



Ca' Foscari  
University  
of Venice

Master's Degree programme  
in Comparative International Relations

Second Cycle (D.M.270/2004)

Final Thesis

**Subnational dissent in Russia:  
constraints and opportunities  
in a hybrid authoritarian system**

**Supervisor**

Ch. Prof. Aldo Ferrari

**Graduand**

Arturo Gorup de Besanez

Matriculation Number 869893

**Academic Year**

2021 / 2022

*This page intentionally left blank.*

## **Table of contents:**

<b>ABSTRACT:</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>1. THE EVOLUTION OF FEDERAL RELATIONS IN RUSSIA</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>1.1. REGIONAL REPRESENTATION AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL: THE FEDERATION COUNCIL</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>1.2. FEDERAL RELATIONS UNDER BORIS YELTSIN</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>1.3. FROM THE 1999 LEGISLATIVE ELECTION TO PUTIN’S REFORMS</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>1.4. THE ABOLITION OF GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>2. POWER AND OPPOSITION IN THE FEDERAL DIMENSION</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>2.1. POLITICAL PARTIES: WEAKNESS IN STRENGTH</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>2.1.1. The role of United Russia</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>2.1.2. The “systemic” opposition: choices and constraints</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>2.2. THE ROLE AND SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE “VERTICAL OF POWER”</b> .....	<b>43</b>
<b>2.3. STREET PROTESTS IN THE REGIONS: ISSUES, GEOGRAPHY, AND SIGNIFICANCE</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>3. YEKATERINBURG: A VICTORY FOR RUSSIA’S PROTEST CITY</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>3.1. SVERDLOVSK OBLAST: A PATHBREAKER IN REGIONALISM</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>3.2. WINTER 2011: THE PROTEST CITY’S COMING OF AGE</b> .....	<b>62</b>
<b>3.3. YEVGENY ROIZMAN: THE ACTIVIST MAYOR</b> .....	<b>67</b>
<b>3.4. THE MAY 2019 PROTESTS IN DETAIL</b> .....	<b>72</b>
<b>3.5. THE YEKATERINBURG PROTESTS: AFTERMATH AND CONCLUDING REMARKS</b> .....	<b>75</b>
<b>4. KHABAROVSK KRAI: PROTESTING FOR THE “PEOPLE’S GOVERNOR”</b> .....	<b>78</b>
<b>4.1. THE FAR EASTERN ECONOMY: DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT AGENCY</b> .....	<b>78</b>
<b>4.2. THE RUN-UP TO FURGAL: FROM ISHAYEV TO THE 2018 ELECTION</b> .....	<b>82</b>
<b>4.3. SERGEI FURGAL: BECOMING THE “PEOPLE’S GOVERNOR”</b> .....	<b>87</b>
<b>4.4. THE 2020 PROTESTS IN DETAIL</b> .....	<b>91</b>
<b>4.5. THE KHABAROVSK KRAI PROTESTS: CONCLUDING REMARKS</b> .....	<b>95</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>97</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY:</b> .....	<b>100</b>
<b>WEBOGRAPHY:</b> .....	<b>107</b>

*This page intentionally left blank.*

## **Abstract:**

Nel decennio successivo alla disgregazione dell'Unione Sovietica, sono emersi all'interno del nuovo stato russo, gravemente indebolito, numerose realtà di potere regionale. Il caos istituzionale ha permesso alle élite regionali da una parte di ottenere considerevoli concessioni da Mosca e dall'altra di consolidare il loro potere svolgendo un ruolo cruciale nell'influenzare la politica federale. Le riforme a livello politico ed economico, attuate negli anni successivi all'ascesa di Putin alla presidenza, ed un contesto economico più favorevole hanno frenato le spinte centrifughe e le tendenze autonomistiche delle regioni, trasformando i rispettivi leader in sostenitori leali dello stato federale. L'efficienza della cosiddetta "verticale del potere" putiniana, ovvero la propagazione del potere centrale a tutti i livelli regionali rappresenta la base principale dell'autoritarismo di Putin. Un'analisi dell'opposizione in Russia focalizzata unicamente a livello federale rischia di non cogliere proprio quelle manifestazioni di dissenso che potrebbero costituire il pericolo maggiore per l'autoritarismo del Cremlino. L'obiettivo di questo elaborato è quello di analizzare le cause e le dinamiche di due manifestazioni di dissenso a livello locale, apparentemente spontanee: le proteste del 2019 contro la costruzione di una cattedrale in un popolare parco di Ekaterinburg e quelle scoppiate a Khabarovsk dopo la rimozione del governatore Furgal nell'estate del 2020. La tesi si propone di studiare questi eventi inserendoli nel contesto delle politiche del governo federale mirate a ridurre il potere delle regioni, così come l'influenza delle opposizioni al loro interno. La conclusione dell'analisi dimostrerà come nonostante le cause di facciata dei due eventi di protesta, entrambi possono essere considerati il frutto della graduale eliminazioni di uno spazio politico sub-nazionale per la rappresentazione dei soggetti federali e dei loro cittadini. Nonostante l'apparente solidità della "verticale del potere" di Putin, i contesti locali e regionali continuano ad essere un terreno fertile per il malcontento verso il potere statale.

I primi due capitoli contengono un'analisi storica dei processi che hanno portato il Cremlino a godere di un primato quasi indiscusso sui soggetti federali e sulle élite al loro interno. Il primo

capitolo descrive lo sviluppo delle relazioni federali dagli anni Novanta fino ad oggi. Durante la presidenza di Boris Yeltsin il governo federale dovette prendere atto della propria debolezza nei confronti di regimi regionali ben consolidati, concludendo trattati bilaterali che garantivano alla maggior parte delle regioni un'ampia gamma di privilegi. Con l'ascesa al potere di Vladimir Putin, e in un contesto di maggiore stabilità economica, il governo federale poté invece invertire il processo di decentramento, arrivando ad abolire le elezioni governatoriali dal 2004 al 2012, rimpiazzate da un sistema di nomine presidenziali seguite da plebisciti dei parlamenti regionali. Particolare attenzione viene prestata al successo dei partiti sponsorizzati dal Cremlino nelle elezioni parlamentari del 1999, momento spartiacque nella storia dei rapporti intra-federali in Russia.

Il secondo capitolo, diviso in tre sezioni, tratta dei rapporti fra il potere federale e i vari attori da cui sarebbero potute emergere concrete manifestazioni di opposizione, ovvero i partiti politici, la società civile, e le proteste organizzate. Verrà analizzato il modo in cui le politiche del governo federale mirate a consolidare il ruolo dei partiti nella vita politica delle regioni, hanno in realtà portato a una loro marginalizzazione e perdita di identità ideologica. Nei confronti della società civile, in particolare le organizzazioni non-governative (ONG) e i sindacati, il Cremlino ha invece optato per un loro coinvolgimento nell'orbita delle strutture governative. Infine, verranno descritti alcuni casi di protesta popolare, evidenziandone la varietà delle ragioni, evoluzione e interazioni con le autorità.

Gli ultimi due capitoli, infine, affrontano rispettivamente i due casi studio. Ordinati cronologicamente, il terzo capitolo tratta degli eventi di Yekaterinburg nel 2019 e il quarto capitolo delle manifestazioni nella regione di Khabarovsk del 2020. In entrambi vengono illustrati i tratti salienti della storia post-sovietica di queste due regioni, con particolare attenzione alle loro relazioni con il governo federale. In seguito, vengono analizzate le cause immediate e le dinamiche delle proteste prese in esame, evidenziando soprattutto le rispettive reazioni delle autorità regionali e federali.

La conclusione riassume l'assunto principale della tesi, ovvero l'importanza della "verticale del potere" per la solidità dell'autoritarismo putiniano e, di conseguenza, del pericolo costituito dalle manifestazioni di dissenso a livello sub-nazionale. La conclusione, infine, menziona gli eventi recenti riguardanti lo svolgimento della campagna militare in Ucraina, e offre uno spunto per un progetto di ricerca futuro.

## Introduction

The history of the Russian Federation since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, and especially since Vladimir Putin's rise to power at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is often seen through the lens of the country's gradual return to an authoritarian system of government, as well as its growing assertiveness in foreign policy. The relations between the central government and the 83 subnational units that make up the nominally federal structure of the state, are therefore frequently overlooked, considered as little more than a footnote in the larger story of resurgent state power. Yet the federal government's centralisation of power, starting from the early 2000s, is neither an accident nor a side effect of external dynamics. In the economic and political wilderness of the 1990s, the most powerful regional heads could effectively run their region as a state-within-a-state, and a *de facto* disintegration of the Russian state seemed possible, if not imminent. Reining in the power of the regions was therefore a daunting task for the federal government, and it was only through deliberate choices, legal measures, and targeted policies, that it was achieved. By the end of the decade, regional leaders had been turned into willing participants in the maintenance of a political system in which their power had been significantly reduced. Far from being a collateral effect of Putin's growing authoritarianism, the "vertical of power", which propagates the federal government's policies and preferences from the corridors of the Kremlin to the most remote regions in the Federation, might in fact be among its most important pillars.

If intra-federal relations are essential to understand the Russian political system and its history, they also need to be considered central when studying the different shapes taken by opposition forces in the country, from the most institutionalised opposition parties sitting in the State Duma, to spontaneous manifestations of dissent culminating in street protests. The lion's share of Western media coverage is generally reserved to large scale anti-system demonstrations calling for



democratisation and political rights, most often taking place in Moscow or Saint Petersburg. This, however, tends to obfuscate the diversity of causes and the geographical distribution of dissent in Russia. Most importantly, it fails to account for the fact that it is when facing local or regional organised dissent that the authorities' responses appear more uncertain and improvised. This thesis seeks to partially remedy to the scarce attention paid to subnational discontent in Russia, studying two cases of recent large scale local protests. More specifically, it will analyse the 2019 demonstrations against the construction of a cathedral in a popular green space in Yekaterinburg, the capital of Sverdlovsk Oblast, and the protests taking place in Khabarovsk Krai in the summer of 2020, following the arrest and transfer to Moscow of Governor Sergei Furgal. It will show how the federal government's policies towards the regions from the 1990s, with particular regards to the centralisation push during the Putin years and the consolidation of the "vertical of power", have reduced the political space available to the regions' citizens, thereby determining the shape taken by their expression of dissent. Ultimately, by combining a study of the history of federal relations in Russia with the analysis of two local protest movements, the research will show that it is outside the country's "two capital cities" that the Kremlin might yet meet its most threatening challenges.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The research is organised as follows: the first two chapters provide a historical background, detailing how control over the regions has underpinned the government's stability and growing power. The first chapter's focus is on the reduction of the regions' significance as political actors in their own right. It describes how in the decade following the demise of the Soviet Union, some regions enjoyed a wide autonomy from the federal centre and essentially functioned as alternative centres of power where the governor's authority could be almost unchallenged. The chapter details how under President Yeltsin the central government had little choice but to adapt its policies to the scattered federal landscape. Subsequently, it analyses the impact of the 1999 legislative elections and the first

reforms operated by President Putin, which strengthened the federal government vis-à-vis the regions. A main focus of the chapter is how these reforms have radically diminished the role played by governors in Russian politics.

The second chapter complements the description of how state power was gradually centralised, by describing, through the perspective of federal relations and regional politics, how each potential source of opposition was neutralised. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first one examines the role played by political parties, including the “party of power” United Russia and the other parties with a role in federal politics, in facilitating the centralisation of power. The second gives a brief account of the nature of civil society in Russia, the state’s attempts to co-opt it into its corporatist system, and the role it can play on the regional level. Finally, the third section deals with street protests, the diverse tactics they employ and objectives they pursue. Having clarified the significance of each actor, and the authorities’ attitude towards it, the thesis finally moves on to the two case studies.

The third and fourth chapters are dedicated to analysing the 2019 protests in Yekaterinburg and the 2020 mass rallies in Khabarovsk. Both chapters begin with an account of the region’s post-Soviet history, explaining their peculiar trajectories and positions within the new Russian state. They seek to show that while the protests were sparked by very specific events, the eruption of discontent had a long prelude, steeped in the larger context of the Kremlin’s suppression of the regions’ political significance, and, consequently, of regional leaders’ accountability to their citizens.

This thesis was planned shortly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on February 24, 2022, and it was completed in the subsequent months, while the tragedy was unfolding. The conclusion briefly refers to the most recent developments and offers a suggestion regarding how they may soon inspire future research on centre-periphery relations in Russia.

## **1. The evolution of federal relations in Russia**

The nature of the relationship between the central government in Russia and the various types of regions that constitute its peculiar federal design has changed a lot since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, the weakness of the central government in Moscow coupled with the invigorated and entrenched power of regional leaders meant that the constitution of the new Russian state had to employ federalism as “a virtue out of necessity”,<sup>1</sup> to prevent a disintegration that otherwise seemed quite imminent. Whereas under Boris Yeltsin maintaining the territorial integrity of the State could only mean striking a series of compromises with the most important regions and the most resourceful regional leaders, starting from the early 2000s an economic upturn and an important electoral victory for the Kremlin gave the federal government, now under Vladimir Putin, the political capital to start the process of rolling back the power of the regions. This chapter will analyse the evolution not so much of the federal system in Russia, which on paper has barely changed since the 1990s, but of the different measures, including federal laws, presidential decrees and changes in the institutions and procedures, that in different ways helped determine how power would be distributed between the central government and the federal subjects.

### **1.1. Regional representation at the federal level: the Federation Council**

Before examining relations between the Kremlin and the regions themselves, it is worth giving a brief account of how the Federation Council has changed since its conception. Constituting the upper chamber of the Russian parliament, the Federation Council is intended as the federal state organ where the regions are represented. The 1993 Constitution, however, does not specify a fixed

---

<sup>1</sup> Slider, D.: “A federal state?”, in Sakwa, R., Hale, H. E., White, S. ed. *Developments in Russian politics 9* (London, Red Globe Press, 2019), p. 119

procedure for the selection of the senators themselves, stating simply that the Council “shall include two representatives from each constituent entity of the Russian Federation: one from the legislative and one from the executive State government body”.<sup>2</sup> This ambiguous wording left the door open for a series of reforms that ultimately severely weakened the scope for regional interests to assert themselves at the federal level.

Between 1993, when the Federation Council became a permanent institution, and 1995, senators were elected directly, with each federal subject constituting a two-mandate electoral district. It is worth noting, however, that among the winners were a high share of high-ranking regional officials and governors themselves, who at the time were still appointed by the President. In 1995 President Yeltsin established that governors and the heads of the regional legislative assemblies would occupy *ex officio* their respective region’s seats in the Federation Council. This coincided with the beginning of popular gubernatorial elections throughout the Federation, which made the Council a credible body for the representation of regional agendas.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is estimated that between 1996 and 1999 the upper chamber rejected approximately one fourth of all the laws submitted to it.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, with anti-Kremlin forces controlling a slight majority in the lower chamber during the first two post-Soviet legislatures, the Council gained leverage on the government by blocking several laws that went against its wishes.<sup>5</sup> Despite strengthening the Federation Council vis-à-vis the federal government, however, the reform was ultimately detrimental to the upper chamber, which, due to the senators’ time-consuming roles in the regions, could only meet seldomly, and struggled to act as an initiator of legislation.<sup>6</sup> A new reform was introduced by Putin in August 2000, a few months after winning the presidential election and, as we will see later in this chapter, after the Kremlin-sponsored

---

<sup>2</sup> Russian Government, The: *Constitution of the Russian Federation*, Art. 95 (adopted December 12, 1993), available at: <http://archive.government.ru/eng/gov/base/54.html>

<sup>3</sup> Makarenko, B.: “Le istituzioni dello Stato russo: un’evoluzione controversa”, in Aragona, G. ed. *La Russia post-sovietica. Dalla caduta del comunismo a Putin: storia della grande transizione* (Milano, ISPI-Mondadori, 2018), p. 32

<sup>4</sup> Slider, D, 2019, p. 120

<sup>5</sup> Makarenko, B, 2018, p. 31

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 32

party had defeated the effort of the regional governors to take control of parliament at the December 1999 legislative election. According to the new procedure the governors and head of regional assemblies would no longer double as senators, and instead would appoint one delegate each to represent their region at the upper chamber in Moscow. Fearing the loss of the most important institutional platform for regional lobbying, the senators naturally opposed the reform, which was nonetheless adopted after being approved by over two thirds of the State Duma, the threshold at which the upper chamber's veto could be bypassed.<sup>7</sup>

The appointment system was a heavy blow for the legitimacy of the Federation Council. The new senators were to be nominated by the two branches of regional governments, but in practice they were picked under Moscow's suggestion,<sup>8</sup> and for the most part drawn from the federal political or entrepreneurial elite.<sup>9</sup> Residing in the federal capital, under the intense scrutiny of the Kremlin, the ties between regions and senators was weakened to the extent that a sizeable percentage of at least one third of the appointees had no actual links to the region they were supposed to represent.<sup>10</sup> By the 2006-2008 period this figure had peaked to over half the members of the upper chamber.<sup>11</sup> Thus, virtually overnight, the Federation Council ceased to be an effective counterweight to the executive power, approving the laws brought to it even when they eroded the powers of regional leaders. In 2002 it ratified a law that rescinded the governors' power to appoint the top law-enforcement officials in their region, and, most significantly, it did not oppose Putin's abolition of gubernatorial elections in 2004.<sup>12</sup> In just a few years, as Ross and Turovsky wrote, the upper chamber had become a "compliant and passive body that act[ed] more as a champion of the federal centre in the regions than as a representative of the regions at the centre".<sup>13</sup> Measures adopted in the following years, such as a

---

<sup>7</sup> Starodubtsev, A.: *Federalism and Regional Policy in Contemporary Russia* (London, Routledge, 2018), p. 49

<sup>8</sup> Slider, D, 2019, p. 120

<sup>9</sup> Starodubtsev, A, 2018, p. 49-50

<sup>10</sup> Slider, D, 2019, p. 120

<sup>11</sup> Ross, C., Turovsky, R.: "The representation of political and economic elites in the Russian Federation Council", *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 21, Issue 1 (2013), p. 68

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 65

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 65

June 2007 law imposing a 10-year residency obligation on new senators, were so full of exceptions and loopholes that they can safely be considered as little more than a façade, showing that the Kremlin was well aware of the importance of the upper chamber's role as a forum for regional representation, while at the same time closing its grip on the Council's activities. Similarly, under Medvedev's presidency, a new procedure was established, that limited the selection of senators to those who had served in regional or local assemblies, allegedly to ensure that members of the Federation Council would have experience of engaging with voters and running an electoral campaign. Between the widespread use of proportional party list electoral systems and the dominance of United Russia in regional and local legislative bodies, however, it is easy to see how membership in a sub-national assembly did not necessarily mean having personally gone through a competitive campaign, nor having engaged significantly with the local communities (especially since that same year the 10-year residency requirement was abolished).<sup>14</sup>

Despite being endowed with significant powers by the 1993 Constitution, including approving a state of emergency, martial law, changes in borders, the use of the Russian armed forces abroad and the impeachment of the President among others,<sup>15</sup> the Federation Council has not been a significant counterweight to the other organs of government since the late 1990s. Most importantly, new laws introduced by the Kremlin since Vladimir Putin's rise to the presidency have severely damaged the links between the Russian regions and the federal institution where their interests are supposed to be represented. This has led some scholars to speak of a "de-regionalization of the Federation Council",<sup>16</sup> which now acts as little more than a rubber stamp for the government and a tool for elite reshuffling. The change in power relations between the centre and the regions is further shown in the State Council, a plenary assembly of all regional governors chaired by the President himself, which, perhaps in compensation for the loss of their senatorial seat, was created in the same year as the

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 66-67

<sup>15</sup> Russian Government, The (1993), Art. 102

<sup>16</sup> Ross, C., Turovsky, R., 2013, p. 67

appointment system was introduced for the upper chamber. This institution allows the governors to discuss federal policies related to the regions, and the Kremlin to coordinate the implementation of said policies throughout the Federation. Crucially, however, the State Council is a purely advisory body with no constitutional powers, whose inputs are valid only insofar as the presidential administration is receptive to them. Already in its first year of activity, this dynamic was starkly demonstrated. The influential President of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev, was tasked with leading a State Council working group that would revisit the issue of relations between the centre and the regions. The working group produced a “Basic Concept” that clearly indicated which responsibilities were going to pertain to the federal government and which ones to the subnational units. However, several points of the Concept conflicted with the federal government’s preferences. This meant that the document, despite being approved by the Presidium of the State Council, was never discussed in its plenary assembly.<sup>17</sup> As the governors’ power and influence became more subdued, in recent years Putin has not refrained from a performative use of the State Council, often appearing to scold governors if they are distracted or seemingly unprepared for a session.<sup>18</sup> The conclusion, as Slider wrote, is that “no one who has observed a meeting of the State Council would be under the illusion that governors are treated as the political equals of the president”.<sup>19</sup>

## 1.2. Federal relations under Boris Yeltsin

The danger of regional leaders enjoying an authority virtually on par with that of the president is precisely the reason why during the first post-Soviet decade federal relations in Russia were heavily marked by compromises. The result was an asymmetric federation, where the allocation of powers between the centre and the regions were determined primarily by *ad hoc* bilateral agreements that

---

<sup>17</sup> Chuman, M.: “The rise and fall of power-sharing treaties between centre and regions in post-Soviet Russia”, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 19, Issue 2 (2011), p. 144

<sup>18</sup> Slider, D, 2019, p. 128

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 128

would often contradict the freshly written constitution of the Russian Federation, approved in December 1993.

