to 25%, but [none of the regions](#) has yet made use of this option (in Russian).

⁷² Data from websites of regional parliaments.

⁷³ [Russia bars anti-Kremlin coalition from upcoming polls](#), The Daily Star, 10 August 2015.

⁷⁴ [How United is United Russia? Regional Sources of Intra-party Conflict](#), Slider D., 18 May 2010.

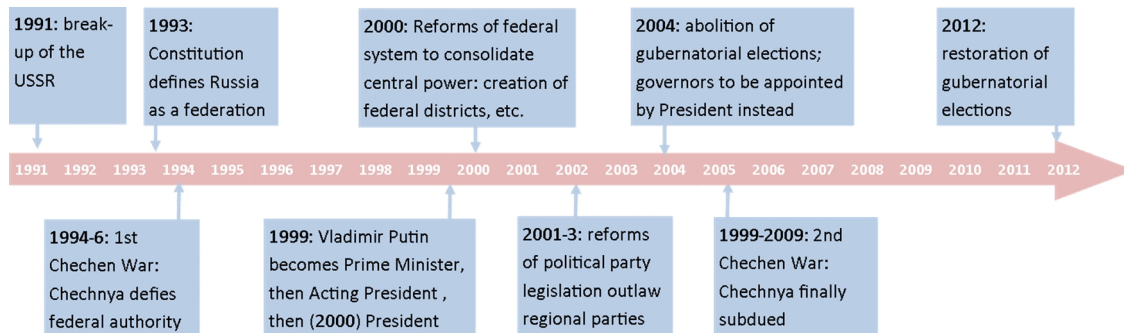
⁷⁵ [Federal Law 131](#) on General Principles of the Organization of Local Self-Government in the Russian Federation (in Russian).

⁷⁶ [Referral to Constitutional Court by State Duma](#), Kommersant, 24 August 2015 (in Russian).

a measure which according to one expert could be used as a tool to deal with 'difficult mayors'.⁷⁷

Worryingly, these developments coincide with calls⁷⁸ by Oleg Ivanov, head of the Association of Greater Moscow Local Authorities, for constitutional changes to scrap local self-government altogether – although there is no evidence yet of wider support for this proposal.

4 Timeline: key dates in Russian federalism



⁷⁷ [Elected Mayors to Come under Governors' Scrutiny](#), Kommersant, 24 August 2015 (in Russian).

⁷⁸ [Greater Moscow Feels Affinity with China](#), Kommersant, 20 August 2015 (in Russian).

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According to its constitution, Russia is a federation, like the Soviet Union before it. However, a growing concentration of power in the hands of President Vladimir Putin is undermining regional autonomy, as a result of which Russia increasingly functions as a unitary state.

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