While already in its 1978 Constitution the Russian Soviet Republic (RSFSR) had declared itself to be a “federation”, in reality the system of governance throughout the Soviet era was highly centralised.<sup>20</sup> The particular federal system that emerged in the 1990s was more an outcome of the power struggle between the RSFSR, headed by Boris Yeltsin, and the Soviet Union led by Gorbachev.<sup>21</sup> In 1990 the Soviet government was met with the double challenge of attempting some degree of decentralisation to tackle the Union’s economic troubles and a resurgence of ethnic conflicts within its territory. Its solution was to raise the status of the ethnically based “autonomous republics”, which now became virtually equal to that of the Soviet Republics. Such an arrangement, however, was particularly threatening to the RSFSR, whose “non-Russian” autonomous republics were numerous enough to significantly endanger its territorial integrity.<sup>22</sup> The Russian declaration of sovereignty, adopted by the Supreme Council of the RSFSR in the summer of 1990, tried to flatten the asymmetry created by the Soviet policy by raising the status of the “Russian” subnational administrative units. Unsurprisingly, it was followed by a number of declarations of sovereignty by autonomous republics, including Tatarstan, Karelia, Kalmykia, Mari El, Chuvash, Altai, and Buryatia among others. When the Soviet Union officially ended in 1991, the situation inherited by the new Russian Federation was therefore very precarious. While in 1990 Yeltsin had famously invited the autonomous republics to “take as much sovereignty as [they could] swallow”,<sup>23</sup> he understood that in order to placate their centrifugal potential, which in the early 1990s seemed capable of precipitating

---

<sup>20</sup> Starodubtsev, A, 2018, p. 34

<sup>21</sup> For the discussion on the effects of the 1989-1991 political conflict on Russia’s federalism see Starodubtsev, A, 2018, pp. 38-40

<sup>22</sup> We must pay attention here to the distinction, in the Russian language, between the terms *rossijskij*, which refers to the Russian state and its attributes (e.g., flag, citizenship, borders) and the term *rususkij*, referring to the ethnic population and its attributes (e.g. language, traditions). The autonomous republics of the Russian Federation, for example Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Mari El, Tuva, and many others, cannot therefore be described as *rususkij*. For the purpose of clarity, since both terms are translated as “Russian” in the English language, we put the term in quote marks when it stands for *rususkij* (i.e. the Russian ethnicity)

<sup>23</sup> Slider, D, 2019, p. 120



the disintegration of the Russian state, it would be necessary to award them a special political status within the Federation.

The ambiguous nature of Russia's federalism was well reflected in the two foundational documents that laid out how relations between the centre and the regions would be structured, namely the 1992 Federation Treaty and the 1993 Constitution. Made public on 31 March 1992, the former was a three-part agreement between the centre and the regions that divided the Russian territory into different types of administrative units, largely modelled on the 1978 RSFSR Constitution. The first part was directed at the autonomous republics, the second at the "Russian" federal subjects (including krais, oblasts, cities of federal subordination) and the third at the autonomous oblasts and districts.<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, it was the governments of the republics that obtained the largest degree of autonomous administrative powers, as well as political recognition as "sovereign governments".<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the Treaty established that at least half of the seats in one of the parliamentary chambers of the Federation would be reserved for the autonomous republics, districts, and oblasts.<sup>26</sup> The October 1993 constitutional crisis between the parliamentary and the executive branches of government, which culminated in the October 4 bombing of the Supreme Soviet, led however to the drafting of a new constitution for the Russian Federation, which was approved in a referendum on 12 December 1993. The 1993 Constitution made certain provisions of the Federation Treaty essentially void. All the federal subjects were now considered equal, their different designations being stripped of any special political meaning.<sup>27</sup> While autonomous republics were still recognised their own language and constitutions, their priority in the federal order was cancelled, as was their control of one half of a parliamentary chamber.<sup>28</sup> However, considering that two of the regions in which a separatist regional elite was most consolidated, namely Tatarstan and Chechnya, had even refused to

---

<sup>24</sup> Starodubtsev, A, 2018, p. 42

<sup>25</sup> Chuman, M. 2011, p. 134

<sup>26</sup> Starodubtsev, A, 2018, p. 42

<sup>27</sup> Chuman, M. 2011, p. 134

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 134

sign the Federation Treaty, instead demanding negotiated separate agreements with the central government as equal partners,<sup>29</sup> it was clear that the federal question was far from being resolved.

The 1993 Constitution had therefore tried to rein in the asymmetry in the federal structure that had been created by the 1992 Treaty. The political reality of early 1990s Russia, however, was one in which powerful regional elites could easily force concessions out of the federal government, especially in an institutional context still characterised by large gaps in the legislation. The first bilateral treaty between the centre and a federal subject was signed with Tatarstan in February 1994, giving the autonomous republic ample concessions in economic policy, especially with regards to the privatisation plan, tax collection and international relations.<sup>30</sup> In July of the same year a special commission was established with the task of preparing more bilateral treaties, six of which were signed between 1994 and 1995 with the autonomous republics of North Ossetia, Bashkortostan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Buryatia, Sakha, and Udmurtia.<sup>31</sup> In one of the most noteworthy concessions, regions such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan could award subnational citizenship in joint jurisdiction with the centre.<sup>32</sup> The same two regions, joined by Kabardino-Balkaria, were furthermore given joint control of banking and monetary policy, and, this time joined by North Ossetia, wide managerial autonomy with regards to their natural resources.<sup>33</sup> In general, on matters where regional jurisdiction was awarded, regional norms would prevail in case of a clash with a federal norm. Finally, in 1996 Sverdlovsk Oblast became the first “Russian” federal entity to sign a treaty with the centre.<sup>34</sup>

The signing of these bilateral treaties was not exclusively beneficial to regional elites. When in the 1996 presidential election the Communist Party candidate Gennady Zyuganov forced Boris Yeltsin to a run-off second round, for the first time the President was able to harness the power of

---

<sup>29</sup> Starodubtsev, A, 2018, p. 42

<sup>30</sup> Paustyan, E. “A Treaty for the rich and politically loyal? Explaining the bilateral center-region treaties in Post-Soviet Russia”, *Russian Politics* Vol. 6, Issue 2 (2021), p. 188

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 189

<sup>32</sup> Chuman, M. 2011, p. 137

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 137

<sup>34</sup> Paustyan, E. 2021, p. 189

governors to his advantage. The centralising instinct of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) did not make it more popular among powerful regional leaders.<sup>35</sup> Neither did the additional expenses its social security policies imposed on regional budgets after its victory in the 1995 State Duma election.<sup>36</sup> In this context the centre-regions bilateral treaties played an important part in securing regional leaders' support for Yeltsin. As Paustyan has shown in her study of the 42 bilateral treaties signed between 1994 and 1998, the 1996 election was a "golden opportunity" for those regional heads without a treaty, who now had considerable leverage with the President when offering to mobilise their political resources in his favour.<sup>37</sup> Conversely, governors who had already signed one could be reliably counted upon to support Yeltsin, since compliance with the treaty by the federal government would be in danger should Zyuganov win the election. By the mid 1990s most regions had what can be considered a consolidated regional elite, meaning that governors could claim a firm grip on the political machinery in their own region. In the ethnic-based republics (whose leaders could still refer to themselves as "presidents" in the 1990s) this was especially evident. But even in those cases where a Yeltsin-appointee had lost his post after an electoral defeat (gubernatorial elections having been finally allowed by Yeltsin in 1995), the new governor was quick to cast his lot with the President, understanding that it would be the price to pay to enjoy only minimal interference by the Kremlin in regional politics.<sup>38</sup> Thus, by building a coalition of regional leaders, making them responsible for delivering electoral outcomes favourable to the Kremlin, Yeltsin inaugurated a system which, even in radically changed circumstances, remains operative to this day. According to Reisinger and Moraski, this is well illustrated by the fact that the electoral results in the ethnic-based

---

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7-8

<sup>36</sup> Starodubtsev, A, 2018, p. 77

<sup>37</sup> Paustyan, E. 2021, pp. 191-192

<sup>38</sup> Golosov, G. V. "The Regional Roots of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia" *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 63, Issue 4 (2011), p. 626

republics, which should have been the “most troublesome regions” for the federal centre, have on the contrary shown increasing deference to the Kremlin.<sup>39</sup> They conclude that

“if regional leaders have utilised their administrative and organisational resources to produce results that will curry them the Kremlin’s goodwill, then the Kremlin has an interest in preserving the structures of power that enable these regional baron the ability to produce favourable – at times, implausible – outcomes”.<sup>40</sup>

Even without seeking to alter the internal political order of the regions, by the end of the 1990s the discrepancies between regional and federal laws had become so numerous that the Kremlin had to take measures. In 1996 the Main Control Division of the Presidential Administration was created, tasked with monitoring the implementation of federal laws in the regions. The following year, faced with a myriad of regional norms in contrast with federal law, it began advocating for a more unified legal space across the Federation, as did the authoritative voice of Yevgeny Primakov, who served as Prime Minister between September 1998 and his dismissal in May 1999.<sup>41</sup> In the final months of the Yeltsin presidency a first attempt was made at bringing the bilateral treaties in line with federal law. After long negotiations between the State Duma, the Federation Council, and the government, in June 1999 a Federal Law on the Division of Power was adopted. It established that regions could no longer adopt rules on matters under joint jurisdiction that clashed with federal laws, and that every bilateral treaty would have to be revised within three years.<sup>42</sup> The law, however, did not prove to be very effective, especially due to the lack of provisions in cases of violations of its norms by the regions,

---

<sup>39</sup> Reisinger, W. M., Moraski, B. J.: “Regional changes and changing regional relations with the centre”, in Gel’man V. and Ross, C. ed. *The politics of sub-national authoritarianism in Russia* (New York, Routledge, 2016), p. 79

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 80

<sup>41</sup> Chuman, M. 2011, pp. 138-141

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 141

none of which, with the exception of the Sakha Republic, abided by the three-year deadline for amending their treaty.<sup>43</sup>

The events of the 1990s appear to sustain the idea, advanced most notably by Golosov, that authoritarianism in post-Soviet Russia has markedly “regional roots”.<sup>44</sup> Under Yeltsin’s presidency the separatism of the most problematic regions was tamed through incentives such as financial support, the bilateral treaties with the centre and, especially in the case of the autonomous republics, a *laissez faire* political approach. By the time Putin arrived at the presidency, however, the hand played by the federal centre was already strengthening.

### **1.3. From the 1999 legislative election to Putin’s reforms**

The Russian 20<sup>th</sup> century closed with an attempt by a group of influential regional leaders to take control of the State Duma in the December 1999 legislative election. While said attempt was ultimately a failure, there is no doubt that at the time of Putin’s accession to the presidency the governors still constituted a force to be reckoned with. Yet less than five years later the Kremlin was able to abolish gubernatorial elections meeting little opposition. While previously the governors had been able to draw their strength from popular support, occasionally obtained by railing against federal policies, the Kremlin had now, at least on paper, made itself the only meaningful stakeholder, and the final arbiter on a governor’s survival in office. In a very brief time, the central government had laid the basis of the system that would become known as the “vertical of power”.

For the first time in post-Soviet Russia, the 1999 legislative election allowed a pro-Kremlin majority, albeit relative, to be formed in the State Duma. This, however, was the result of a long process, whose ultimate outcome was far from certain. In August 1998 Russia was hit by a serious financial crisis that pushed it to default on its debts. Under pressure from the Duma, Yeltsin appointed

---

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 145

<sup>44</sup> Golosov, G. V. 2011, pp. 637-638

Yevgeny Primakov as Prime Minister, who proceeded to implement a much more tightly centralised regional policy.<sup>45</sup> As we have seen, this happened at a time when the government had declared its intention to rein back the legal discrepancies established by the bilateral treaties' regime. It was therefore not surprising that a number of prominent regional leaders decided to contest the 1999 election, attempting to gain a foothold on the new Duma. In December 1998 the Mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov founded *Otechestvo* ("Fatherland"). His position as the head of the country's capital city had allowed him to build an extensive network of regional leaders, thirty of whom attended the new party's inaugural congress.<sup>46</sup> Soon it formed an electoral bloc with another party recently constituted party, *Vsya Rossiya* ("All Russia"), whose founders included the governor of St. Petersburg, Vladimir Yakovlev, and a group of prominent autonomous republic governors, including Bashkortostan's Murtaz Rakhimov, Ingushetia's Ruslan Aushev, and, most importantly, Tatarstan's Mintimer Shaimiev. Perhaps ironically, heading the Fatherland - All Russia bloc into the 1999 election was former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who, despite having advocated for a more centralised governance for the country, now needed a platform to support his planned presidential bid,<sup>47</sup> and, after his dismissal, he could only find it in opposition to Yeltsin's government. Taking heed of the threat posed by the coalition built in the name of regional interests, the Kremlin initiated its own political party, significantly called *Yedinstvo* ("Unity"). Interestingly, the basis for the foundation of the party was purported to be a letter signed by 39 governors, worried about the country's destabilisation and calling for "honest and responsible people" to be elected".<sup>48</sup> It is clear that, despite having been created to counter a coalition claiming to advance regional rights, the founders of Unity understood that in late 1990s Russia support by governors was too important to not be courted. The new party's biggest asset, however, was without a doubt the endorsement of Vladimir

---

<sup>45</sup> Starodubtsev, A, 2018, p. 79

<sup>46</sup> Slider, D. "How United is United Russia? Regional sources of intra-party conflict", *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* Vol. 26, Issue 2 (2010), pp. 258-259

<sup>47</sup> Sakwa, R.: *The Putin Paradox* (Bloomsbury, London, 2020), p. 19

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p. 259

Putin, who had been nominated Prime Minister in August 1999. In addition, a series of terrorist attacks in three Russian cities, including Moscow, in September 1999, and the subsequent declaration by Putin of a second military campaign in Chechnya not only increased the Prime Minister's popularity, but allowed the Kremlin to rally the electorate around its role as the protector of the Russian people. Thus, while the KPRF confirmed itself as the most voted party list, the contest between Unity and the Fatherland-All Russia bloc was convincingly won by the former. However, if on one side the election saw the defeat of the "regional" party's attempt to assert itself on the federal stage, on the other it confirmed what Yeltsin had already discovered during the 1996 campaign: the successes of the Fatherland-All Russia coalition were confined with no exceptions to those regions whose leaders had endorsed the bloc, demonstrating the tight control exercised by most governors over the political resources within their own federal subject.<sup>49</sup> As Golosov wrote, while the 1999 election was arguably the freest post-Soviet Russia has ever seen, "the authoritarian character of the underlying subregional structures weighed heavily on the electoral outcome".<sup>50</sup>

Negotiations aimed at creating a parliamentary coalition between Unity and the Fatherland-All Russia bloc began soon after Putin became president, in January 2000. The combined strength of the new coalition would bring a total of 136 Duma seats out of 450, allowing the president to rely on a relative majority in parliament to support his government's actions.<sup>51</sup> The merger of the two blocs which had contested the 1999 election signalled that, while the regional leaders' effort had been defeated, the course of action chosen by the Kremlin was to co-opt them into the ruling coalition. As Starodubtsev has written, an effect of the 1999 election was that

"[b]efore, the governors had been seen as rent-seekers who used every opportunity to extract additional benefits from the federal centre. But now, the centre recognized some regional

---

<sup>49</sup> Golosov, G. V. 2011, p. 626

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p. 626

<sup>51</sup> Morini, M. *La Russia di Putin* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2020), p. 94

leaders as political challengers who were able both to control political processes in their home subnational units and to influence political outcomes at the federal level”.<sup>52</sup>

Led by Vladislav Surkov, one of Putin’s (and later Medvedev’s) most trusted political advisors, the negotiations came to fruition in December 2001, when the founding congress of United Russia was held.<sup>53</sup> Over the next decade the new “party of power” would prove more resilient than its short-lived predecessor, *Nash Dom – Rossiya* (“Our Home is Russia”), which had existed to support Yeltsin between 1995 and 1999, when it virtually ceased to operate after failing to gain any seats in the State Duma.<sup>54</sup> Most importantly, it would become an extremely useful tool in the hands of the federal elite to co-opt, control, support and, when necessary, dismiss regional leaders.

When Vladimir Putin arrived at the presidency, he was deeply aware of the complicated issues surrounding regional policy. After having served as the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg between 1994 and 1996 he had been appointed to head the Main Control Division of the Presidential Administration, a position he was holding when the office issued a damning report on the existing conflicts between regional and federal norms.<sup>55</sup> Subsequently, in July 1998, he was nominated chairman of the commission tasked with the preparation of the bilateral treaties themselves. Reflecting the policies he had advocated in his previous capacity, under Putin’s chairmanship the signing of bilateral treaties was abruptly discontinued.<sup>56</sup> After winning his first presidential election in March 2000, one of his first measures was the appointment of seven “presidential envoys”, one for each of the new seven “federal districts” in which the Federation was divided. They comprised the Southern, Volga, North-West, Central, Urals, Siberian and Far Eastern districts, with the North Caucasus becoming the eighth district after being carved out of the Southern by Medvedev in 2011. Despite not enjoying any power of their own, the envoys were very influential figures due to their direct link to the President. This

---

<sup>52</sup> Starodubtsev, A. 2018, p. 48

<sup>53</sup> Morini, M. 2020, p. 61

<sup>54</sup> Slider, D. 2010, p. 258

<sup>55</sup> Chuman, M. 2011, p. 138

<sup>56</sup> Paustyanyan, E. 2021, p. 189



importance was reflected in the initial choices of the officials nominated to these positions, with many of them coming from Putin's inner circle of "*siloviki*" and lacking political backgrounds, most often coming from the military or the police force.<sup>57</sup>

The presidential envoys had two principal functions. The most evident one was to create a uniform legal space by bringing regional norms in line with federal legislation. In practice, the presidential administration began issuing recommendations that the regions abolish their bilateral treaties with the centre.<sup>58</sup> Many of them complied, including all the regions in the Volga district as well as Perm and Omsk. Unsurprisingly, opposition to abolishing the treaties was strongest in the autonomous republics, although other subnational units such as Sverdlovsk, Krasnoyarsk, and the city of Moscow also objected. Nonetheless, by the mid-2000s only Tatarstan was still negotiating a treaty with the centre. Signed in 2007, it was to be the last bilateral treaty between a subnational unit and the federal centre, and when it expired in 2017 it was not renewed.<sup>59</sup> The second, less apparent function of the presidential envoys was to tie the local law-enforcement agencies to the Kremlin. The appointments of prosecutors and police and security chiefs would now therefore be closely supervised by Moscow, through new special departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Prosecutor General's Office that were established at each federal district level.<sup>60</sup> The links between governors and the top law-enforcement officials in their regions was therefore severely weakened, while the federal centre's control over regional administrations was strengthened.

Putin's first reforms were written principally to clarify the distribution of power between the centre and the federal subjects. Their implicit effect, however, would be to establish a vertical hierarchy that reduced the scope for subnational political figures to oppose the Kremlin, or even act as an opposition. The federal law "on the general principles for the organisation of legislative and executive organs of state power", and the amendments that were attached to it in 2003, were based

---

<sup>57</sup> Slider, D, 2019, p. 121

<sup>58</sup> Chuman, M. 2011, p. 145

<sup>59</sup> Paustyan, E. 2021, p. 189

<sup>60</sup> Starodubtsev, A, 2018, p. 49

on the recommendations of a commission led by the deputy head of the presidential administration, and close ally to Putin, Dmitry Kozak.<sup>61</sup> The law gave the regions more powers on the implementation of policies as well as on public administration, social security, and cultural inheritance among others. An important innovation presented in the amendments, however, was that the regions were expected to fulfil the functions under regional jurisdictions by drawing from their own regional budgets. The obvious effect was that the poorer federal subjects became even more dependent on the Kremlin.<sup>62</sup> Another important reform was the 2003 law “on the general principles of organisation of local self-government”. During the 1990s it was not unusual for the mayor of a large city to be the main political rival of a governor.<sup>63</sup> The 2003 law strengthened regional administrations at the expense of local government, through measures such as awarding the region control over city budgets.<sup>64</sup> While the law gave local government bodies the ability to amend their own charter, it left them vulnerable to pressure from above. Shortly after gubernatorial elections were abolished in 2004, more and more cities were pushed to reform their own system of governance, introducing the figure of a “city manager”, strictly approved by the governors and the regional assemblies, to oversee the cities’ administrations and budget. The old “mayor” became the speaker of the city Duma, tasked with general policymaking and the ceremonial role of representing the city. It is important to note that the adoption of the “dual chief executive” model saw great variations across the Russian Federation. In some regions, such as Nizhny Novgorod, governors were able to manoeuvre in a way that brought little opposition from the cities, while in others, such as Yekaterinburg or Kamchatka’s regional capital Petropavlovsk, the imposition of a city manager saw intense political conflicts.<sup>65</sup>

The reduction of the political space available at the municipal level had a clear rationale: the need to avoid conflicts between politically strong mayors, who could count on extensive personal and

---

<sup>61</sup> Chuman, M. 2011, p. 145

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p. 147

<sup>63</sup> Moses, J. C. “The Political Resurrection of Russian Governors” *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 66, Issue 9 (2014), p. 1403

<sup>64</sup> Chuman, M. 2011, p. 147

<sup>65</sup> Moses, J. C. 2014, p. 1404

political local networks, and governors who, while more powerful, did not. The latter case, of course, became almost the norm across the Federation following the Kremlin's decision to abolish gubernatorial elections in 2004.

#### **1.4. The abolition of gubernatorial elections and its consequences**

The declared reason for the abrupt end of gubernatorial elections was the September 2004 terrorist attack in Beslan, where the authorities' blundered response was blamed partially on an unclear chain of command.<sup>66</sup> Some scholars, however, believe that the tragedy in North Ossetia was but a pretext, and that the real motivations lay elsewhere, between a need by the federal government to tie most of the governors to United Russia, the quickly expanding party of power, and retaliation for a coordinated attempt by a group of regional leaders to oppose Putin's welfare reform.<sup>67</sup> The abolition of gubernatorial elections was certainly a defining moment of the first Putin presidency. The effects, however, were less obvious than what might be supposed at first. On paper, the reform gave the president an undisputed upper hand. The appointee he nominated had to be approved by the popularly elected regional legislative, which, however, could be dissolved by the president if it failed to do so.<sup>68</sup> Only during Medvedev's presidency was the appointment process modified, allowing for more input by the majority party in the regional legislative to nominate candidates for the governorship, a provision which changed little in a political landscape in which United Russia controlled virtually all regional parliaments.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, alongside these changes came a surprising amount of continuity. The control exercised by some governors over their regions made them difficult to dismiss, due to their reliability in implementing federal policies and providing the

---

<sup>66</sup> Slider, D, 2019, p. 122

<sup>67</sup> Petrov, N.: "Regional Governors under the Dual Power of Medvedev and Putin", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* Vol. 26, Issue 2 (2010), p. 294

<sup>68</sup> Makarenko, B. 2018, p. 31

<sup>69</sup> Moses, J. C. 2014, p. 1397

Kremlin with the necessary results in federal elections. Indeed, some of the heavyweight governors of the past decade, including Shaimiev in Tatarstan and Rakhimov in Bashkortostan, remained in power until Medvedev's presidency. Shaimiev, moreover, was among the first regional heads to declare their support for Putin's reform in 2004.<sup>70</sup> While it can be said that during the eight years without gubernatorial elections "Russian federalism, at least institutionally, was dead",<sup>71</sup> it is also true that Putin showed significant restraint from using his power to replace sitting governors. In 2005, out of 44 gubernatorial appointments, only in 12 cases was the incumbent not confirmed (one of which due to his death while in office).<sup>72</sup> The replacement of sitting governors did, however, accelerate during Medvedev's presidency, and by 2012, when popular elections were re-introduced, only 16 of them had been in office since before the appointment system.<sup>73</sup>

The main initial shift brought by the abolition of gubernatorial reform was not, therefore, in personnel, but in how governors became perceived. Rather than political figures carrying their own legitimacy and authority, regional leaders were now demoted to implementers of policy from above. This was strengthened by the introduction, by presidential decree in June 2007, of 43 "basic indicators" that would be used by the federal government to evaluate the governors' performance.<sup>74</sup> The number of said indicators would be repeatedly increased in the following years, peaking at 295 in April 2009, relating to areas such as education, health, housing construction, average income, crime, and the unemployment rate among others. In a textbook system of carrot-and-stick the worse regions could be threatened with the dismissal of the sitting governor, while good results would be rewarded with special government grants.<sup>75</sup> The technocratic profile of post-2004 governors is also evident in the frequent cases of appointees having very limited ties to the region they are due to

---

<sup>70</sup> Starodubtsev, A, 2018, p. 52

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p. 52

<sup>72</sup> Kynev, A.: "The Membership of Governors' teams in Russia's regions, and the key features of the formation of regional administrations 1991-2018", *Russian Politics* Vol. 5, Issue 2 (2020), p. 163

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p. 162

<sup>74</sup> Petrov, N. 2010, p. 285

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p. 286

administer. As Kynev has effectively demonstrated, the distinction between “locals” and “outsiders” is grossly simplistic, with the two categories being far from monolithic.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the way replacements for outgoing governors are chosen has been extremely varied. What is clear, however, is that the vast majority of new governors were now the expression of different interest groups within the federal elite, whose protection was essential to maintain the office.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, behind the objectivity façade of the official indicators according to evaluate governors, the most important factor by far remained the ability of a regional administration to deliver votes to the ruling party during federal elections.<sup>78</sup> It is not a coincidence that shortly after the 2011 State Duma election, several governors whose regions had seen a lacklustre performance by United Russia, including Volgograd, Kostroma, Murmansk, Saratov, and Vologda, resigned before the end of their term.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, regional elites whose control over the electoral machinery was reliable, the case of the already mentioned Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, but also of Russian-majority regions such as Kemerovo and Tyumen, were certain to enjoy greater stability.<sup>80</sup>

The essence of gubernatorial appointments between 2005 and 2012 has been well summarised by Petrov:

“[a] governor is no longer a senior representative of the regional elite whose key task is to represent the interests of the regions at the centre. Now he or she is rather a representative of the centre, who has been posted to a region”.<sup>81</sup>

As one of the probable effects of the 2011-2012 mass protests “for fair elections”, popular gubernatorial electoral contests were re-introduced in January 2012.<sup>82</sup> It was soon clear, however,

---

<sup>76</sup> Kynev, A. 2020, pp. 163-164

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 167

<sup>78</sup> Slider, D, 2019, p. 130

<sup>79</sup> Moses, J. C. 2014, p. 1400

<sup>80</sup> Kynev, A. 2020, p. 168

<sup>81</sup> Petrov, N. 2010, p. 295

<sup>82</sup> Starodubtsev, A, 2018, p. 54

that the competitive regional elections seen between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s would not be coming back, as the Kremlin took measures to ensure that no unwelcome candidate would be able to register (see next chapter). The central government's discretionary power of selecting who would lead the Federation's subnational units remained therefore extremely strong. The years since 2012 have seen an attempt to strike a balance between revitalising regional administrations and ensuring stability. Especially in the two years preceding the March 2018 presidential election governors' turnover was extremely high, and more than ever detached from regional elites. Of 47 new governors who came to power between 2016 and 2018, many of whom were described in Russian media with the "young technocrat" label, only 10 can be considered "locals" whose political life had taken place in the region itself.<sup>83</sup>

Not every gubernatorial election since 2012 has seen a victory of the Kremlin's favourite candidate. The cumulative effect of the changes in regional policy since the early 2000s, however, has all but eliminated the possibility for federal subjects to become viable bases for an opposition to the federal government. The high turnover of regional heads, furthermore, means horizontal cooperation between the regions is difficult, making the emergence of a new coalition of governors challenging the Kremlin extremely unlikely. This has been particularly evident during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, when Putin was able to lay the responsibility for imposing unpopular restricting measures on the governors, who, understanding that their own survival in the "vertical of power" depended on the stability of the political system, complied.<sup>84</sup> From an administrative standpoint, the pandemic may have indeed shown that, as it has been suggested, "the existing overcentralisation of executive power in Russia's federal system has ... approached its limit and can hardly be strengthened further".<sup>85</sup> It is doubtful, however, that this will result in a resurgence of the regions' significance as political actors in their own right.

---

<sup>83</sup> Kynev, A. 2020, p. 174

<sup>84</sup> Busygina, I., Filippov, M. "COVID and federal relations in Russia", *Russian Politics* Vol. 6, Issue 3 (2021), p. 288

<sup>85</sup> Seliverstov, V. E., Kravchenko, N. A., Klistorin, V. I., Yusupova, A. T.: "Russian regions and the federal center against global threats: a year of fighting COVID-19", *Regional Research of Russia* Vol. 11, Issue 4 (2021), p. 417

## **2. Power and opposition in the federal dimension**

While the Russian federal entities had been rendered essentially toothless vis-à-vis the federal government by the late 2000s, this did not necessarily apply to the oppositional actors within the regions themselves. Deadening the threat from opposition parties, civil society and, lastly, spontaneous street actions was a process that occurred to a large extent in parallel and in complicity with the reduction of regional power. Whereas the previous chapter dealt with the system-wide reforms and practices that strengthened the federal centre and weakened the regions, this one analyses how sources of opposition at virtually all levels of the “vertical of power” were managed, co-opted, or side-lined in the years since Putin’s rise to the presidency. It will conclude that although it cannot be said that the opposition has been thoroughly eliminated across the Federation, the system ensures that local opposition victories remain circumscribed to their own subnational level, with very little opportunity to translate their success into the federal arena.

### **2.1. Political parties: weakness in strength**

Albeit democratic on paper, the Russian political system has been widely acknowledged as fitting into the paradigm of “hybrid democracy”,<sup>86</sup> sometimes also known as “electoral authoritarianism” or, at least until the early 2000s, “managed democracy”.<sup>87</sup> The basic tenet of said system is that the race for power, which nominally takes place through the electoral process, is only imitated by the actors involved, which understand all too well that the opportunity for a change at the head of government is basically non-existent. A detailed analysis of the Russian political party

---

<sup>86</sup> Grishin, N. “Regional opposition in Russia: Aliens in a hybrid regime”, *Russian Politics* Vol. 1, Issue 3 (2016), p. 271

<sup>87</sup> Golosov, G. V. 2011, p. 623

landscape is outside the scope of this research. Instead, this section studies the role that political parties have had in consolidating the federal government's "vertical of power". It will show that measures by the Kremlin imposing political parties as the central actors in the system, have had in fact two main effects: consolidating United Russia's role as the "party of power" while at the same time actively reduce the significance, ideological identity and, ultimately, influence, of most other parties. The section is therefore divided into two parts, with the first detailing how legal engineering made United Russia the political vehicle of state power, and the second explaining how opposition parties were affected by, and responded to, the new political conditions.

### **2.1.1. The role of United Russia**

As we have seen, in the early 2000s a combination of factors including a favourable economic condition, the Kremlin's victory vis-à-vis the governors in the 1999 legislative election and Vladimir Putin's personal popularity made it possible for the "party of power" project to move forward. After a complicated start under the stewardship of Putin's close ally Aleksandr Bespalov, who attempted to use regional party leadership positions to undermine governors, the Kremlin opted for a strategy of attracting popular governors into United Russia.<sup>88</sup> The strength and autonomy enjoyed by some governors in their region, coupled with the structural weakness of political parties and the fact that officially it was forbidden for governors to join a political party until 2005, meant that certain adjustments had to be made to increase the appeal of affiliation with United Russia. The restriction on governors' party memberships were circumvented with the creation of the "Supreme Council", a large consultative organ to which eleven regional heads had already been nominated by the time of the third party congress in September 2003. The Council, however, had little role in the day-to-day

---

<sup>88</sup> Slider, D. 2010, pp. 259-260



management of the party, whose main leadership positions remained occupied by federal-level political heavyweights.<sup>89</sup>

The political independence often enjoyed by governors, however, constituted a bigger obstacle to the Kremlin's plans. Two laws, adopted in 2001 and 2002, served to increase demand for political party membership, while also creating constraints that ensured the supremacy of central party bureaucracies over regional organisations. The first law, "On political parties", essentially outlawed regional parties, establishing thresholds of 10,000 members in total, with at least 100 in half of the federal entities of the Russian Federation, for parties to be officially registered.<sup>90</sup> In 2006 these requirements were sharply increased, to 50,000 members with at least 500 in half of the regional branches and at least 250 in the remaining ones.<sup>91</sup> Given these prohibitive figures it is no surprise that the number of registered parties in Russia fell drastically, from 141 in 1999 to only 14 in 2007.<sup>92</sup> Since the task of verifying party memberships in the regions fell to law enforcement agencies,<sup>93</sup> which, as we have seen, had been resolutely tied to the federal government by the introduction of the seven presidential envoys at the outset of the Putin presidency, it was not unusual for the norms to be applied selectively, affecting opposition parties disproportionately.<sup>94</sup> Essentially, a system where the executive could choose its own challengers was taking shape. The second law, "On the basic guarantees of electoral rights", had a different objective. Its main provision was that at least half of the seats in regional parliaments must be elected through a proportional system,<sup>95</sup> thus turning political parties from a potential liability for a candidate into the most useful vehicle to win office at the regional level. The role of central party bureaucracies was further strengthened by the 2004

---

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* p. 269

<sup>90</sup> Kynev, A.: "Party politics in the Russian regions: competition of interest groups under the guise of parties", in Gel'man V., Ross, C. ed. *The politics of sub-national authoritarianism in Russia* (Routledge, London, 2010), p. 140

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p. 140

<sup>92</sup> Semenov, A. "The rationale of organizational control: managing the political opposition in Putin's Russia", *European Political Science* Vol. 20, Issue 4 (2021), p. 585

<sup>93</sup> Kynev, A. 2010, p. 140

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p. 140

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p. 139

electoral reform, which established that the entire membership of the State Duma would be elected with the proportional system starting from the 2007 legislative election.<sup>96</sup>

The reforms on political parties and elections had a clear rationale, according to the Kremlin. Forcing political formations to be present in most of the Federation's territory would weaken separatist sentiments, reduce the fragmentation of the political system (also through the 7% electoral threshold necessary for a parliamentary seat), and thus ensure stability.<sup>97</sup> These declared objectives indicate valid concerns that certainly required attention. Equally evident, however, were the deep effects the reforms had on democratic life in the regional legislatures, many of which displayed genuine multiparty memberships and, indeed, an emerging political opposition in the early 2000s.<sup>98</sup> Now, as Kynev wrote, "a system was formed where the party deputies are totally dependent on the party bureaucracy and the party bureaucracy is totally dependent on state bureaucracy".<sup>99</sup> Despite the ban on regional parties, however, politically strong governors could still threaten the Kremlin's objective of obtaining a majority for United Russia in each regional parliament. In particular, some governors endorsed electoral blocs consisting of the regional branches of minor federal parties, finding preferable to work with a fragmented legislature where *ad hoc* deals could be concluded without the restraints imposed by intra-party politics.<sup>100</sup> In addition, it was not unusual for these blocs to appeal to local sentiment, with names such as "We are for the development of Amur Oblast" or "Our motherland is Arkhangelsk Oblast".<sup>101</sup> Between 2004 and 2005, however, electoral blocs were forbidden by law,<sup>102</sup> and, as we have seen, gubernatorial elections were abolished, exchanged for a system of appointments. Since the appointed governor had to obtain the approval of a majority in

---

<sup>96</sup> Grishin N. 2016, p. 278

<sup>97</sup> Morini, M. 2020, p. 98

<sup>98</sup> Golosov, G. V. 2011, p. 631

<sup>99</sup> Kynev, A. 2010, p. 141

<sup>100</sup> Golosov, G. V. 2011, p. 630

<sup>101</sup> Kynev, A. 2010, p. 144

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p. 144

their region's legislature, a fragmented parliament became a liability, and affiliation with United Russia the safest guarantee of political survival.<sup>103</sup>

After these measures were adopted, the “party of power” was able to virtually monopolise political power throughout the Russian Federation. In 2010 United Russia was the majority faction in 82 out of 83 regional parliaments (in 62 of which it controlled at least two-thirds of the seats), with St. Petersburg being the only exception.<sup>104</sup> While this figure saw a decrease in following years, in 2017 the party could still count on majorities in 78 regional legislatures, as well as counting 75 out of 85 governors, and 86 percent of mayors in cities with over 75,000 residents, among its members.<sup>105</sup> It is important to note, however, that it would be a mistake to deduce that the Kremlin's control was absolute. In fact, certain basic tenets of the relations between the centre and the regions remained constant, if below the surface. During federal elections, the party still had to rely on governors, who quickly understood that delivering a good result for the Kremlin will bring more funds, investments and so-called infrastructural “party projects” (very often sports complexes) to their region.<sup>106</sup> Politically strong regional leaders, furthermore, could sometimes afford to clash with the centre, as was the case in 2009, when Murtaz Rakhimov, leader of Bashkortostan, attacked both the United Russia leadership and the Kremlin itself over the degree of centralisation and the lack of accountability to the region of Duma deputies. Following a visit to the regional capital by deputy head of the presidential administration Vladislav Surkov, Rakhimov was allowed to essentially take control of the party's regional branch.<sup>107</sup> Nor has the “party of power” eliminated factions within the elites, as it is seen in the numerous “party within the party” informal groups that emerge in assemblies where United Russia holds an absolute majority. Occasionally, these factions will identify themselves with their city or region, as was the case with the “Omsk initiative”, to which most members of the

---

<sup>103</sup> Golosov, G. V. 2011, p. 631

<sup>104</sup> Slider, D. 2019, p. 122

<sup>105</sup> Morini, M. 2020, p. 65

<sup>106</sup> Slider, D. 2010, p. 265

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 271-272

city council belonged, or the “Vladivostok bloc”, sponsored by Mayor Vladimir Nikolaev in the Primorsky Krai regional assembly.<sup>108</sup> However, the presence of United Russia, whose “catch-all” approach to elite co-optation has never prioritised ideological uniformity, allows the vast majority of elite infighting to happen behind closed doors instead of the public arena.

It is clear that United Russia was not just a beneficiary of the reforms concerning political parties and the electoral system, but the Kremlin’s chosen tool to manage its candidates, deputies, and officials at the federal, regional, and municipal level, distribute patronage and present a façade of elite co-operation. In Konitzer and Wegren’s words, the party is therefore the “central government’s instrument for deepening and consolidating political centralisation”.<sup>109</sup> While holding very little influence on the executive (Vladimir Putin’s popularity is, after all, the party’s biggest asset), its resources, organisational networks, media coverage across the Federation dwarf those of any other officially registered political party.<sup>110</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that the rules of the game have been deliberately shaped in United Russia’s image.

### **2.1.2. The “systemic” opposition: choices and constraints**

Opposition parties participating in the political institutions of hybrid regimes are sometimes accused of serving the status quo, by providing the semblance of democratic elections and channelling anti-regime opposition into easily manipulated structure. Furthermore, a collaborative opposition will legitimise the government’s most contentious policies, as was the case in Russia when all parties in parliament supported the abolition of gubernatorial elections or the annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>111</sup> This sweeping characterisation of the so-called “systemic” opposition, however, is not useful to

---

<sup>108</sup> Kynev, A. 2010, p. 146

<sup>109</sup> Konitzern, A., Wegren, S. K. 2006, quoted in Golosov, G. V. 2011, p. 637

<sup>110</sup> Morini, M. 2020, p. 64

<sup>111</sup> Grishin N. 2016, p. 276

understand the behaviours of opposition parties in the sub-national level, where they are presented with a different range of choices and challenges.

With the possible exception of the Communist Party of the Russia Federation (KPRF),<sup>112</sup> political parties in Russia generally suffer from a weak presence across the Federation and a lack of ideological identity. The Kremlin's policies in the early 2000s seemed tailored to exacerbate these conditions. As we have seen, the thresholds for registration imposed by law in 2001 constituted a heavy burden for parties without extensive regional networks. Furthermore, the 2003 law establishing proportional party list voting for half the seats in regional assemblies pushed political parties at the centre of the political contest. Thus, despite their newly acquired relevance, regional branches of federal parties were in the paradoxical position of urgently needing financial resources to meet the registration obligation. Unsurprisingly, this turned many of them into little more than promotional vehicles for interest groups or ambitious local politicians with resources at their disposal. This was the case of the Primorsky Krai branch of the "Freedom and Rule of the People" party, which "became in reality the [Krai's] regional party" after falling under the control of former Vladivostok Mayor Viktor Cherepkov, and of the "Party of Social Justice" in Arkhangeslk Oblast, which was taken over by the Titan Forestry Group.<sup>113</sup> In brief, as Kynev wrote, "the formal strengthening of the role of political parties, in fact, led to their internal destruction and loss of identity".<sup>114</sup>

Whether such an ideological identity was an important factor for political parties, in any case, is far from certain. In some cases, the way a political party is founded can already show a feeble ideological profile. The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), founded in 1992 and led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy until his death in 2022, was formed under the auspices of former CPSU and KGB officials.<sup>115</sup> Despite its name, deliberately designed to split the vote of the emerging liberal

---

<sup>112</sup> Morini, M. 2020, p. 68

<sup>113</sup> Kynev, A. 2010, p. 144

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p. 148

<sup>115</sup> Morini, M. 2020, p. 60

parties, the LDPR is often considered the most extremist nationalist party in the Duma.<sup>116</sup> An even more blatant example is the foundation of *Rodina* (i.e., “Motherland”), a left-leaning bloc created by the Kremlin to put pressure on the KPRF’s vote share.<sup>117</sup> In 2006 *Rodina* was merged with the “Party of Life” and the “Pensioners’ Party” to create a new political entity, “A Just Russia”, led by the long-time speaker of the Federation Council, and long-term ally of President Putin, Sergey Mironov.<sup>118</sup> “A Just Russia” was designed to become an “alternative party of power”, with a populist, anti-establishment approach that only went insofar as local elites and United Russia officials, very rarely directed at the federal government and never at the president himself. Indeed, as one commentator declared, the objective of “A Just Russia” “was to have Putin’s influence spread all over the political field”.<sup>119</sup> Notwithstanding its origins, there are reasons to believe that the Kremlin soon came to regret this experiment. As disaffected elites in the regions started joining “A Just Russia”, among them popularly elected mayors and former governors, the party waged active campaigns that highlighted discontent with United Russia.<sup>120</sup> The regional legislative elections between March and April 2007 saw strong results by “A Just Russia”, which became one of the top three largest parties in 12 out of 14 regions and won in Stavropol Krai. The Kremlin’s biggest worry, however, was that “A Just Russia’s” campaigns actually mobilised an electorate that favoured the Communists.<sup>121</sup> Putin’s decision to head the United Russia party list at the September 2007 State Duma elections effectively destroyed A Just Russia’s *raison d’être*, signalling which “party of power” would henceforth be the only acceptable arena for intra-elite conflicts.

The Communist Party (KPRF) is usually identified as the only opposition party in Russia with a mass membership and well-established territorial branches across the Federation.<sup>122</sup> It is also the

---

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* p. 60

<sup>117</sup> March, L.: “Managing opposition in a hybrid regime: Just Russia and parastatal opposition”, *Slavic Review* Vol. 68, Issue 3 (2009), p. 513

<sup>118</sup> Morini, M. 2020, p. 68

<sup>119</sup> March, L. 2009, p. 514

<sup>120</sup> Golosov, G. V. 2011, p. 634

<sup>121</sup> March, L. 2009, p. 519

<sup>122</sup> Morini, M. 2020, p. 68

party that most often supports street protest actions of various character, including those with a strictly local character.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, in 1996 it became the only party, to this day, to force an incumbent to a run-off in a presidential election. In the face of the developments of the early 2000s, however, the apparently strong ideological stance of the KPRF was shown to be faltering. The increasing authoritarian character of the Russian government meant that the Communist Party, which in the 1990s could count on a sizable share of its own elected governors, found itself in a particularly vulnerable position in the regions. Most of the governors in the so-called “red belt” of the 1990s joined United Russia in the 2000s,<sup>124</sup> and those who didn’t made sure to openly disavow their party’s ideology, instead trying to fit into the technocratic profile that the Kremlin desired from its governors. A textbook case was Nikolay Maksyuta, governor of Volgograd Oblast from 1997 to 2010, who despite its KPRF membership preferred to be recognised for his pragmatism rather than ideology and included top managers of oil giant LUKOIL in his administration.<sup>125</sup> In other cases, an “oppositional” governor could create his own party of electoral bloc, giving it a centrist outlook that distanced its leader from the KPRF’s stance. This was the choice of Vasily Starodubtsev, governor of Tula Oblast from 1997 to 2005,<sup>126</sup> a notable case given his credentials as a member of the Committee on the State of Emergency during the 1991 coup attempt.

An important reason why the choices made opposition parties can appear contradictory or complacent is that the government’s actions towards it are difficult to predict. Broadly speaking, the ruling regime can swing between repression and co-optation of the opposition. In the first case, whose frequency and impact should not be underestimated, potentially strong opposition candidates are excluded through a combination of coercion and legal means. In this sense, the re-introduction of gubernatorial elections in 2012 did not lead to a significant increase in the regions’ democratic life,

---

<sup>123</sup> Semenov, A. “Electoral performance and mobilization of opposition parties in Russia”, *Russian Politics* Vol. 5, Issue 2 (2020), p. 243

<sup>124</sup> Semenov, A. 2021, p. 585

<sup>125</sup> Turovsky, R. “Opposition parties in hybrid regimes: between repression and co-optation: the case of Russia’s regions”, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* Vol. 15, Issue 1 (2014), pp. 81-82

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83

since candidates are required by law to collect signatures from a range of 5 to 10 percent of municipal deputies, coming from at least three-quarters of the region's towns and districts.<sup>127</sup> This so-called "municipal filter" gives United Russia full discretion over which candidates to admit at the election, and in any case precedes the more informal, yet arguably more important, "presidential filter", which gives the president the right to "consult" with the candidates.<sup>128</sup> It is little surprise that it was only in 2015 that the opposition won its first gubernatorial contest since before the elections' suspension, when Sergey Levchenko, a member of the KPRF, was elected governor of Irkutsk Oblast. Even in the presence of competitive elections, however, victories for the opposition can easily lead to political instability, with the threat of forcible removal hanging over local officials. Especially between 2007 and 2011, the period coinciding with Putin's tenure as Prime Minister and leader of United Russia, an intense campaign of repression against the opposition's elected mayors took place.<sup>129</sup> This "mopping-up operation" led to the dismissal of 90 percent of mayors belonging to the opposition, including those of Arkhangelsk, Smolensk, Murmansk, Stavropol, and Volgograd (this latter despite having joined United Russia while in office). By comparison, only 10 percent of United Russia's mayors were forced to resign during the same period.<sup>130</sup> Under these conditions, it is unsurprising that the opposition parties' central offices (which, as we have seen, were strengthened vis-à-vis their regional branches) often refuse to field strong candidates for regional elections. This was particularly evident during the 2014-2015 gubernatorial elections, as the KPRF chose to withdraw from elections in regions whose capitals had recently elected communist mayors, including Novosibirsk, Volgograd and Nenets Autonomous Okrug.<sup>131</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Turovsky, R.: "The systemic opposition in authoritarian regimes: a case study of Russian regions", in Ross C. ed. *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation. Civil Society Awakens?* (New York, Routledge, 2016), p. 122

<sup>128</sup> Starodubtsev, A. 2018, p. 54

<sup>129</sup> Grishin, N. 2016, p. 281

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* p. 281

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* p. 284



If, as one scholar wrote, “[i]t was centralized political parties that created the sterilization of the gubernatorial elections”,<sup>132</sup> one must understand the other tactics used by the ruling party that lead to the opposition’s self-defeating behaviour. That is, co-optation into the power system, through the distribution of patronage or political positions. Since the final years of the Medvedev presidency, the ruling party has frequently adopted the practice of awarding political offices to the opposition in the regions, making them vice-presidents, chairmen or vice-chairmen of the legislature, and heads of committees.<sup>133</sup> Thus, United Russia creates a system of incentives for the opposition to participate in the regions’ politics from a subordinate position, since executive positions are for the vast majority precluded. Furthermore, by choosing to reward certain parties and side-line others, the ruling party encourages the opposition parties to compete among themselves for political spoils and funds. Since 2008, when Medvedev appointed Nikita Belykh, a former member of the Union of Right Forces, governor of Kirov Oblast, the opposition is sometimes rewarded with a gubernatorial position.<sup>134</sup> Thus, in 2012 the Liberal Democratic Party’s Alexey Ostrovsky became the governor of Smolensk, a position he occupies to this day. In 2013 “A Just Russia” received the leadership of Zabaykalsky Krai, and the Communist Party that of Oryol Oblast (the native region of its leader Gennady Zyuganov) in 2014. In any case, the political affiliation of a governor does not change the expectation that during federal elections the priority should be the delivery of votes to United Russia and President Putin. During the years of gubernatorial appointments, a failure in this task was the most quoted reason in the media when explaining a governor’s dismissal or missed re-appointment.<sup>135</sup> More recently, the lead-up to the 2018 presidential election saw a high number of governors’ resignation, as well as five jailed former regional heads, among whom was former Kirov governor Nikita Belykh.

---

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* p. 283

<sup>133</sup> Turovsky, R. 2014, p. 74

<sup>134</sup> Slider, D. 2019, p. 126

<sup>135</sup> Moses, J. C. 2014, p. 1400

These shake-ups were widely interpreted as President Putin securing support across the federal subjects, with little regard for the political colour of their leader.<sup>136</sup>

In conclusion, despite their visibility, the role played by political parties in Russia cannot actually be considered central. If United Russia has been the federal government's tool for manoeuvring among different elite factions and gain control of each level of the "vertical of power", the parties of the so-called "systemic" opposition have contributed to deepen the federal centre's penetration into the regions, by deliberately weakening their local branches and accepting the spoils of power awarded to them by the ruling party. It is worth mentioning that while the government's reforms aimed at strengthening central party bureaucracies at the expense of their regional representatives had a deep impact (especially the law "On the basic guarantees of electoral rights and the 2004 electoral reform), the relations between centre and periphery were a contentious topic even before Putin's rise to power. After the 1996 presidential election, and especially during the 2000s, tensions were often high between KPRF governors and the party's leader Zyuganov.<sup>137</sup> Even the most authentically liberal opposition party, Grigory Yavlinsky's "Yabloko", had already opted for a highly centralised command structure that left very little discretion to regional branches in the late 1990s,<sup>138</sup> long before the federal government began using political parties as weapons against the regions. At the same time, even a "systemic" opposition acting more as an auxiliary of the government than as competitor creates a certain amount of uncertainty during the electoral process. As we will see, in 2018 a virtually non-existent campaign by the Liberal Democratic Party in Khabarovsk did not stop a wave of protest voting from carrying its candidate to victory against United Russia's incumbent. Furthermore, while the two "filters" can be used to exclude threatening candidates from running in local elections, incumbents might be tempted to admit potentially strong adversaries to increase the legitimacy of their own victory at the polls. It was in such an instance that Alexei Navalny was able

---

<sup>136</sup> Slider, D. 2019, p. 125

<sup>137</sup> Turovsky, R. 2014, p. 80

<sup>138</sup> Hale, H.: "Yabloko and the challenge of building a liberal party in Russia", *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 56, Issue 7 (2004), p. 1005

to assert himself as the most visible opposition leader in Russia, as he was allowed to take part in the 2013 mayoral elections in Moscow and gather a strong 27 percent of the vote despite the one-sided media coverage and the precarious conditions of his campaign.<sup>139</sup> Even if “systemic”, the political opposition could yet find itself facilitating unexpected shocks to the system.

## **2.2. The role and space for civil society in the “vertical of power”**

In the years following the Soviet Union’s demise, the new Russian Federation saw a boom of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) of many different kinds. Some of them, mostly centred around human rights, women’s rights and environmental issues found a particularly receptive audience abroad, attracting large quantities of funds.<sup>140</sup> Others worked to compensate for the shortcomings of the state in the 1990s in the social sphere, as well as the problems that accompanied the economic transition to capitalism. These included organisations providing assistance to homeless people, drug addicts, abused women or orphans, as well as associations fighting corruption and electoral malpractice.<sup>141</sup> Finally, in perhaps the most symbolic shift from the Soviet era, independent trade unions, and rivalries between them, started to appear from the mid-1990s.<sup>142</sup> Since the early 2000s, however, the centralisation push from Moscow, and the gradual reduction of space available to the opposition, has not spared civil society, which was soon confronted with a choice that would not have been unfamiliar to anti-government parties: be co-opted into the Kremlin’s brand of corporatism, or risk irrelevance by remaining on the side-lines.

---

<sup>139</sup> Slider, D. 2019, p. 125

<sup>140</sup> Stuvøy, K.: “The foreign within’: State-Civil Society relations in Russia”, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 72, Issue 7 (2020), p. 1107

<sup>141</sup> Zafesova, A.: “La Società civile: tra progresso e ostacoli”, in Aragona, G. ed. *La Russia post-sovietica. Dalla caduta del comunismo a Putin: storia della grande transizione* (ISPI, 2018), p. 57

<sup>142</sup> Traub-Merz, R., Gerasimova, E.: “Trade Unions in Russia – Between Survival and Subordination”, in Traub-Merz, R., Pringle, T. ed. *Trade Unions in Transition. From Command to Market Economies* (Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, Berlin, 2018), p. 167

From the mid-2000s, the Russian government under Vladimir Putin began taking steps to tame civil society organisations into becoming essentially an auxiliary network controlled by the state. After a tentative start with the 2001 Civil Forum, at which thousands of activists from nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) met with Putin and top Kremlin officials, in January 2006 the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation was established, providing an institutional venue for the representation of civil society interests. However, working more as a “talking shop” than a policy-making assembly, the influence of the Public Chamber has been described as extremely limited.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, mirroring the centralisation of political power in the capital during the first two mandates of Putin’s presidency, only a third of the Chamber’s representatives are elected by NGO assemblies at the regional level, with the remaining members having been directly or indirectly nominated by the president.<sup>144</sup> A more subtle outcome of the Public Chamber has been to sharpen the division between civil society within the political system, with access to funding and visibility, and that remaining outside. The legislation adopted from the mid-2000s has also worked towards this fragmentation. A 2006 law increasing the reporting requirements for NGOs strained their resources by imposing additional bureaucratic hurdles to their activities.<sup>145</sup> In 2012, most notably, organisations receiving funding from foreign sources have been required to register as “foreign agents”, a label which leads to additional, often selective, scrutiny by the Ministry of Justice, tasked with keeping the list of such organisations.<sup>146</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the “foreign agents” law has been a particularly effective weapon to sever the links between civil society and the political opposition, for whom the label would be particularly toxic. Even more so from 2020, when the scope of the “foreign agent” label was expanded to include individuals as well as organisations.<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>143</sup> Belokurova, E.: “NGOs and politics in Russian regions”, in Gel’man V. and Ross, C. ed. *The politics of sub-national authoritarianism in Russia* (Routledge, New York, 2016), pp. 115-116

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* p. 116

<sup>145</sup> Evans, A. B.: “Civil society and protests in Russia”, in Ross C. ed. *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation. Civil Society Awakens?* (Routledge, New York, 2016), p. 19

<sup>146</sup> Semenov A. 2021, p. 588

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* p. 588

With regards to organised labour, the state has also deployed a similar tactic of divide-and-rule, rewarding its partners and side-lining smaller actors. The largest trade union is the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), considered the successor of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions of Soviet times. Closely allied with the Kremlin at the federal level,<sup>148</sup> it benefits from a Labour Code, adopted in 2001, that effectively cements its hegemonic position vis-à-vis the alternative, generally more militant, trade unions. Unlike regional political parties, which were banned by the laws of the early 2000s, trade unions can exist on an exclusively local scale, formed as a consequence of local contentions or labour strikes. However, the Code only allows for primary organizations of federal trade unions to be recognised in collective agreement negotiations.<sup>149</sup> Furthermore, the Code requires a joint negotiating team, to be created in enterprises where more than one union is present. If the unions cannot agree to form such a team, the largest union (in the vast majority of cases the FNPR) receives the automatic right to represent all employees at the negotiating table.<sup>150</sup> In practice, this gives the FNPR “an inbuilt power to exclude rival unions from participating in bargaining”,<sup>151</sup> since it only needs to refuse collaboration with smaller unions to push them into irrelevance. It is worth noting that it was the FNPR leadership itself that insisted on the inclusion of this “majority clause” in the Labour Code, before granting its approval.<sup>152</sup>

If at the federal level a role has been carved out for civil society, albeit at the expense of its independence, at the subnational level the involvement of NGOs as advisors in policymaking is entirely at the discretion of regional and local administrations. This, however, can sometime leave civil society with more influence and room to move, since the implementation of restrictive NGO laws is also a responsibility of regional authorities. As shown in a study by Belokurova, the extent of

---

<sup>148</sup> Crowley, S., Olimpieva, I.: “Labor Protests and Their Consequences in Putin’s Russia”, *Problems of Post-Communism* Volume 65, Issue 5 (2018), p. 349

<sup>149</sup> Robertson, G. A.: *The politics of protests in hybrid regimes: managing dissent in post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 151

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* p. 151

<sup>151</sup> Traub-Merz, R., Gerasimova, E. 2018, p. 177

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* p. 178

NGO involvement in local policymaking generally depends on a set of factors.<sup>153</sup> Already in the 1990s, some regional administrations entered into partnerships with local NGOs, in order to benefit from their expertise, acquired also through the international networks they had recently joined, and to attract funds from the West.<sup>154</sup> Conversely, such funding was especially directed at those regions where the implementation of democratisation and free-market reforms seemed more promising, as shown by the international attention given to Nizhny Novgorod under the governorship of Boris Nemtsov.<sup>155</sup> Most importantly, between the mid 1990s and the early 2000s, NGOs became especially instrumental in regions experiencing political instability, often in the form of a conflict between the regional capital's mayor and the governor. Where this happened, as was the case in Kaliningrad, Pskov, and the Republic of Karelia, cooperation between NGOs and the administration could turn into an established practice, outliving the political conflicts that had facilitated it in the first place.<sup>156</sup> In other cases, NGOs were sought for their expertise in social policies and the most efficient ways to implement them. This was the case in the city of Perm in the late 1990s, which was translated on the regional level when the capital's mayor won the 2000 gubernatorial elections.<sup>157</sup>

Despite these cases, the impact of civil society in regional politics, as well as their freedom therein, should not be overstated. The semi-authoritarian nature of numerous regional regimes makes NGOs vulnerable to being selectively targeted for inspections, bureaucratic hurdles, and legal pressure from regional administrations as much as those working on the federal level.<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, policies such as the abolition of gubernatorial elections, the imposition of city managers instead of elected mayors and the co-optation of subnational authorities into the “vertical of power”, have significantly reduced the space in which civil society could assert itself. Whether at the federal or at

---

<sup>153</sup> Belokurova, E. 2016, p. 110

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* p. 114

<sup>155</sup> Mommen, A.: “Boris Nemtsov, 1959-2015. Rise and fall of a provincial democrat”, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* Vol. 24, Issue 1 (2016), pp. 13-14

<sup>156</sup> Belokurova, E. 2016, p. 110

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* p. 117

the subnational level, it is safe to conclude that the scope for civil society to act as an opposition to power has been severely circumscribed. As the next section will therefore show, in the absence of organisational channels for collective demands, be they political parties or civil associations, street actions such as demonstrations, strikes or protests have become a last, fragmented resort for the expression of discontent.

### **2.3. Street protests in the regions: issues, geography, and significance**

The lack of democratisation in regional politics, the diminishing importance of the federal subjects in the national arena, and the co-optation into the power system of a large share of opposition parties and civil society organisations, have led to street demonstrations, such as protests and strikes, representing a last resort for citizens to express dissatisfaction with the authorities. Despite their inevitably confrontational nature, the authorities' responses to street actions have been varied, leading some scholar to write that protests in Russia "have emerged as a tolerable avenue for collective claim-making".<sup>159</sup> While images of violent repressions of anti-Putin protests in Moscow are the most widely reported abroad, a growing body of observers is indicating street politics outside the capital as the most useful object of study to understand the role of demonstrations in contemporary Russia. Indeed, as Lankina and Voznaya write, "neglect of the regional dimension of protests obscures important trends in protest dynamics, which may incrementally contribute to systemic political change".<sup>160</sup> Determining the root causes, geographical patterns, and political significance of protests, however, is a harder task.

Since the end of the Soviet Union, Russians have protested for a wide variety of causes. Responding to the most immediate concerns, the majority of demonstrations during the 1990s

---

<sup>159</sup> Clardie, J.: "Protests in Russia's regions: The influence of regional governance", *Social Science Quarterly* Vol. 103, Issue 1 (2022), p. 7

<sup>160</sup> Lankina, T., Voznaya, A. "New data on protest trends in Russia's regions", *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 67, Issue 2 (2015), p. 328

revolved around economic issues, most frequently on a local scale. Alongside the economic difficulties experienced by Russia during the decade, especially around the 1998 default, the fragmentation of political power led to governors themselves instigating and facilitating workers' strikes, hoping to increase their own bargaining power with the centre. As pointed out by Robertson, the high levels of strikes experienced in regions such as Primorsky Krai, Khabarovsk Krai, the Republic of Sakha, Krasnoyarsk Krai or Kemerovo Oblast, can be partially explained by their low leverage vis-à-vis the federal centre, whereas it was more unlikely for politically sensitive regions, especially those at risk of ethnic polarisations, to show a high propensity for protest actions.<sup>161</sup> It is also for this reason that the 1990s saw frequent displays of extreme forms of protest, such as hostage-taking of managers, hunger strikes, seizures of factories by workers, and the 1998 "rail wars", in which coal miners blockaded major railways.<sup>162</sup> Between 1997 and 1998, furthermore, at least thirty cases of self-immolations connected with labour protests were reported by the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>163</sup> In a textbook case of regional authorities flexing their muscles, in 1997 Governor Nazdratenko of Primorsky Krai provided transportation to submarine repair workers on strike blockading a railroad in the town Bolshoy Kamen, and then paid a Moscow-based television channel to cover the protests.<sup>164</sup>

Against theoretical expectation of labour protests increasing during periods of economic prosperity, Russian workers' propensity for demonstrations has been described as "counter-cyclical", showing a higher intensity during economic downturns.<sup>165</sup> A likely explanation is that the Russian government has gone to extreme lengths, from extreme wage adjustments to heavily subsidizing inefficient industries, in order to avoid mass layoffs during times of crisis. Indeed, from the 1990s until today a large share of labour protests in Russia has precisely been caused by wage arrears.

---

<sup>161</sup> Robertson, G. A. 2011, pp. 68-84

<sup>162</sup> Crowley, S., Olimpieva, I. 2018, p. 348

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* p. 348

<sup>164</sup> Robertson, G. A. 2011, pp. 78-79

<sup>165</sup> Crowley, S., Olimpieva, I. 2018, p. 345



Despite the non-political nature of these demonstrations' demands, the government's frequent portrayal of the Russian industrial heartland as the main source of support for Putin forces the Kremlin to tread carefully.<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, while, as we have seen, the largest Russian trade union keeps a close relationship with the government at the federal level, its regional branches, which by definition work at closer contact with the disputes themselves, have occasionally shown some autonomy. Between 2008 and 2009 the town of Pikalyovo, in Leningrad Oblast, saw a series of protests that attracted wide attention in the country. As one of the numerous "monotowns", whose economy is based around few, closely related industrial activities, the town was particularly vulnerable to the economic crisis that hit Russia, and the world at large, in 2008-2009. Facing bankruptcy and mass layoffs of workers, local trade unions affiliated with the FNPR took the lead in organising the demonstrations, which at different times included blockading the highway into the town, holding officially authorised rallies and, most notably, the storming of the city hall during a meeting on the crisis' effects at which none of the workers' representatives had been invited.<sup>167</sup> The turmoil ended only after Putin himself, then in his capacity as Prime Minister, visited the town, chastised local officials, and promised subsidies for the industries.<sup>168</sup>

The case of Pikalyovo is emblematic for different reasons. First, it shows that protests based on economic issues have the highest success rate, especially when they coalesce around a union of professionals from the same trade or industry. Second, it is significant for its resolution, not through institutional channels or dialogue with the local authorities, but through an *ad hoc* intervention from the top of the federal government. If on one side this creates a buffer between the protesters and the Kremlin, now able to blame mismanagement on officials at the lower floors of the "vertical of power", on the other it risks radicalising local demonstrations in cases where a resolution is not readily available. In late 2015, truck drivers across Russia began protesting against an increase in road tariffs,

---

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.* p. 353

<sup>167</sup> Kulaev, M. "Russian trade unions and the de-escalation of protests in Russian regions", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* (2020), available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10767-020-09369-1>

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

initially under the slogan of “president, help us!”.<sup>169</sup> Their demands being unsatisfied, in March 2017 over half a million truckers went on strike, this time asking for “the resignation of the government and no-confidence in the president”.<sup>170</sup> A similar escalation was seen in the long series of demonstrations in the monotown of Gukovo, in Rostov Oblast, sparked by the 2015 bankruptcy of “Kingcoal Ltd”, the town’s main employer, and the salaries it had failed to pay its miners since 2013. Starting with pleas for the president’s intervention, it was only after a hunger strike in the summer of 2016 that the Kremlin began paying the wage arrears.<sup>171</sup>

Labour protests deserve attention because of their frequency and the seemingly privileged position they occupy in the Kremlin’s view. In recent years, however, local protests of a different kind have also attracted Putin’s attention. Environmental concerns are not entirely new in Russia. In early 2006 activists throughout the country voiced their opposition to a planned oil pipeline in the proximity of Lake Baikal, and after a series of mass gatherings in Irkutsk, Putin announced that the pipeline’s route would be changed.<sup>172</sup> Less successfully, between 2008 and 2010 plans for a new highway passing through Khimki forest, in the outskirts of Moscow, met tenacious protests by local citizens. Due to a combination of the ecologists’ effective tactics and the proximity to the capital, the protests were widely reported on local media, and were received favourably by a number of prominent politicians, including the speaker of the Federation Council Sergey Mironov.<sup>173</sup> Eventually, however, the government pushed ahead with the plans for the highway, after making certain concessions that divided the forest’s defenders. Like the truck drivers’ strike and the miners in Gukovo, by the time Medvedev made his final decision the protests had escalated both in scope and in tones. After hearing the president’s announcement, Yevgeniya Chirikova, who had started and led the movement to

---

<sup>169</sup> Crowley, S., Olimpieva, I. 2018, p. 352

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* p. 352

<sup>171</sup> Ferris-Rotman, A.: “Keep Your Eyes on the Protests in Russia’s Provinces”, *Foreign Policy* (April 28, 2017), available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/28/keep-your-eyes-on-the-protests-in-russias-provinces-putin/>

<sup>172</sup> Evans, A. B.: “Protests and civil society in Russia: The struggle for the Khimki Forest”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* Vol. 45, Issue 3-4 (2012), p. 237

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.* p. 235

preserve the forest, declared that “[they were] beginning the political struggle, and [they would] insist on the replacement of the political order”.<sup>174</sup>

In hindsight, however, the most notable element of the Khimki protests was that Chirikova was not a long-time environmental activist. Instead, as she herself said, she had been a passive citizen “until they touched my forest”.<sup>175</sup> In this sense, she may have been a predecessor of a more recent phenomenon. With the bulk of civil society organisations having been incorporated by the state, a new, seemingly spontaneous pattern of demonstrations has emerged in the last few years. While these protests can be broadly defined as ecological, they actually consist in the active protection, by local citizens, of their community’s living environments against interference by the state. As Kolesnikov writes, “[a] growing part of society is developing civic consciousness as a result of non-political conflicts in which entities supported by the authorities intrude into ordinary people’s private space”.<sup>176</sup> This, he argues, has led to the formation of a kind of “backyard sovereignty”,<sup>177</sup> which can take the shape of opposition to urban replanning and constructions, or protection of a natural environment. In a well-documented example of the former, to which the next chapter is dedicated, citizens of Yekaterinburg protested against the planned construction of a cathedral that would have eliminated a well-loved public green space in the summer of 2019. The following year, Bashkortostan saw large-scale protests erupting in defence of the Kushtau mountains, an important ecological habitat for protected species as well as a site of rich emotional significance for local Bashkirs, against a planned mining project by the Bashkir Soda Company, which had been approved by the regional authorities.<sup>178</sup> These two cases show striking similarities: an initial violent response by regional

---

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.* p. 236

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.* p. 238

<sup>176</sup> Kolesnikov, A.: “Russians find new ways to protest”, *The Moscow Times* (May 9, 2019), available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/02/russians-find-new-ways-to-protest-a65467>

<sup>177</sup> Kolesnikov, A.: “Protests in Russia: Between Civil Society and political opposition”, *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)* (November 9, 2020), available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/protests-russia-between-civil-society-and-political-opposition-28047>

<sup>178</sup> Clardie, J. 2022, p. 5

authorities, aided by private security firms, followed by a direct intervention by President Putin, taking a position that would satisfy the protesters and, at least, put the contention on hold.

Perhaps underestimating the protesters' political awareness, one scholar has described Putin's response to the street actions as "a 21<sup>st</sup> century variant of 'if only the Tsar knew'"<sup>179</sup>, indicating a notion that sees the head of state as righteous and on the people's side, with injustices being instead perpetrated by local officials without his knowledge. It is certainly true, and not without justification, that the immediate target of these protests are local authorities, most often governors. Furthermore, because they are motivated more by policies, rather than politics, the demonstrators often walk a fine line between denouncing the system and calling for the president's assistance. Nevertheless, just like labour protests can become politicised, some of the issues raised by the demonstrators, such as the corruption of local officials and their lack of accountability to the local communities, could easily spill over into the political arena. Nor is their local character always an obstacle: in Arkhangelsk Oblast people had been protesting since August 2018 against a planned landfill in the small town of Shiyes, whose purpose would be to process waste from Moscow. By early 2019 not only were at least 2,000 people taking part in a march calling for the governor's resignation, but "Moscow's garbage problem" had inspired rallies in thirty other regions where similar facilities were being planned, under the slogan "Russia is not a dump".<sup>180</sup> The impression is that while this "backyard sovereignty" brand of civic protests is unlikely to upend the political system in the short term, it is well placed to begin weakening the "vertical of power" from below. In this sense, Putin's ad hoc interventions appear to be more improvisation than policy choices that could be viable in the long term.

If regional protest movements fighting local battles have not yet proved themselves to be an immediate threat to the Kremlin, it is generally agreed that they are more effective in establishing a profitable dialogue with the authorities and achieving their objectives than demonstrations calling for

---

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9

<sup>180</sup> Pagani, C.: "The fragmentation of Russia's discontent", Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) (November 4, 2019), available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/fragmentation-russias-discontent-24315>

political rights and democratisation, most often taking place in the capital and other large cities.<sup>181</sup> The 2011-2012 mass protests, so-called “for fair elections”, taking place in the aftermath of the State Duma election were indeed of a unprecedentedly large scale, with as many as 200,000 protesters reportedly attending the rallies in December 2011.<sup>182</sup> They also took the Kremlin, as well as external observers, by surprise, and should take the credit for leading President Medvedev to introduce a series of liberalising measures, including on political parties’ registrations and the reintroduction of gubernatorial elections (albeit, as we have seen, with severe restriction that essentially neutralise threatening candidacies). Some scholars were quick to hypothesise a shift in protest dynamics in Russia, from the economic demands of provincial mobilisations to the political revindications of the urban middle classes.<sup>183</sup> Similarly, others spoke of “two Russias”, of which “the first ... is populated with sophisticated internet-using urbanities in large metropolises like Moscow and St Petersburg; and the second serves as a home to a different socio-economic constituency, which may not be supportive of political protest activism occurring in the cities of national significance”.<sup>184</sup> While certainly simplistic, these definitions do point to a hard truth for the Russian opposition: as long as the social base of support for politically motivated protests remains small, the lack of unity between the capital cities and the regions eventually leads to the urban protests exhausting themselves. Once the number of protesters began declining, the Kremlin’s political system was well equipped to absorb the threat that the movement could have posed. While some members of “systemic” opposition parties, namely the KPRF and “A Just Russia”, had, for the first time, joined forces with the street protests in December, in the spring of 2012 their leadership ultimately opted against this, suspecting, most likely with good reason, that the “systemic” opposition forces had little to gain from a victory of the

---

<sup>181</sup> See for example Evans, A. B. 2012, Clardie, J. 2022, Lankina, T. and Voznaya, A. 2015

<sup>182</sup> Gel'man, V. “Political opposition in Russia: a troubled transformation”, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 67, Issue 2 (2015), p. 182

<sup>183</sup> Dmitriev, M. “Lost in transition? The geography of protests and attitude change in Russia”, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 67, Issue 2 (2015), p. 225

<sup>184</sup> Lankina, T., Voznaya, A. 2015, p. 329

protesters.<sup>185</sup> Meanwhile, the “non-systemic” forces’ attempt to organise itself into a permanent “Coordinating Council of the Opposition”, with 45 elected members and an equal share of seats guaranteed for liberals, leftists, and nationalist activists, ultimately produced very little of relevance, and was disbanded in October 2013.<sup>186</sup>

This chapter has sought to show that understanding relations between power and opposition in Russia is impossible without taking into consideration the sub-national dimension. On one side the Kremlin has made control over the regions, through the so-called “vertical of power”, the bedrock of its increasingly authoritarian grip on power. This was achieved especially through its use of political parties, both United Russia and the parliamentary opposition, to open regional power systems to more centralised control. With its approach to civil society, alternating repression and co-optation in different degrees according to the region, it has further reduced the risk of well-organised movements rising against the federal or regional authority. However, as the last section has illustrated, organised dissent has not disappeared. This is remarkable in itself, since after the failure of the 2011-2012 mass demonstrations in Moscow, this dissent has had to evolve under extremely restricting conditions. Despite their relatively small scale, it is in the study of local protest movements that one can hope to identify where the biggest threat to Putin’s system of power could come from in a not too distant future.

---

<sup>185</sup> Tertychnaya, K.: “Protests and voter defections in electoral autocracies: evidence from Russia”, *Comparative Political Studies* Vol. 53, Issue 12 (2020), p. 1933

<sup>186</sup> Gel’man, V. 2015, p. 183

### **3. Yekaterinburg: a victory for Russia's protest city**

On May 13, 2019, a hastily organized march to protest against the construction of a cathedral on the site of a popular public garden near the river in Yekaterinburg turned into a confrontation between opposing camps, at times violent, that lasted over a week. On May 22 the governor of Sverdlovsk Oblast Yevgeny Kuyvashev announced that, after conducting a public opinion poll requested by President Putin himself, the decision had been taken to move the cathedral's future site to a location still to be determined, essentially putting the construction plan on hold. The apparent success of the protesters' cause has been attributed, similarly to other instances of public protests across the Russian Federation, to the scarcity of overtly political slogans during the marches. While this may be an accurate observation when the analysis is limited to the May 2019 events, this chapter will conversely show that the eruption of public discontent in Yekaterinburg has a long prelude, the roots of which are deeply political. Tracing developments in Sverdlovsk Oblast since the end of the Soviet Union, it will be revealed that the regional elites' different attitudes towards the federal government have created the condition for the incubation of a political culture that is much livelier and more consequential than it can be said for the vast majority of Russia's federal subjects. In this context, the city of Yekaterinburg has often played the role of a rebellious city within a rebellious region, opposing the regional authorities just as the latter opposed the federal ones. In spite of the apparent reconciliation that ended the protests, the chapter will conclude that the May 2019 events were emblematic of the pitfalls that can happen when the Kremlin's power vertical finds itself overreaching.

#### **3.1. Sverdlovsk Oblast: a pathbreaker in regionalism**

During the first formative years of the Russian Federation in the early 1990s, the regional leaders of Sverdlovsk Oblast played an important role in establishing what kind of federalism would

prevail during the years of the Yeltsin presidency. Despite not being a federal subject constructed around a non-Russian ethnic majority, or perhaps because of it, Sverdlovsk Oblast led the charge in demanding autonomy from the federal centre, opening a path that would be followed by a high number of regions in the late 1990s.

In several ways, the situation of Sverdlovsk Oblast, and the city of Yekaterinburg in particular, that emerged from the end of the Cold War was an ambiguous one. With an economy heavily based on the metallurgical sector, most of which was property of the military-industrial complex, Yekaterinburg found itself in a vulnerable position once the Soviet state and its protection from international markets ended.<sup>187</sup> Between January 1993 and September 1994 manufacturing production in the Oblast as a whole fell by 25 percent, a figure which rose to 55 percent with regards to light industry.<sup>188</sup> In the context of the highly centrifugal regional-centre relations of the 1990s, however, two main factors contributed to give Sverdlovsk a good hand vis-à-vis the federal government. First, the region was after all one of the most productive for the extraction of natural resources, in particular iron, aluminium, nickel and copper, and could count on a well-accumulated expertise at processing them, making the Oblast an attractive destination for investments.<sup>189</sup> Second, during the Soviet years Sverdlovsk had been an important training ground of sorts for ambitious politicians. This was the case of the former chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers Nikolai Ryzhkov, who had rose to prominence as the director of the important Uralmash machine-building complex and, much more importantly, Boris Yeltsin himself, who in 1976 had been nominated first secretary of the Communist Party's regional branch.<sup>190</sup> In the late 1980s, as Yeltsin staged a political comeback that eventually carried him to the presidency of the Russian Federation, he was therefore

---

<sup>187</sup> Kolossov, V., Eckert, D.: "Russian regional capitals as new international actors: the case of Yekaterinburg and Rostov", *Belgeo. Revue belge de géographie* Issue 1, 2007 (January 1, 2007; available online since December 9, 2013), available at: <https://journals-openedition-org.proxy.bnl.lu/belgeo/11686>

<sup>188</sup> Easter, G. M.: "Redefining centre-regional relations in the Russian Federation: Sverdlovsk Oblast", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 49, Issue 4 (1997), pp. 618-619

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.* p. 618

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.* p. 618



personally acquainted with, and supported by, several prominent members of the regional elite. His relations with one of them, the former head of the Main Directorate for Construction for the Central Urals Eduard Rossel, would prove instrumental in determining the position of Sverdlovsk Oblast within the recently constituted Federation.

The history of Sverdlovsk's Oblast support for the so-called "democratic movement", which later became the bedrock of Yeltsin's political success, began as early as January 1988, when the first anti-Soviet opposition groups started to appear in the region.<sup>191</sup> The following year the Movement for Democratic Choice was created, later turning into an important regional branch of Democratic Russia. In 1990 candidates from the democratic movement scored a number of victories in national and local elections, receiving 60 out of 200 seats in the Yekaterinburg (still called Sverdlovsk at this time) city Soviet. Most importantly, out of a Sverdlovsk constituency came the election of Yeltsin as a people's deputy in the Russian Republic's soviet, at the same time as Eduard Rossel became the chairman of the Oblast's legislature.<sup>192</sup> The Oblast's unequivocal support of Yeltsin during the August 1991 attempted coup was probably instrumental in the nomination of Rossel as head of administration (the position which later became the governorship).

From said position Rossel soon began advocating for economic devolution, against the existing, heavily centralized structure of the Russian state. Further aggravating the regional elite, Sverdlovsk's comparatively favourable economic situation led to the Oblast being assigned the "highest donor" status by the Ministry of Finance, meaning that around three quarters of taxes collected in the region would be transferred to Moscow to be reallocated to the poorer federal subjects in the form of transfers or subsidies.<sup>193</sup> This infuriated the local leadership, whose feelings were well summarized by Anatoli Grebenkin, Rossel's successor as chairman of the regional Soviet, who accused the federal government of turning "one of the most important regions in the state into a

---

<sup>191</sup> Gel'man, V., Golosov, G. V.: "Regional party system formation in Russia: the deviant case of Sverdlovsk Oblast", *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* Vol. 14, Issue 1-2 (1998), p. 33

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.* p. 33

<sup>193</sup> Easter, G. M. 1997, p. 621

colonial appendage”.<sup>194</sup> By 1993 Rossel’s objective was to turn Sverdlovsk Oblast into a “Urals Republic”, since within the Russian Federation the national republics had been granted special deals that allowed them to keep most of the taxes raised within their borders. In October 1993, as Yeltsin’s preoccupations were focused on the constitutional crisis’ aftermath (a crisis in which, once again, the Sverdlovsk regional elite stood firmly behind its native son in Moscow), Rossel saw the opportunity to move forward with the institution of the Urals Republic. On October 27 the regional Soviet approved a constitution, and five days later the governor proclaimed the Republic into existence, receiving the public support of several political leaders from neighbouring Kurgan, Chelyabinsk, Perm and Orenburg regions.<sup>195</sup> Rossel’s move, while certainly moved by economic motives, was nonetheless designed to send a strong message to the federal government. At the Republic’s proclamation, Rossel denounced the different treatments certain federal subjects received from Moscow, stating that Sverdlovsk’s action was a rebuttal of “a federation based on sovereign states” as much as of “a federation based on unequal subjects”.<sup>196</sup>

The Urals Republic had a very short life. On November 9 and 10 Yeltsin issued two decrees that dissolved the Sverdlovsk legislature, voiding its actions on the Urals Republic, and removed Rossel from his post. His replacement, deputy head of the Yekaterinburg city administration Alexei Strakhov, was a lesser-known politician who could be trusted to remain loyal to the federal government.<sup>197</sup> Rossel, however, had not been tamed. Already in December he was elected to the Federation Council, obtaining an important national platform to advocate for his federalist vision.<sup>198</sup> Shortly afterwards, in the 1994 Sverdlovsk legislative elections one quarter of the seats were won by candidates running under Rossel’s recently founded association, “Transformation of the Urals”, who, supported by a number of independent candidates, promptly proceeded to nominate him chairman of

---

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.* p. 621

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.* p. 623

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.* p. 623

<sup>197</sup> Gelman V., Golosov, G. V. 1998, p. 34

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.* p. 35

the regional Duma.<sup>199</sup> From his new position, Rossel renewed the political conflict against Governor Strakhov, by leading the Duma to approve a new statute for the Oblast that essentially contained many of the provisions of the voided constitution of the Urals Republic.<sup>200</sup> Crucially, the statute included the institution of popular gubernatorial elections for the Oblast, a measure which had been explicitly forbidden by a presidential decree signed by Yeltsin in October 1994.<sup>201</sup> In light of the Kremlin's obvious preference for Strakhov's refusal to sign the statute, it was most likely Rossel's close, albeit not always easy relations with the president that allowed a compromise to be reached. Bargaining in on Yeltsin during a reception at the Kremlin, Rossel convinced him to mediate between the regional legislative and executive authorities.<sup>202</sup> The results were a watered-down Oblast statute and the region holding the first popular gubernatorial elections in the Russian Federation, whose first round was held on August 6, 1995.

Like the many gubernatorial elections that followed Sverdlovsk's across Russia, the contest was to a good extent determined by the personalities involved in it. However, one issue that loomed large was the contraposition between the causes of regional self-government, embodied by Rossel, and centralization, represented by Strakhov.<sup>203</sup> In order to compete with the former's organizational structure, the already mentioned Transformation of the Urals, the governor set about creating his own, which became the regional branch of the pro-Kremlin federal party "Our Home is Russia".<sup>204</sup> The election was nonetheless won by Rossel in the second round with almost 60 percent of the vote. Now with the weight of the popularly elected governorship behind him, the time was right to negotiate with Yeltsin a treaty between the federal government and Sverdlovsk Oblast, which was finally signed in January 1996. Sverdlovsk, which received joint jurisdiction in areas including the

---

<sup>199</sup> Easter, G. M. 1997, p. 625

<sup>200</sup> Gelman V., Golosov, G. V. 1998, p. 35

<sup>201</sup> Easter, G. M. 1997, p. 625

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.* p. 625

<sup>203</sup> Gelman V., Golosov, G. V. 1998, p. 36

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.* p. 36

processing and use of mineral resources and precious metals,<sup>205</sup> and was removed from the “highest donors” list,<sup>206</sup> was the first federal subject with a Russian ethnic majority to sign a bilateral treaty with the centre.<sup>207</sup>

By the end of 1996 many more Oblasts and Krai had held gubernatorial elections and signed bilateral treaties with the Kremlin of their own. Without the benefit of hindsight, a scholar’s assertion that the Sverdlovsk treaty was “a watershed in Russian history in that the basis of executive authority in the regions was transformed”<sup>208</sup> is understandable, since the steps taken by the Oblast’s political leadership were indeed path-breaking in the mid-1990s. The conflict and rapprochement with the federal government, however, had another important effect. Since at the end of 1993 Eduard Rossel was the most popular politician in the region yet had none of the structural resources controlled by the governor, he was forced to organize his campaigns through a political structure, Transformation of the Urals, eventually forcing Governor Strakhov to create one of his own. It was the beginning of a lively political culture that set the Oblast apart from the vast majority of Russia. As Gel’man and Golosov wrote in 1998, “to a larger extent than Russia as a whole, and in contrast to nearly all other regions, Sverdlovsk [O]blast has developed a set of sustainable political organizations whose competition can be viewed as a pivotal factor of the political process”.<sup>209</sup> It is no coincidence that in 2005 Sverdlovsk was ranked first among Russia’s regions in the Carnegie Moscow Center’s “degree of democratisation” rating.<sup>210</sup> The extent to which its model could be applied elsewhere in the Federation, however, was made painfully clear after Rossel’s 1995 attempt to launch himself into the national stage. In 1995 the governor tried to turn his Transformation of the Urals into an all-Russian political movement, “Transformation of the Fatherland”, advocating his vision of a loose federalism for the whole country. The attempt, however, was certainly underwhelming. At the December 1995

---

<sup>205</sup> Chuman, M. 2011, pp. 139-140

<sup>206</sup> Easter, G. M. 1997, p. 629

<sup>207</sup> Paustyán, E. 2021, p. 189

<sup>208</sup> Easter, G. M. 1997, p. 628

<sup>209</sup> Gelman V., Golosov, G. V. 1998, p. 32

<sup>210</sup> Kolossov, V., Eckert, D. 2007

elections for the State Duma, while collecting 12.1 percent of the vote in the Oblast, already a disappointing result compared to the recent gubernatorial elections, Rossel's movement only garnered 0.5 percent of the nationwide vote.<sup>211</sup> Easter's assessment that "regionalism, inherently, is not a theme around which a national constituency can be built" appears accurate.

Mirroring the conflict between the regional authorities and the federal government, a noteworthy element of Sverdlovsk's political trajectory in the 1990s was the discrepancy between the regional electoral results and those in its capital, Yekaterinburg. Indeed, as much as the 1995 gubernatorial election was fought around the issue of regional autonomy against centralization, the importance of the candidates' personal networks was visible, as Rossel built his success around the countryside and the smaller towns, while the bulk of Strakhov's votes came from the capital.<sup>212</sup> Just a few months later this was confirmed by the mayoral elections in Yekaterinburg, where the incumbent, Arkadi Chernetsky, made good use of Strakhov's political legacy, soundly defeating Rossel's long-time ally Anton Bakov. Ironically, Chernetsky's strategy of framing himself as a defender of the city's interests against the "dictate" of the regional authorities was essentially the same tactic Rossel had employed relatively to Moscow in the gubernatorial election.<sup>213</sup> For a city that had been closed until 1992 and was now quickly becoming an important investment destination for foreign companies, as well as a major hub for air and railway travel,<sup>214</sup> it is probable that support for the rules-setting federal government was more appetible than throwing in its lot with Rossel's regional gamble.

Many seeds were therefore laid by the events of the early to mid-1990s. Among them, faced with Putin's measures aimed at reducing the regional elites' leverage in the 2000s, it was the clash between the city of Yekaterinburg and the regional government that turned out to be the most resilient.

---

<sup>211</sup> Gelman V., Golosov, G. V. 1998, p. 37

<sup>212</sup> Gelman V., Golosov, G. V. 1998, p. 37

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37

<sup>214</sup> Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development, *The: OECD Economic Surveys. The Russian Federation 1995* (Paris, OECD, 1995), p. 56

### 3.2. Winter 2011: The protest city's coming of age

Between 2009 and 2012 the citizens of Yekaterinburg found themselves participating in street protests on numerous occasions. While initially their agenda was dominated by federal issues, the appointment of Misharin as governor in 2009 revived the conflict between the Sverdlovsk Oblast government and its capital city. By the time the nationwide protests against electoral fraud following the December 2011 legislative elections broke out, Yekaterinburg could count on an active base of citizens and a tried-and-tested format for street actions.

For the Kremlin relations with Eduard Rossel remained difficult at the outset of Vladimir Putin's presidency. In its attempt to position itself as the party of power nationwide, United Russia had to adjust to the local reality of the Oblast, where most of its local leaders were initially aligned with the mayor of Yekaterinburg, Arkady Chernetsky. In September 2003, however, the party agreed to support the governor in his re-election campaign, and its internal structure was reorganized to reflect the change of loyalty.<sup>215</sup> In the second half of the 2000s Sverdlovsk Oblast saw a number of demonstrations of considerable size, regarding both local and national issues. On December 4, 2006, between 1,500 and 3,000 protested against the price increase for municipal services. On February 21, 2009, then, a crowd estimated at between 2,000 and 5,000 participants blocked traffic for a few hours while protesting against a plan for the monetisation of benefits.<sup>216</sup> Having swiftly changed the basis of governors' legitimacy with the abolition of gubernatorial elections in 2004, the Kremlin saw an opportunity to move against the aging Rossel. In May 2009 it released a nationwide survey revealing that among regional heads Rossel's popularity had seen one of the sharpest falls as a result of the 2008-2009 financial crisis, to which, as one of the most urbanized and industrialized regions,

---

<sup>215</sup> Slider, D. 2010, pp. 260-261

<sup>216</sup> Il'chenko, M.: "The Protest Movement in Yekaterinburg", in Ross C. ed. *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation. Civil Society Awakens?* (Routledge, New York, 2016), p. 199

Sverdlovsk had found itself particularly vulnerable.<sup>217</sup> Despite his personal efforts to dissuade the Kremlin, and not before he had caused another standoff by withholding funds for the regional United Russia branch,<sup>218</sup> Rossel was finally removed in November 2009 and replaced by the former head of Sverdlovsk Railway Alexander Misharin, an apt decision for a region serving as the gateway point between central Russia and Siberia. Having also served as deputy minister of transports, Misharin can be considered a textbook example of what Kynev has referred to as a “federalised local”, meaning a governor originating from the region who had spent most of his career at the federal level.<sup>219</sup> In a move that was familiar to Kremlin-appointed governors faced with popularly elected mayors, Misharin quickly moved to pressure Chernetsky to adopt the charter reform that would have introduced the figure of the city manager to Yekaterinburg. Having served as mayor of the Oblast capital for almost 20 years and being able to count on a consolidated local supporter base, Chernetsky strongly opposed the reform, but was eventually persuaded to resign his office after being offered Sverdlovsk’s senatorial seat at the Federation Council in Moscow.<sup>220</sup>

In 2010 a first attempt was made to build a cathedral to Saint Catherine, or rather to rebuild the one that had been demolished in 1930 by the Soviet government. The plan, drawn up by the local diocese and supported by the Oblast’s government, was to build it in Labour Square, thereby returning the temple to its original location.<sup>221</sup> An illustrious precedent, furthermore, was represented by the “Church on Blood”, consecrated in 2003 on the site of the Romanov’s 1918 assassination, which had quickly become one of the city’s symbols.<sup>222</sup> The construction of the new temple, however, would have necessitated a radical alteration of the centre’s architectural outlook, including the dismantlement of the popular “stone flower” fountain, a requirement to which the public responded

---

<sup>217</sup> Petrov, N. 2010, pp. 286-287

<sup>218</sup> Slider, D. 2010, p. 268

<sup>219</sup> Kynev, A. 2020, p. 164

<sup>220</sup> Moses, J. C. 2014, pp. 1403-1404

<sup>221</sup> Il’chenko, M. 2016, p. 199

<sup>222</sup> Kolossov, V., Eckert, D. 2007

very unfavourably.<sup>223</sup> On April 10 a demonstration was organized by Leonid Volkov, an outspoken member of the city Duma whose initiatives had found a responsive audience in the context of the renewed conflict between the city administration and the regional government.<sup>224</sup> Estimates of the number of participants range from around 3,000 to 6,000, but most importantly, the demonstrations inaugurated a protesting style that would become a recurring feature of Yekaterinburg's mass actions up to 2019. Rather than chanting political slogans and displaying a combative attitude, the protests unfolded in an almost festive environment, with live music acts, a photography exhibition and signs that stood out for their humour.<sup>225</sup> In addition, the organizers were careful not to frame the demonstration as anti-clerical, moving the date from April 3 to April 10 to avoid a clash with the Orthodox Easter. This posed a stark contrast with the words used by the Archbishop of Yekaterinburg, who, speaking about the opponents of the church's construction, declared before the protests that "no person who opposed God died a natural death".<sup>226</sup> The demonstration, however, was a success, leading to the authorities withdrawing the authorisation for the construction's site.

The protest in April 2010 was pioneering in two regards. First, it was one of the first demonstrations in Russia to be predominantly organized through the internet, with social media playing an essential role in coordinating participants and spreading information about the event.<sup>227</sup> Second, its success encouraged a certain perception of locally motivated protests that would persist through the decade. As Il'chenko wrote, Volkov's greatest success had been "to fix the image of a protest action as a peaceful assembly of citizens rather than as a forum for the promotion of parties and the speeches of radical politicians".<sup>228</sup> It should be noted, however, that the recent arrival of an

---

<sup>223</sup> Belousov, A. B., Davydov D. A., Kochukhova, E. S.: "В постматериалистическом тренде: Мотивация участников протеста в сквере у театра драмы в Екатеринбурге", *Мониторинг общественного мнения: Экономические и социальные перемены* No. 6 (2020), p. 59

<sup>224</sup> Il'chenko, M. 2016, p. 199

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.* p. 200

<sup>226</sup> Antonov, S. "Храм ведет на улицу", *Kommersant* (April 12, 2010), available at:

<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1353136>

<sup>227</sup> Il'chenko, M. 2016, p. 200

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.* p. 200



“outsider” to the governorship, who had not only pressured the resignation of the popularly elected mayor of Yekaterinburg, but whose tenure was already characterized by nepotism and inefficiencies,<sup>229</sup> would suggest that politics could not have been far below the surface of the participants’ motivations.

In the final months of 2010, Labour Square witnessed two other, albeit smaller demonstrations that showed how a penchant for civic action was entrenching itself in a proportionally small but very active share of the population.<sup>230</sup> On September 25 the protesters defended the institution of direct mayoral elections (although, as we have seen, the arrival of a city manager had already considerably reduced the mayor’s role), and on 24 October they successfully called for the release of a local activist Yegor Bychkov. Notably, both protests showed a growing role for civil society in the city’s politics. The September action had been organized by a “Right to Choose Committee”, which also included Volkov as well as other well-known activists. The arrested at the centre of the October protest, on the other hand, was the director of the Nizhny Tagil office of the foundation “A City Without Drugs”, which, to increase participation in the rally, successfully built a network with various other locally based NGOs and unions. Crucially, both actions followed the organizational blueprint of the April protest, indicating that for a considerable number of politically active citizens the series of demonstrations was a learning process that could make the subsequent ones more successful.

In the winter of 2011-2012, following the December 2011 legislative elections, the Russian Federation was rocked by the mass rallies against electoral fraud, the so-called “For Fair Elections” protests. While the nationwide demonstrations were sparked by those organized by the Muscovite middle class in the capital, the citizens of Yekaterinburg could claim a number of grievances of their own. At municipal elections in the Oblast in March 2011 the performance of United Russia had been disappointing, and intra-elite infighting enhanced the difficulties of organizing an effective campaign

---

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.* p. 199

<sup>230</sup> For a summary of the Yekaterinburg protests through March 5, 2012, including the pro-government counter-rallies, see Il’chenko M. 2016, pp. 200-209

for the party of power in the Oblast. The result was that the lead-up to the December 2011 election in the Oblast was marred by abuses and pressures against opposition candidates on a much higher scale than before, deepening the population's resentment. In addition, the popular organizer of the 2010 actions, Leonid Volkov, was barred from entering the regional legislative elections, that would take place on the same day as the nationwide poll. Unsurprisingly, United Russia's result at the State Duma election, which took place on December 4, was among the worst in the country, even finishing behind A Just Russia in the city of Yekaterinburg. Already on December 10, a Saturday, a hastily assembled protest organized by the local Communist Party branch attracted a high number of participants, in spite of its loose organization. Much more similar to the mass actions of the previous year, was the demonstration on December 17, organized by Volkov along with other activists including the founder of the "City Without Drugs" association Yevgeny Roizman. While at the previous rally anti-Kremlin and anti-Putin slogans had been heard, on December 17 the "festive" style made a comeback, including speeches by both politicians and ordinary people alongside ribbons, balloons and a "best poster" competition. One week later, on December 24, the anti-Kremlin cause returned to centre stage at a protest "in support of Moscow", which closely mirrored the rally happening concurrently in the capital, with neither regional-specific issues nor political party symbols anywhere in sight.

In a rather distorted continuation of Sverdlovsk Oblast's legacy as a political laboratory, the marches in 2011 saw the regional authorities pioneer a new form of counter-demonstration tactic that would become widely used by the Kremlin in later years. Playing into the contrast between the perception of Yekaterinburg as a post-industrial, opposition-minded city, and the supposed Russian hinterland that sided with the Kremlin, a rally "in defence of the working class" was organized in the regional capital. The idea had initially been suggested by trade union leaders at the Uralvagonzavod factory in Nizhny Tagil, the Oblast's second city and an important centre for the production of railway carriages and battle tanks. The rally, which took place peacefully on January 28, 2012, attracted a large crowd, supposedly comprised for the most part of factory workers from across the Oblast, and

was the first pro-government, anti-opposition mass rally to be organized in post-Soviet Russia. The most immediate effect, however, was to galvanize the organizers of the Yekaterinburg marches. On February 4 the protest season reached its nadir with a demonstration gathering between 5,000 and 7,000. It was a peak from which, however, the opposition movement could only descend. By early March, when a final rally was held after Putin's victory announcement in the presidential election, the marches had run out of steam.

In the 2011-2012 protests the two faces of Sverdlovsk Oblast seemingly faced each other in the streets of Yekaterinburg. Although some authors have questioned the characterisation of Nizhny Tagil as a pro-Putin bastion,<sup>231</sup> there is no doubt that the region's peculiar internal political conflicts helped make Yekaterinburg an ideal venue for the organization of protests. Moreover, it has been noted that the replacement of Governor Misharin with the former presidential envoy to the Urals Yevgeny Kuivashev, whose efforts in delivering a majority for Putin in the 2012 presidential election had been more than effective, is also likely to have played a part in the rallies coming to an end,<sup>232</sup> thereby indicating that despite the Muscovite origins of the winter 2011-2012 actions, regional grievances were not a secondary factor behind the demonstrators' persistence.

### **3.3. Yevgeny Roizman: the activist mayor**

As Il'chenko wrote, "the importance of the protest movements [outside the Russian capital] is not so much in the number of demonstrations and their mass scale, as in their ability to turn the cities into sustainable centres of public activism".<sup>233</sup> In the early 2010s no activist had been more visible in Yekaterinburg than Yevgeny Roizman, a former State Duma deputy and anti-drugs campaigner who, on September 9, 2013, unexpectedly won the mayoral election as an opposition

---

<sup>231</sup> Judah, B.: *Fragile Empire. How Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 281-282

<sup>232</sup> Il'chenko, M. 2016, p. 210

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.* p. 199

candidate, beating not only the vice-governor and head of the administration Yakov Silin, running as United Russia's candidate,<sup>234</sup> but also a more than competent challenge from A Just Russia's local leader, Alexander Burkov.<sup>235</sup> Thus, Yekaterinburg became one of only two cities, with the other one being the much smaller Yaroslavl, to elect a mayor who had actively taken part in the anti-Kremlin protests of 2011-2012.<sup>236</sup>

Far from a typical image of an anti-authoritarian activist, in the words of one observer Roizman's success can be credited to a "winning cocktail of Russian nationalism, vigilante policing and civil society".<sup>237</sup> Having served as a Duma deputy between 2003 and 2007, in his last year as a member of A Just Russia, he had later distanced himself from politics for a period of time, in what some have interpreted as an instance of a "systemic" opposition party expelling a potentially troublesome independent-minded provincial politician.<sup>238</sup> For the 2013 mayoral election, Roizman was affiliated with the "Civic Platform Party", founded by oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, from whom he wisely denied receiving financial aid of any kind.<sup>239</sup> Roizman's popularity, however, had its origins in 1999, when he founded "A City Without Drugs". The organization's *raison d'être* was the raging drug addiction epidemic that, due in large part Sverdlovsk Oblast's proximity to the trafficking corridors across Central Asia, had hit the region particularly hard since the end of the Soviet Union.<sup>240</sup> The state's weakness in the Federation's peripheral regions left ample room for the kind of vigilante justice that Roizman's organization came to embody, staging mass protests and even physically

---

<sup>234</sup> Mukhametov, R. S.: "Политические процессы в Свердловской области при Губернаторе Е. Куйвашеве", *Studia Humanitatis* No. 4 2016 (2016), available at: <http://st-hum.ru/content/muhametov-rs-politicheskie-processy-v-sverdlovskoy-oblasti-pri-gubernatore-e-kuyvasheve>

<sup>235</sup> Grishin, N. 2016, p. 288

<sup>236</sup> Shurmina, N., Balmforth, T.: "Rebel Russian mayor resigns over move to scrap elections", Reuters (May 22, 2018), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-mayor-resignation/rebel-russian-mayor-resigns-over-move-to-scrap-elections-idUSKCN1IN1ZY>

<sup>237</sup> Judah, B. 2013, p. 288

<sup>238</sup> Grishin, N. 2016, p. 283

<sup>239</sup> Leighton, J.: "The Roizman Phenomenon", Carnegie Moscow Center (September 13, 2013), available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/52961>

<sup>240</sup> Judah, B. 2013, p. 288

taking drug dealers themselves to the police.<sup>241</sup> “A City Without Drugs” attracted further controversy with regards to the alleged anti-scientific methods it used when treating drug-addicts, confined in “clinics” with scarce food and made to carry out compulsory labour.<sup>242</sup>

Despite defeating the “party of power” in the mayoral elections”, Roizman’s opposition was inherently local and politically realist. He avoided attacking not only Putin,<sup>243</sup> but also the city manager who had been forced on Yekaterinburg, Alexander Yakov, whom the new mayor described as a “decent man” with whom he was ready to work.<sup>244</sup> While he criticised the city’s bid to host four matches of the 2018 World Cup and the 2020 World Expo as populist measures,<sup>245</sup> both pertained to policies over which his own power was basically non-existent. On the other hand, he directed strong words at the Oblast’s governor Yevgeny Kuivashev, who was described as an outsider imposed by Moscow lacking the legitimacy, experience, and intelligence to deal with the problems afflicting Yekaterinburg.<sup>246</sup> However, even though between Roizman and Kuivashev only the former had been elected, and thus could command a popular base of support, in the mid-2010s it was the latter that had virtually all the tools of power at his disposal to eventually force his rival out.

In 2014 and 2015 the State Duma in Moscow approved two federal laws that constituted a serious blow to the autonomy of municipalities in favour of the heads of the federal subjects, which received vast leeway in determining the how local administrative bodies would be formed. This meant that governors could decide how the head of a municipality would be chosen, essentially being able to pick a candidate of their own for the position.<sup>247</sup> Even before moving against the electoral process

---

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.* p. 286

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.* p. 286

<sup>243</sup> Luhn, A.: “New mayor of Russia’s fourth-largest city says he is not Putin’s ‘opposition’”, *The Guardian* (September 13, 2013), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/13/new-mayor-russia-fourth-largest-city-not-putins-opposition>

<sup>244</sup> *Moscow Times*, The: “Roizman inaugurated as Yekaterinburg mayor” (September 24, 2013), available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/09/24/roizman-inaugurated-as-yekaterinburg-mayor-a27954>

<sup>245</sup> Leighton, J. 2013

<sup>246</sup> Nikiforova, M. V.: “Стратегия дискредитации в дискурсе регионального политика (на материале речей Мэра Екатеринбурга Е. Ройзмана)”, *Политическая Лингвистика* Vol. 43, Issue 4 (2015), p. 102

<sup>247</sup> Babun, R. V.: “Local self-government in Russia. A new stage of municipal development”, *Problems of Economic Transition*, Vol. 60, Issue 8-9 (2018), pp. 630-631

itself, however, under Kuivashev the Sverdlovsk regional government had been eroding the autonomy of the Yekaterinburg municipality. Between 2014 and 2016 the regional authorities implemented measures such as transferring urban planning powers to the region and depriving the municipal authorities of numerous competencies. These included the coordination of mass events, the organization of advertisement billboards in outdoor spaces and the management of undelimited lands within the city.<sup>248</sup> In June 2014, an attempt by deputies of the regional Duma to remove the Yekaterinburg city manager prompted a large rally in support of the city administration, against the regional authorities. Perhaps it was because of this outpouring of the city's discontent that when the regional Duma adopted a bill to cancel mayoral election through the Oblast in March 2016, the cities of Yekaterinburg and Nizhny Tagil (which had seen a mayoral opposition victory of its own in 2008) were excluded from application of the provision.<sup>249</sup>

The disparity in the power balance between the Oblast and the city certainly played a key part in driving Roizman away from his initial pragmatic approach towards a more open opposition against the Russian political system. In July 2017 he withdrew from the gubernatorial election, where he was the Yabloko party's nominated candidate, after failing, unsurprisingly, to pass the "municipal filter". In response, he publicly declared the "filter" to be impossible to clear and threatened to challenge it in front of the Constitutional Court.<sup>250</sup> Roizman then called for a boycott of the election, which he defined as nothing more than a deception of voters and a role-playing game, in which no honest people should take part.<sup>251</sup> Using similar language, in January 2018 he finally attacked the Kremlin itself, declaring that to boycott the election was "a matter of principle, of hygiene".<sup>252</sup> While strongly

---

<sup>248</sup> Mukhametov, R. S. 2016

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>250</sup> Meduza: "Евгений Роизман отказался от участия в выборах губернатора Свердловской области" (July 18, 2017), available at: <https://meduza.io/news/2017/07/18/evgeniy-roizman-otkazalsya-ot-uchastiya-v-vyborah-gubernatora-sverdlovskoy-oblasti>

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> Moscow Times, The: "Yekaterinburg Mayor Yevgeny Roizman on why Russians should boycott the elections" (January 29, 2018), available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/01/29/-not-voting-is-a-matter-of-principle-a60319>

worded, there is little doubt that Roizman's words concealed an awareness that he did not have much time left in office. On April 3, 2018, just days after Putin's victory in the presidential election, the Sverdlovsk regional parliament voted to cancel the direct election of Yekaterinburg's mayor. As the head of the municipal Duma, it would have been Roizman's responsibility to put the region's decision to a final vote. The mayor's stern identification with his local constituents took a final stand, as he framed himself as the defender of the city's interests against regional power. Thus, the cancellation of mayoral elections was called a "direct insult to the citizens of Yekaterinburg, a belittling of the status of Yekaterinburg, a show of disrespect to the city, the city's traditions".<sup>253</sup> Later, speaking to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty he declared: "This is Yekaterinburg, people will understand me ... Step by step the local council is being stripped of everything; authority, finance, direct elections".<sup>254</sup> In late May Roizman resigned as mayor, in a theatrical move that, to use his own words, was the only way to not "legitimize someone else's decision".<sup>255</sup>

Already when Roizman took office in 2013, the mayor only enjoyed powers that were largely ceremonial. It seems unlikely, therefore, that, as one observer wrote, he would have ever "shape[d] up to be a formidable leader of the opposition".<sup>256</sup> What his political trajectory does show, however, is that a popularly elected official can still prove irksome to those appointed to higher positions. Once governors across the Federation had been neutralized as potential sources of political opposition, the Kremlin could make good use of the long-standing animosity between the local regional authorities and the city of Yekaterinburg to encroach the power vertical further down in the political ladder. In the absence of even a ceremonial representation, almost exactly one year after Roizman's resignation

---

<sup>253</sup> Roth, A.: "Russian city cancels elections in move to oust maverick mayor", The Guardian (April 3, 2018), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/03/russian-city-cancels-elections-in-move-to-oust-maverick-mayor>

<sup>254</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: "Yekaterinburg mayor resigns over scrapping of direct mayoral elections" (May 22, 2018), available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-yekaterinburg-mayor-resigns-over-scrapping-of-direct-mayoral-elections/29241745.html>

<sup>255</sup> Shurmina, N., Balmforth, T. 2018

<sup>256</sup> Leighton, J. 2013

the long-standing issue of St. Catherine's Cathedral re-emerged, meeting a city that was ready to erupt again.

### 3.4. The May 2019 protests in detail

When on the night between May 13 and 14, 2019 a metal fence appeared around the green area of October Square, located in front of the Yekaterinburg Drama Theatre on the city pond's southern shore, the issue of the construction of St. Catherine's Cathedral was fresh in the minds of the citizens. In 2016 a second attempt had been made at building the temple, this time on an artificial island at the centre of the city pond. If in 2010 the rally in Labour Square had inaugurated a period of intense protest activity for Yekaterinburg, in 2016 the lessons and tactics of the previous years had been consolidated. Following public hearings on December 1, which served to neatly divide citizens between those for and against the construction project, the latter organized themselves in a "Committee of the city pond", which organised numerous pickets and, most notably, three different "Hug the pond" initiatives, where over 1,500 participants held hands along the shore of the pond, symbolically "protecting" it.<sup>257</sup> A seemingly ideal contraposition between engaged but unheard citizens on one side, and the different facets of power on the other, came as Governor Kuivashev, along with Metropolitan Kirill and the head of the Russian Copper Company Igor Altushkin (one of the two main financiers of the project) led a procession along the pond, ending with a blessing of the future construction site.<sup>258</sup> However, Kuivashev's concurrent necessity to campaign for the September 2017 gubernatorial elections was probably the main factor that led to the decision to once again freeze the project and move the planned construction to a different location.<sup>259</sup>

---

<sup>257</sup> Koryukova, O. P.: "Кейс дискуссии противников и сторонников строительства Храма-на-воде в Екатеринбурге", in Osintsev, A. V., Mel'nikova E. V. ed. *90 лет Викторову Владимиру Петровичу: материалы круглого стола "Религия и религиоведение на Урале"* (Yekaterinburg, 2018), pp. 134-135

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.* p. 135

<sup>259</sup> Belousov, A. B., Davydov D. A., Kochukhova, E. S. 2020, p. 59



Between December 21, 2018, and January 18, 2019, the Yekaterinburg city administration invited the citizens to participate in an online survey regarding the construction of St. Catherine's Cathedral on the grounds of October Square. The effectiveness, accuracy, or transparency of such an institutional channel can, however, be questioned. While around 90 percent of respondents voiced their support for the project, it is significant that, during the same period, a petition for a referendum on the subject, presented by the recently founded association "Parks and Squares of Yekaterinburg" along with the local office of Alexei Navalny's movement, was rejected by the city Duma despite being approved by the electoral commission.<sup>260</sup> Almost at the same time, the municipal legislature modified the land use status of October Square, indicating it as an area to be used for religious purposes.<sup>261</sup> On May 13 the square was suddenly sealed off by an aluminium fence, announcing that construction of the cathedral would begin soon. Again, social media proved instrumental at mobilizing the citizenry at short notice, while bypassing the authorities' radar. Invited to "take a walk" near the city pond, around 2,000 people arrived at the scene in the early evening.<sup>262</sup> Soon, they broke down the fence and entered the square. According to a report by *Novaya Gazeta*, it would appear that in the following few hours the demonstrators repeated the template from the 2010-2012 rallies, with music and dancing filling up the park.<sup>263</sup> Instead of political slogans, the rally remained focused on the issue at hand, with the most heard chants including "this is our city" and "it will be [i.e., remain] a square".<sup>264</sup> At around 11.00 p.m., however, a group of around one hundred trained fighters from the Russian Copper Company's academy of martial arts arrived at the scene, and violently removed the demonstrators from the square's area, which they kept guarding until the morning.<sup>265</sup> As we have seen, the head of the Company, Igor Altushkin, was one of the two sponsors

---

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 59-60

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.* p. 60

<sup>262</sup> Zhilin, I.: "Крест, кулак и власть", *Novaya Gazeta* (May 14, 2019), available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/05/14/80510-krest-kulak-i-vlast>

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*

of St. Catherine's Cathedral, the other one being the head of the Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company Alexei Kozitsyn.<sup>266</sup> The role of the fighters from the academy protecting the construction site closely mirrored the events of 2017 in Chelyabinsk, where they had been deployed against protesting opponents of the Tominsky Mining and Processing Plant project.<sup>267</sup> What is noteworthy about the first night of protests in Yekaterinburg is that while the fence was initially guarded by National Guard troops, state security forces seemed to leave the scene once the fighters arrived,<sup>268</sup> an all too physical representation of the porous fault lines between business and local authority in Russia's regions.

The Copper Company's reaction, however, proved not enough to deter the demonstrators, which during the following days continued arriving at the square in large numbers.<sup>269</sup> Contents shared by local bloggers and other participants led to information about the protests traveling far beyond the city. Already by the end of May, the Levada Centre estimates that almost 60 percent of Russian citizens had at least heard about the protests,<sup>270</sup> an impressive figure considering that on May 14 Channel 1 only focused on the events in Yekaterinburg for less than a minute, mostly devoted to Governor Kuivashev's call for a peaceful resolution.<sup>271</sup> After a failed dialogue attempt by the governor, on May 16 it was President Putin himself who intervened, proposing a new survey on the cathedral's construction site. When the state-owned agency VTsIOM reported its finding that 74 percent of the citizens polled had declared themselves opposed to the cathedral being built on October Square, it was only a matter of days before the Orthodox Church itself called for the removal of the fence, which was carried out on May 21.<sup>272</sup>

---

<sup>266</sup> Belousov, A. B., Davydov D. A., Kochukhova, E. S. 2020, p. 60

<sup>267</sup> Zhilin, I. 2019

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> Belousov, A. B., Davydov D. A., Kochukhova, E. S. 2020, p. 60

<sup>270</sup> Levada-Center, The: "Protests" (August 7, 2019), available at: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2019/08/07/protests-3/>

<sup>271</sup> Irisova, O.: "Yekaterinburg protest shows cracks in Kremlin's media manipulation", The Wilson Center (May 31, 2019), available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/yekaterinburg-protest-shows-cracks-kremlins-media-manipulation>

<sup>272</sup> Belousov, A. B., Davydov D. A., Kochukhova, E. S. 2020, pp. 60-61

### 3.5. The Yekaterinburg protests: aftermath and concluding remarks

Like many protest events across Russia in recent years, the demonstrations of May 2019 in Yekaterinburg escape easy interpretations. The city's relative economic well-being has led some scholars to conclude that the motivations behind the city's passionate response to the cathedral's planned construction would indicate the outset of a "post-materialistic trend" among young Russians, whose concerns rest more with intangible goods such as political representation, social rights, or a personal connection to a cause (in this case, protecting the city's square) rather than with economic issues.<sup>273</sup> Others have pointed to popular dissatisfaction with the close, almost inextricable relations between the Orthodox Church and the State in post-Soviet Russia, suggesting that the protests in Yekaterinburg, while not explicitly anti-clerical, are symptoms of a backlash that has long been in the making.<sup>274</sup> The picture is further complicated by surveys conducted prior to the May 2019 events, which, while noting that a sizeable portion of Yekaterinburg's citizens was eager to participate in rallies supporting nationwide causes, a combination of political eclecticism, the authorities' firm grip on the most popular media channels, and recent geopolitical success strengthening support for the Kremlin, did not create the preconditions for a stable opposition movement to emerge from the street actions.<sup>275</sup> The protest movement in Yekaterinburg is therefore characterised as present but ephemeral, fuelled more by notions of Russian society as largely unfair (a perception shared by 80 percent of young people in Yekaterinburg, according to a 2019 survey conducted shortly before the protests)<sup>276</sup> than by coherent political convictions or local dynamics. According to Vatoropin and

---

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 54-55

<sup>274</sup> Baunov, A.: "Russians are getting sick of church", Carnegie Moscow Center (June 12, 2019), available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2019/06/12/russians-are-getting-sick-of-church-pub-79305>

<sup>275</sup> Vatoropin, S., Ruchkin, V.: "The Protest Potential of the Population of Sverdlovsk Oblast", *Sociological Research* Vol. 57, Issue 1 (2018), p. 89

<sup>276</sup> Rudenkin, D. V.: "Импульсы роста протестной активности российской молодежи: кейс Екатеринбурга", *Конфликтология / nota bene* No. 1, available at: [https://nbpublish.com/library\\_read\\_article.php?id=32326](https://nbpublish.com/library_read_article.php?id=32326)

Rutchkin, Sverdlovsk Oblast is similar to the rest of Russia in that only a sizeable drop in living standards could reliably be expected to precipitate the public mood.<sup>277</sup> Another research points to the January 2021 rally in support of Alexei Navalny, which dispersed without leading to further escalations after a harsh reaction by the authorities, as proof of the fragmentary nature of street actions in Yekaterinburg.<sup>278</sup> One could also note that despite its reputation, events in Yekaterinburg following the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by the Russian military have hardly been exceptional. While on the evening of February 24 an average-scale protest action, soon dispersed by the police, resulted in 60 arrests, according to human rights-focused media project OVD-Info, the size of pickets and protests actions soon decreased considerably.<sup>279</sup> Detentions of demonstrators, furthermore, tends to follow a familiar pattern of quick release from custody with *ad hoc* charges, most frequently discrediting the armed forces, or the spread of false information about the “military operation”. It would appear that the anti-war banner is yet too heavy for the scattered opposition in the city.

The same cannot be said, however, of the most prominent local opponent of the Kremlin. On August 24 former mayor Yevgeny Roizman was detained under charges of discrediting the armed forces, in practice by referring to Russia’s action in Ukraine as an “invasion”, after being previously fined at least three times for the same offense.<sup>280</sup> In a carefully calibrated declaration, Governor Kuivashev acknowledged his adversarial relations to Roizman, yet called for the ex-mayor to be treated with justice and respect.<sup>281</sup> Furthermore, he expressed his hope that the Nevyansk icon

---

<sup>277</sup> Vatoropin, S., Ruchkin, V. 2018, p. 89

<sup>278</sup> Vatoropin, A. Vatoropin, S., Chevtaeva N.: “Protest activity of youth in Yekaterinburg in 2017-2021: cases and determining factors”, *SHS Web of Conferences* Vol. 128 (2021), available at: [https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2021/39/shsconf\\_ifsdr2021\\_01033.pdf](https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2021/39/shsconf_ifsdr2021_01033.pdf)

<sup>279</sup> The analysis of events in Yekaterinburg since February 24, 2022 is based on OVD-Info: “Акции в поддержку народа Украины и против войны” (February 24, 2022), available at: <https://ovd.news/news/2022/02/24/akcii-v-podderzhku-naroda-ukrainy-i-protiv-voyny>, accessed on August 31, 2022

<sup>280</sup> Roth, A.: “Russia detains opposition politician for calling Ukraine war ‘an invasion’” (The Guardian, August 24, 2022), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/24/russia-detains-opposition-leader-yevgeny-roizman-over-criticism-of-ukraine-war>

<sup>281</sup> TASS: “Свердловский губернатор прокомментировал задержание Ройзмана” (August 24, 2022), available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/15548531>

museum, which Roizman founded and has run since 1999, would remain open to the public, an invite for which he was later thanked by the ex-mayor himself.<sup>282</sup> While officials announced his imminent transfer to Moscow, where he was to remain during the course of the investigation, Roizman was instead released from detention on August 25, albeit with restrictions imposed on his communications and visits of public spaces until September 29.<sup>283</sup> A number of small-scale protests, at which at least one person was arrested, were nonetheless organised following Roizman's detention.<sup>284</sup>

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to show that analysing the May 2019 events without taking into consideration the peculiar history of Sverdlovsk Oblast provides only an incomplete picture. In particular, relations between the federal centre, the regional authorities, and the city of Yekaterinburg have shaped the Oblast's political culture since the early 1990s. The Kremlin's consolidation of the power vertical has progressively reduced the space for regional interests to express themselves, first with the appointment of a governor largely perceived as an outsider to replace the combative Rossel, then with the regional authorities' gradual erosion of Yekaterinburg's autonomy in the mid-2010s, shortly after the city had elected a mayor who was first and foremost a widely followed social activist. In this context, the May 2019 events would indicate that an opposition-oriented political culture in Yekaterinburg, while enjoying a limited space that, for the moment, prevents it from consolidating itself into a viable base for political action, is nonetheless very much alive.

---

<sup>282</sup> It's My City: "Судья показала, что в Екатеринбурге не дебилы сидят" (Interview with Yevgeny Roizman, August 26, 2022), available at: <https://itsmycity.ru/2022-08-26/intervyu-evgeniya-rojzmana>

<sup>283</sup> Narayeva, A.: "Обвиняемый в дискредитации армии Ройзман будет частично свободен" (Vedomosti, August 25, 2022), available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2022/08/25/937659-roizman-chastichno-svoboden>

<sup>284</sup> OVD-Info, 2022

## **4. Khabarovsk Krai: protesting for the “people’s governor”**

In the summer of 2020 the arrest of Sergei Furgal, the sitting Governor of Khabarovsk Krai, sparked recurring popular protests of an unexpected magnitude in the regional capital. While initially limited in their demands, the largely spontaneous, leaderless protesters soon began to adopt slogans against the federal government and against Putin himself, giving the mass actions an overtly political tone that is very rare outside of the large federal centres of power. This chapter will analyse the historical economic and political background to the Khabarovsk Krai protests, fitting the region in the wider context of the Russian Far East. It will then examine the brief tenure of Furgal as Governor, highlighting how an initially unknown politician from the “systemic” opposition almost inadvertently became a symbol whose arrest pushed tens of thousands of citizens on the streets of the regional capital. It will conclude with a summary of the main features and events surrounding the street actions themselves. The chapter seeks to show how while the grievances behind the protests are deeply rooted in the peculiarities of the regional context, the Kremlin’s power vertical does not fully shelter the federal leadership from local manifestations of discontent.

### **4.1. The Far Eastern economy: development without agency**

Despite its remoteness from the national centre, the economic trajectory of the Russian Far East has been largely determined by the policies of the federal government, essentially following the long-standing Russian tradition of a top-down approach to modernisation. Despite the large amounts of planning and state assistance, Moscow has fallen short of actively engaging with the dynamics that the region has developed locally, enhancing the perception of a rich region subjected to an almost colonial exploitation by the federal government.

Already during the Russian Empire, the Tsarist government instituted a free port regime in Vladivostok, which lasted from 1861 to 1909, the same year in which a Committee on Resettlement

to the Far East was established by Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin.<sup>285</sup> The extreme distance from the Russian centre of gravity in the East, coupled with the backwardness of the infrastructure connecting the region to the rest of the country meant that, with the possible exception of its natural resources, economic output was extremely uncompetitive.<sup>286</sup> Indeed, during the Soviet period the significance of the Far East was primarily political, representing the natural boundaries of the state and symbolizing its vast geopolitical outreach.<sup>287</sup> Under the Far East Military District, the defence industry served as the bedrock of the region's economy, attracting people and jobs, and sustaining the local welfare program.<sup>288</sup> Its remoteness, furthermore, encouraged a semblance of regional identity behind the common purpose of a "garrison region", located at the furthest outpost of the Soviet state.<sup>289</sup>

By the time the Soviet Union ended in 1991, the conception of a paternalistic State, responsible for the provision of jobs, development, and social care, was therefore well entrenched in the Far East. The economy tied to the Far East Military District, however, essentially collapsed in the early 1990s, leading to a retreat of the state from the economic life of the region.<sup>290</sup> Thus began a very difficult decade, in which a large part of the population had to find their means to survive outside the realm of the legal economy. This made vast sectors of local trade invisible to the federal authorities. As Bliakher and Vasileva have noted in their analysis of the economic interactions between the federal centre and the Far East, the region has historically undergone phases of "flood", when a positive economic turn coupled with political will from Moscow leads to money, people and

---

<sup>285</sup> Blakkisrud, H.: "An Asian pivot starts at home: The Russian Far East in Russia regional policy", in Blakkisrud, H., Rowe, E. W. ed. *Russia's turn to the East: Domestic policymaking and regional cooperation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 25

<sup>286</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Vasileva, L. A.: "The Russian Far East in a State of Suspension. Between the 'Global Economy' and 'State Tutelage'", *Russian Politics & Law* Vol. 48, Issue 1 (2010), p. 84

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.* p. 84

<sup>288</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V.: "Что это было? Предварительная рефлексия о хабаровских митингах", *Полития* Vol. 99, Issue 4 (2020), p. 115

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.* p. 121

<sup>290</sup> Копуяхина, А. Р. "Власть как контрагент: случай российского Дальнего Востока (1985-2014 гг.), *Ойкумена. Регионоведческие исследования* 2015 N. 4 (2015), p. 46

resources arriving in the region, and of “suspension”, in which, due to financial difficulties or geopolitical realignments, the Far East is no longer seen as fulfilling a national purpose, investments from the centre dry up, and its population is left to fend for itself.<sup>291</sup> The years between the fall of the Soviet Union and the commodities boom of the early 2000s are a textbook example of the latter condition. Fulfilling a role traditionally associated with developing countries, the main focus of the Far Eastern economy became the export of primary commodities such as timber, fish and minerals to its Asian-Pacific neighbours in exchange for consumer goods.<sup>292</sup> In particular, the abundance of Japanese cars soon became one of the most recognisable features of the Far Eastern economic landscape, as well as an important staple for the evolving regional identity.<sup>293</sup> This dynamic not only allowed the region to survive the challenging times, but also served to integrate it into the regional international market, where centres like Shanghai, Osaka or Singapore had recently become important trading hubs.

Given the challenges facing the Russian state in the 1990s, it is hardly a surprise that a 1996 targeted program for the development of the Far East had little discernible impact.<sup>294</sup> Nonetheless, along with two more plans aimed at the exploitation of natural resources (2002) and living standards and social welfare (2006), it signalled that Moscow’s top-down, centralized approach to the development of the Far East would continue in the post-Soviet years.<sup>295</sup> In 2009 the government approved an ambitious long-term agenda, the “Strategy for the Socioeconomic Development of the Far East and the Baikal Region for the Period until 2025”, whose focus on the export of natural resources to the Asia-Pacific region<sup>296</sup> was an acknowledgment of the direction in which the regional economy had moved, albeit under the radar of the state’s fiscal control, during the turbulent 1990s. While the controversial plan to institute a special state corporation to implement the Strategy was

---

<sup>291</sup> Bliakher L. E., Vasileva, L. A. 2010, pp. 86-87

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.* p. 88

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 89-90

<sup>294</sup> Blakkisrud, H. 2018, p. 14

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15



rejected, from its ashes came the impulse to establish the Ministry for the Development of the Far East, which saw the light in June 2012.<sup>297</sup>

Being constituted by two branches, of which the main one was to be located in the Far East itself,<sup>298</sup> it seemed initially that the new Ministry might represent a break from the Kremlin's traditional approach to economic planning. As the seat of the Presidential Plenipotentiary to the Far East, as well as the former headquarter of the Far Eastern Military District, the city of Khabarovsk was the obvious choice to host the new Ministry's branch. Soon, however, the Ministry appeared to slide back to the old vices of Moscow-centred planning. The creation of new offices in Vladivostok and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky reduced the weight of the Khabarovsk branch without necessarily shifting control of policymaking away from Moscow. In addition, overlapping portfolios and inter-institutional rivalries have been frequent, with the Ministries of Finances, Natural Resources and Economic Development having clashed at different times with the projects of the Far Eastern Ministry. Just a few years after Putin's 2013 speech to the Federal Assembly declaring the development of the Far East to be a "national priority for the entire twenty-first century", Moscow appeared to scale back its ambitions, with the role of the new Ministry essentially being reduced to overseeing initiatives such as the Advanced Special Economic Zones (ASEZs) and the Free Port of Vladivostok, both introduced in 2015 and clearly aimed at encouraging private investments as the new engine of the regional economy.

Notwithstanding the good intentions of the federal government, the recurring feature of the policies concerning the development of the Far East seems to be a lack of genuine engagement with the local communities and elites. A clear example of this dynamic can be seen in the mass protests erupting in Vladivostok between October and December 2008, following the government's decision to sharply increase tariffs on imported cars. Imported Japanese cars, as we have seen, had become an

---

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15

<sup>298</sup> For the discussion on the organisation and branches of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East see Blakkisrud, H. 2018, pp. 16-22

important component of the Far Eastern economy during the 1990s, with their storing, washing, and repairing coming to form an industry in itself. However, neither the tens of thousands of protesters in the capital of Primorsky Krai, nor the appeal of the United Russia regional branch to the Kremlin served to reverse Moscow's decision.<sup>299</sup> In general, Bliakher and Kovalevsky's observation that for the federal government "interest towards the [Far Eastern] region ... did not imply an interest towards its inhabitants"<sup>300</sup> rings true. The pace of development itself, furthermore, has been sluggish. By 2019 only seven out of 31 planned international projects in the ASEZs had started to operate, and the region still lagged the Russian average in infrastructural development. To fully appreciate how this perceived lack of agency by the local population contributed to the Khabarovsk protests of 2020, it is necessary to complete the picture with a summary of the regional political scenery in the post-Soviet decades.

#### **4.2. The run-up to Furgal: from Ishayev to the 2018 election**

As we have seen, in the first post-Soviet decade the Far East developed a penchant for self-reliance, which made resentment palpable when Moscow's initiatives fell short of their promises. While even in the centrifugal regional landscape of the 1990s this did not translate into convincing calls for independence or even autonomy,<sup>301</sup> political symptoms of the region's disaffection with the federal government had appeared long before Furgal's electoral victory in 2018.

In the 1990s, the combination of the state's abrupt retreat from the Far East, and a national political landscape in which the governors could wield enormous authority over their own territory, meant that the region constituted a particularly favourable environment for political heavyweights to emerge. In 1993 Yeltsin dismissed the Governor (then called "head of administration") of Primorsky Krai, Vladimir Kuznetsov, and replaced him with the industrialist Yevgeny Nazdratenko. Seen

---

<sup>299</sup> Evans, A. B. 2012, p. 237

<sup>300</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V. 2020, p. 121, translated from Russian

<sup>301</sup> Valliant, R.: "The political dimension", in Akaha, T. ed. *Politics and economics in the Russian Far East. Changing ties with Asia-Pacific* (Routledge, 1997), p. 16

initially as little more than a proxy for Moscow, Nazdratenko became, according to Blakkisrud, “the *bête noir* of Russian regional politics in the 1990s”,<sup>302</sup> developing a distinctive personal image and a “quirky” style<sup>303</sup> that strengthened the personalization of politics in the Far East. More importantly, over his eight-year tenure he repeatedly clashed horns with the federal government, questioning its right to intervene in regional politics.<sup>304</sup>

The most significant political figure to emerge from the post-Soviet Far East, however, was the long serving Governor of Khabarovsk Krai, Viktor Ishayev, who headed the region from 1991 to 2009. A native of Kemerovo Oblast who had been working in Khabarovsk since the 1960s, accumulating a wide experience managing state enterprises in the shipbuilding and construction sectors,<sup>305</sup> Ishayev quickly gained a reputation as a robust decision-maker by saving communal services in Khabarovsk during a wintertime energy failure and by moving to reduce the influence of criminal leaders in the region.<sup>306</sup> In 1996, in an implicit acknowledgment of the Governor’s growing importance, Yeltsin signed a power-sharing treaty with Khabarovsk Krai shortly before the hotly contested presidential election.<sup>307</sup> Ishayev, however, maintained his ability to manoeuvre between the federal government and his local constituents, knowing how to touch the right strings when communicating with the latter. Channelling a widespread feeling among economic operatives in the region, and giving a well-measured nod to supporters of Far Eastern autonomy, in 1998 he wrote:

“[e]verywhere, among entrepreneurs, in factories, at logging-lumbering enterprises, or in mines, protests are being raised against Moscow functionaries who pump virtually all the

---

<sup>302</sup> Blakkisrud, H. 2018, p. 23

<sup>303</sup> Kynev, A. 2020, p. 181

<sup>304</sup> Blakkisrud, H. 2018, p. 23

<sup>305</sup> RIA Novosti: “Биография Виктора Ишаева” (March 28, 2019), available at:

<https://ria.ru/20190328/1552178325.html>

<sup>306</sup> Kynev, A. 2020, pp. 180-181

<sup>307</sup> Troyakova, T.: “The political situation in the Russian Far East”, in Bradshaw, M. J. ed. *The Russian Far East and Pacific Asia. Unfulfilled Potential* (Routledge, 2001), p. 55

money and resources out of the territories and never offer anything in return. Under such circumstances, the idea of ‘our own’ republic does not seem that absurd”.<sup>308</sup>

By the end of the 1990s, Ishayev’s authority in Khabarovsk Krai was nearly absolute, and his close identification with the region, exemplified in his electoral slogan, “My party is Khabarovsk Krai”, the bedrock of his political appeal.<sup>309</sup>

Differently from his colleagues in Amur Oblast and Sakhalin, who actively supported the creation of electoral blocs appealing to local sentiment,<sup>310</sup> Ishayev was nonetheless a relatively early supporter of United Russia, having joined the “party of power” in June 2003.<sup>311</sup> A watershed moment, however, occurred in mid-2004. Just a few weeks into Vladimir Putin’s second term, a bill introduced in the State Duma proposed a radical reform of the Russian welfare system, exchanging long-standing subsidies for monthly cash stipends.<sup>312</sup> The opposition of many regional heads to such a plan erupted in a governors’ “fronde” led by Ishayev. According to one scholar, this concerted opposition action by the governors was the decisive factor pushing Putin to abolish gubernatorial elections in September 2004.<sup>313</sup> It is likely, however, that Ishayev’s popularity and firm grip on power made his removal a politically unwise move for the Kremlin, which instead reappointed him as governor in 2007. In February 2009 Ishayev still felt secure enough to appoint the former speaker of the Khabarovsk regional Duma as deputy chairman of his government, after he had been removed from his post due to having expressed an opinion out of line with the Kremlin.<sup>314</sup> Just two months later, however, Ishayev’s tenure ended when he became the first governor to be appointed presidential envoy to the

---

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 51-52

<sup>309</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V. 2020, p. 118

<sup>310</sup> Golosov, G. V. 2011, p. 63

<sup>311</sup> Reuter, O. J. “The politics of dominant party formation: United Russia and Russia’s governors”, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 62, Issue 2 (2010), p. 325

<sup>312</sup> Chivers, C. J.: “Cash vs. benefits: efficiency, or assault on Russia’s soul?” *The New York Times* (June 18, 2004), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/18/world/cash-vs-benefits-efficiency-or-assault-on-russia-s-soul.html>

<sup>313</sup> Petrov, N.: 2010, p. 297

<sup>314</sup> Petrov, N.: “The Kremlin’s New Man in the Far East”, *Carnegie Moscow Center* (May 12, 2009), available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2009/05/12/kremlin-s-new-man-in-far-east-pub-23114>

Far East. While this move by the Kremlin made perfect sense from a policymaking standpoint (few officials could have had Ishayev's in-depth knowledge of the region) it has been suggested that the role of presidential envoy was being used by Moscow as a sort of "honourable discharge", which put a powerful governor in a position from which he would not be able to openly oppose the federal government.<sup>315</sup>

In June 2012, in line with the established procedure,<sup>316</sup> the portfolio of minister for the Development of the Far East was added to Ishayev's role as presidential envoy. Soon, however, intra-elite rivalries combined with diverging visions for the role of the State in the Far East came to light. In March 2013 a state program with the enormous budget of 10 trillion roubles, of which the government would contribute 3.8 trillion, was adopted, focusing on large scale infrastructural projects.<sup>317</sup> Just five months later, however, Ishayev was replaced, the ministerial and presidential envoy positions were split, and Aleksandr Galushka became the new minister for the Far East. The contrast with Ishayev could not have been clearer: contrarily to the large-scale investments engineered by his predecessor, Galushka was keener on an approach designed to attract private investment.<sup>318</sup> Most importantly, Galushka was a Muscovite with very little experience in the Far East, and it was indeed in the capital that the new Minister spent most of his time, while the Khabarovsk branch of the Ministry of the Far East saw its importance drastically diminished, with its staff being reduced to only 28, from a starting point of over 200, by early 2014.<sup>319</sup>

At the time of the 2018 gubernatorial elections, the Krai's appetite for a protest vote was understandably high. Following Ishayev's "promotion" in 2009, Vyacheslav Shport was appointed governor. A native of Komsomolsk-on-Amur whose political career had mostly taken place in the

---

<sup>315</sup> Petrov, N. 2010, p. 296

<sup>316</sup> Blakkisrud, H. 2018, p. 16

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19

<sup>318</sup> Koldunova, E.: "The curious case of State-driven regionalism in the Russian Far East", Ponars Eurasia (December 18, 2020), available at: <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-curious-case-of-state-driven-regionalism-in-the-russian-far-east/>

<sup>319</sup> Blakkisrud, H. 2018, p. 17

State Duma in Moscow, he had been appointed deputy chairman of the regional government just one month before his rise to the governorship.<sup>320</sup> As it frequently happened in cases of successors coming from within a previous administration, clashes between Shport's and Ishayev's teams inside the regional bureaucratic machine were frequent.<sup>321</sup> The main contrast between Shport and his predecessor, however, was in their approach to the region's economic trouble. In particular, the new governor's reports to the federal government were perceived by the citizens as painting a deliberately rosy picture, aimed more at pleasing Moscow rather than portraying the Krai's situation accurately.<sup>322</sup> For a population chiefly worried about low wages, high unemployment among locals, high prices for housing and communal services, and feeling abandoned by the federal government,<sup>323</sup> Shport's reports of high salaries and rapid economic growth only served to heighten the feeling that it now was their own representative who had abandoned them.

If as late as the March 2018 presidential election support for Putin was high in Khabarovsk Krai, improving on its result from the 2012 election,<sup>324</sup> by the time of the September gubernatorial election discontent in the region was palpable. Nor was tension limited to the region. An unpopular pension reform announced in June, raising the retirement age to 60 for women and 65 for men, sparked country-wide protests throughout the summer, and caused Putin's approval ratings to fall to levels not seen in years.<sup>325</sup> Thus, in Primorsky Krai, the election's second round was cancelled after the result, later deemed falsified, showed the candidate from the Communist Party virtually on par with United Russia. To prevent the defeat of the new United Russia candidate, former head of three different federal subjects Oleg Kozhemyako, at the second round do-over in December, he was

---

<sup>320</sup> RIA Novosti: "Биография Вячеслава Шпорта" (April 30, 2013; updated March 1, 2020), available at: <https://ria.ru/20130430/935357613.html>

<sup>321</sup> Kynev, A. 2020, p. 165

<sup>322</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V 2020, p. 126

<sup>323</sup> Pechenkin, N. M., Netkachev, K. I.: "Протестные общественно политические настроения жителей Дальнего Востока в 2020 году (на примере Хабаровска, Владивостока, Благовещенска)", *Гуманитарные науки. Вестник Финансового Университета*, Vol. 11, Issue 4 (2021), p. 171

<sup>324</sup> Pechenkin, N. M., Netkachev, K. I. 2021, p. 170

<sup>325</sup> Movchan, A.: "Putin's botched pension reform" Carnegie Moscow Center (October 9, 2018), available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2018/10/09/putin-s-botched-pension-reform-pub-77451>

allowed to conduct his campaign appealing to regional identity and voicing his opposition to federal policies.<sup>326</sup> Meanwhile, on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, the protest vote against the party of power had carried Sergei Furgal, a little-known politician from the Liberal Democratic Party, to a landslide victory against the incumbent Shport in Khabarovsk, in one of four electoral upsets by the “systemic” opposition at the autumn 2018 regional elections.

Furgal’s victory was therefore the result of a multitude of factors, both economic and political, which had been in the making for decades before 2018. It is widely accepted, however, that his own personality or campaign were not among them. In Khabarovsk the defeat of United Russia was seen not as a victory of Furgal, or much less of the Liberal Democratic Party, but as a victory of the Krai’s population itself.<sup>327</sup> The next section will show how Furgal’s policies while in office served to consolidate this perception, leading into the mass action that followed his arrest.

### **4.3. Sergei Furgal: becoming the “people’s governor”**

As one scholar wrote in reference to opposition victories in Khabarovsk and Khakassia, “candidates fielded by the so-called systemic opposition ... are products, not initiators, of protest voting”.<sup>328</sup> This was certainly true in Furgal’s case. Interviews of participants of the 2020 protests have shown that at the time of his election Sergei Furgal was not a significant player, nor was his name or reputation a driving force behind the electoral support that was bestowed upon him.<sup>329</sup> Given the strict requirements for political candidacies, especially the so-called “municipal filter”, the fact that he was not only allowed to run for governor, but it was indeed the second time he represented the Liberal Democratic Party at the gubernatorial elections, having been soundly defeated by Shport

---

<sup>326</sup> Kynev, A. 2020, p. 178

<sup>327</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V 2020, p. 126

<sup>328</sup> Golova, T.: “Mobilising for regional protests on Russian social media: the case of Khabarovsk”, *ZOIS Report No. 4 / 2021*, (Centre for East European and International Studies, June 2021), p. 6

<sup>329</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V 2020, p. 126

at the 2013 contest, is indicative of how unthreatening his candidature was deemed to be. According to the Financial Times, a briefing document prepared for Putin ahead of the regional elections acknowledged the locals' dissatisfaction towards the economic and social spheres in the Krai but reputed that no viable alternative to the incumbent Shport was in sight.<sup>330</sup> Moreover, following his narrow victory in the election's first round, Furgal had accepted a deal to become Shport's vice-governor, although he had not withdrawn from the electoral contest.<sup>331</sup> During his brief tenure, Furgal nonetheless showed remarkable political skills, channelling the symbolic significance of his electoral victory into policy decisions that strengthened his image as a governor chosen by the people against the will of Moscow.

Furgal's policymaking as governor has been described as focusing on "quick small victories",<sup>332</sup> opting for a series of populist measures that served to connect him to the population. Of this type are certainly the cuts he implemented to the salaries and pensions of top public officials, including his own, as well as restricting their use of first-class flights and selling the regional administration's yacht.<sup>333</sup> Responding to the population's perceived isolation from the rest of the country, he introduced measures to lower the prices of internal long-distance flights, which remained nonetheless nearly unaffordable for the majority of the Krai's citizens.<sup>334</sup> Other policies, however, were certainly more ambitious. Shortly after taking office, Furgal took aim at the fishing contracts in place on the river Amur. Especially in rural villages in the north of the Krai local residents lamented the concession of sweeping rights by the federal government to large corporations, whose large fishing nets near the river's mouth had contributed to a shortage of wild salmon, a traditional catch whose abundance had been taken for granted by the locals for generations. The governor called for

---

<sup>330</sup> Foy, H. "Protesting Putin: Kremlin faces revolt in the regions", Financial Times (August 6, 2020), available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/a66161bf-a136-4329-91ec-c194570b6784>

<sup>331</sup> Golova, T. 2021, p. 7

<sup>332</sup> Pechenkin, N. M., Netkachev, K. I. 2021, p. 171

<sup>333</sup> Ventsel, A.: "The background to the protests in the Russian Far East", International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) (August 27, 2020), available at: <https://icds.ee/en/the-background-to-the-protests-in-the-russian-far-east/>

<sup>334</sup> Moscatelli, O.: "'Mosca, vattene!'. L'Estremo Oriente russo preoccupa Putin", Limes, Rivista italiana di Geopolitica (July 30, 2020), available at: <https://www.limesonline.com/rubrica/khabarovsk-proteste-furgal-sviluppo-economico>



new limits on salmon fishing, only a handful of which were implemented by the time of his arrest.<sup>335</sup> Another popular measure among low-income families was the standardisation of kindergartens' lunch programmes, which ensured that every child would receive the same meal regardless of their families' financial capabilities.<sup>336</sup>

More than the ultimately mixed effectiveness of Furgal's measures,<sup>337</sup> it was his personal communicating style that made the largest contribution to his popularity. Thanks to an excellent work by his communication and media team, Furgal was able to develop a carefully crafted image as a people's person, frequently engaged in listening tours to learn about his constituents' needs.<sup>338</sup> When he could not provide a solution to a problem affecting the region, he often would invite his listeners to "think together",<sup>339</sup> certainly an effective message towards a citizenry resentful of how distant the previous governor had been perceived.

While it is clear that Furgal was well aware of his peculiar role as the inadvertent embodiment of the region's disgruntlement towards Moscow, he was careful enough to not style himself as an opposition figure.<sup>340</sup> This, however, was not enough to prevent Putin from signing a decree in December 2018 moving the capital of the Far Eastern Federal District from Khabarovsk to Vladivostok. The fact that Vladivostok had already seen its status raised by hosting both the 2012 APEC summit and, since 2015, the annual Eastern Economic Forum, makes it difficult to ascertain whether Putin's decision was a politically motivated response to Furgal's election. What is certain is that the relocation was a heavy blow to Khabarovsk, losing not only in prestige but also in more

---

<sup>335</sup> Troianovski, A.: "The fish rots from the head": how a salmon crisis stoked Russian protests", The New York Times (August 15, 2020), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/15/world/europe/Khabarovsk-Russia-Amur-protests-salmon.html>

<sup>336</sup> Ventsel, A. 2020

<sup>337</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V 2020, p. 120

<sup>338</sup> Pechenkin, N. M., Netkachev, K. I. 2021, p. 170

<sup>339</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V 2020, p. 120

<sup>340</sup> Holcomb, F., Dossymov, A.: Consolidated power and growing unrest: Putin's Russia in Summer 2020", The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (September 30, 2020), available at: <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/30/consolidated-power-and-growing-unrest-putins-russia-in-summer-2020/>

tangible financial and administrative resources.<sup>341</sup> Nevertheless, by 2019 Furgal's popularity had carried the Liberal Democratic Party to victories in elections for the regional legislature and for the city Dumas of Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk-on-Amur, essentially signalling that the Liberal Democratic Party had replaced United Russia as the "party of power" in the Krai.<sup>342</sup>

As much as the landslide defeat of the United Russia incumbent and the new governor's subsequent policies might have irritated Moscow, the death knell on Furgal's tenure was most likely the Krai's lukewarm response to the 2020 constitutional referendum. As we have seen, in a system of hybrid democracy it is not for the systemic opposition to oppose high-stakes decisions by the ruling party. Indeed, led by Zhirinovskiy, the Liberal Democratic Party group in the State Duma had supported the original constitutional reform bill.<sup>343</sup> This was all the more evidence that despite not belonging to the federal "party of power", as regional head Furgal was still expected to deliver a satisfactory share of votes in favour of the reform. Khabarovsk's results, however, posed a stark contrast with the national figures: against a national voter turnout of 67.97 percent, of which 77.92 percent supported the reform, turnout in the Krai was only 44.2 percent, of which 62.3 percent in favour, making the region one of the least supportive of the referendum nationwide.<sup>344</sup> It was only nine days after the referendum that Furgal was arrested.

More than a year before the referendum, on March 29, 2019, former governor and Far Eastern political heavyweight Viktor Ishayev was arrested in Moscow. Despite his popularity in the region, it was not an event that sparked popular agitation in Khabarovsk. While it is possible that ten years after the end of his governorship, and six years after he was replaced as minister for the Far East, his star was quite simply not shining as bright, it also does suggest that Furgal's policies and personality

---

<sup>341</sup> Golova, T. 2021, p. 12

<sup>342</sup> Novikov, D. V.: "'Воронка причинности' социально-политического протеста в Хабаровском Крае лета-осени 2020 года", *Ученые записки Комсомольского-на-Амуре Государственного Технического Университета*, Vol. 56, Issue 8 (2021), p. 42

<sup>343</sup> Hutcheson, D. S., McAllister, I. "Consolidating the Putin Regime: The 2020 Referendum on Russia's constitutional amendments", *Russian Politics* Vol. 6, Issue 3 (2021), p. 364

<sup>344</sup> See Hutcheson, D. S., McAllister, I. 2021, p. 365 for the nationwide results; Golova, T. 2021, p. 10 for the results in Khabarovsk Krai

were not a secondary factor behind the protests that broke out in July 2020. It is to an analysis of the protests themselves, their demands, dynamics, and consequences, that the next section turns.

#### 4.4. The 2020 protests in detail

During the course of the recurring popular actions following Furgal's arrest, starting in July and appearing to fade out by the end of the year, the protesters' demands and slogans reflected to a large extent the underlying themes that had led to the regional population's discontent.

Sergei Furgal was arrested on July 9, 2020, with the modality of his detention becoming a key component in the first phase of the population's indignation. The governor was taken by the OMON, the Russian National Guard's Special Force used most often as riot police. The particularly harsh footage of his arrest by machine gun-carrying police forces was widely broadcast on national and regional television channels, creating a strong impression.<sup>345</sup> The fact that Furgal was immediately flown to Moscow and placed in preliminary detention reinforced the perception that the federal government had essentially abducted not only the popular, but popularly elected, head of the Krai.<sup>346</sup> The accusation levelled against him was that of having organized the murder of a businessman in 2005. While it is hard to determine whether such an accusation had any merit (the demarcation lines between businesses and organized crime in the Far East had been especially porous during the first two post-Soviet decades),<sup>347</sup> its timing and target suggested that the primary motivation behind the arrest was political. During the first large street protest on Saturday, July 11, only two days after Furgal's detention, the main calls were thus for the governor to be tried in Khabarovsk rather than Moscow, a clear sign of how regional identity and its opposition to federal power in the capital was an essential component of the protests from the start.<sup>348</sup> Against an official head count of just over

---

<sup>345</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V 2020, p. 111

<sup>346</sup> Novikov, D. V. 2021, p. 43

<sup>347</sup> Moscatelli, O. 2020

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

3,000 protesters,<sup>349</sup> the actual number of participants was likely much larger, probably ranging around 12,000<sup>350</sup> at least. Typically, the protesters would march through the main squares in the city and arrive in Lenin Square, in front of the Krai's government building.<sup>351</sup> While virtually every day from July 11 saw some kind of protest action, including pickets in Komsomolsk-on-Amur and solidarity actions in Vladivostok, Yekaterinburg, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Moscow itself among others, it was the regular Saturday marches that brought tens of thousands in the city's squares, an enormous figure in a city with a population of just over 600,000.<sup>352</sup> Very soon, slogans such as "Moscow, go home!" and chants calling for Putin's resignation became widely heard along with those in support of Furgal.<sup>353</sup>

Given the scarce coverage of the Khabarovsk protests on federal TV channels, where nonetheless local deputies and directors of enterprises appeared inviting the population to stop attending the rallies due to the danger of spreading Covid,<sup>354</sup> it was hardly surprising that social media would play an important role in keeping the marches happening regularly and raise awareness of the events in Khabarovsk through the Federation. To simultaneously prevent and mock the government's oversight of the digital space, which can have serious legal consequences for organizers of protest actions and participants alike, the rallies were referred to as "feeding the pigeons" on social media pages and groups.<sup>355</sup> A typical message in this sense, posted on July 15, reads as follows: "The plan is to feed the pigeons collectively. Saturday at 12 at Lenin Square in Khabarovsk. You can support the Khabarovsk pigeons".<sup>356</sup> It is largely to the credit of social media use that, according to a poll

---

<sup>349</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V 2020, p. 111

<sup>350</sup> Golova, T. 2021, p. 5

<sup>351</sup> Litvinekno, I., Mingazov S.: "Жители Хабаровска вышли на стихийный митинг в поддержку арестованного Фургала", *Vedomosti* (July 11, 2020), available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2020/07/11/834380-miting-furgala>

<sup>352</sup> Golova, T. 2021, p. 12

<sup>353</sup> Newlin, C.: "Patterns of dissent in Russia's regions", Centre for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) (July 17, 2020), available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/patterns-dissent-russias-regions>

<sup>354</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V 2020, p. 112

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.* p. 112

<sup>356</sup> Golova, T. 2021, p. 23

conducted by the Levada Center, 83 percent of Russians had heard about the rallies in Khabarovsk by July 20, of whom 45 percent saw the protesters favourably (compared to 17 percent with a negative perception).<sup>357</sup> Social media therefore helped maintain the regular protests alive, in the absence, remarked by virtually all observers, of a clear leadership or an overarching strategic plan. Indeed, participants of the rallies could be remarkably diverse ensemble, with nostalgic communists marching alongside supporters of a Far Eastern autonomous Republic.<sup>358</sup>

It has already been remarked that for all the various factors behind Furgal's electoral success and subsequent popularity, his membership of the Liberal Democratic Party was not one of them. While in the immediate aftermath of his arrest, the historic leader of the Party Vladimir Zhirinovskiy threatened that, in protest with the Kremlin's actions, his entire group in the State Duma would resign, few were surprised when nothing of the sort happened.<sup>359</sup> In the Krai itself, despite being elected on the wave of Furgal's popularity as the majority party in the regional Duma and the city Dumas of the two largest regional centres, no one from the Liberal Democratic Party was seen at the rallies.<sup>360</sup> Two noteworthy exceptions, however, were Pyotr Yemelyanov and Aleksandr Kayan, regional legislators who quit the Party in protest.<sup>361</sup> Among local officials, the only one who publicly supported the protesters' cause was the mayor of Komsomolsk-on-Amur Aleksandr Zhornik.<sup>362</sup> Predictably, the same cannot be said of the mayor of Khabarovsk itself Sergei Kravchuk, a member of United Russia. In an interview during the first week of protests he claimed that its participants were being paid to attend the marches, and although said statement was retracted shortly afterwards, calls for his own resignation began emerging from the rallies.<sup>363</sup>

---

<sup>357</sup> Levada-Center, The: "Protests in Khabarovsk Krai" (September 21, 2020), available at: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/09/21/protests-in-khabarovsk-krai/>

<sup>358</sup> Makarychev, A.: "The Minsk-Khabarovsk nexus: Ethical, performative, corporeal", *New Perspectives* Vol. 29, Issue 1 (2021), pp. 113

<sup>359</sup> Golova, T. 2021, p. 20

<sup>360</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V 2020, p. 112

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.* p. 112

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113

The starkest demonstration of the small importance given by the protesters to party politics, however, was the response to the arrival of the new governor, Mikhail Degtyarev, appointed by Putin on July 20. Despite belonging to the same party as Furgal, a concession that Putin certainly hoped would help placate the protesting population, Degtyarev was seen primarily as a party apparatchik with no experience or connection to the region. If Furgal had represented the reclaimed political subjectivity of the Krai's people, having been elected against the Moscow-favoured incumbent, Degtyarev was an embodiment of the federal government's policy of appointing outsiders whose loyalties would lie very far from the region they were sent to administer. On social media he was frequently referred to as little more than "Moscow's *protégé*".<sup>364</sup> The new governor himself seemed at times to play into this perception, appearing on social media while buying ice cream in the city centre or asking the locals for sauna recommendations.<sup>365</sup> As one scholar noted, Degtyarev's actions constituted a seemingly deliberate contrast with the public mood in the Krai, with the new governor "playing a role of a jester sent by the central power ... in response to the mass scale actions of protest".<sup>366</sup> Upon his arrival, Degtyarev refused to meet with the protesters, instead declaring at an interview on July 22 that the rallies were being deliberately aggravated by foreigners.<sup>367</sup> Ironically, Degtyarev might have been somewhat right, given that the march occurring on the Saturday following his arrival in Khabarovsk was the largest in terms of participation up to that point, and most likely constituted the peak of protest activity for the Krai.<sup>368</sup>

It is not clear whether the authorities' initial restraint from repressing the unauthorized marches stemmed from real uncertainty over how to deal with a rare political protest in a peripheral region, or from the perception that, despite the anti-Kremlin chants, the threat from the Khabarovsk rallies was low. Shortly after Degtyarev's appointment, a strategy of targeted repression began, aimed at the

---

<sup>364</sup> Golova, T. 2021, p. 26

<sup>365</sup> Makarychev, A. 2021, p. 115

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.* p.115

<sup>367</sup> DV Novosti: "Дегтярев заявил, что в протестах в Хабаровске замешаны иностранцы" (July 24, 2020), available at: <https://www.dvnovosti.ru/khab/2020/07/24/117803/>

<sup>368</sup> Foy, H. 2020

most visible activists. On July 28 the two drivers of the “Furgalmobile”, a minibus carrying and distributing pro-Furgal posters were given short administrative arrests of 10 and 20 days respectively.<sup>369</sup> On July 31 it was the turn of Alexey Romanov, a popular Khabarovsk-born blogger covering the protests.<sup>370</sup> Due to the leaderless nature of the marches, these arrests did not stop the Saturday protests, which continued through the summer, albeit with diminishing numbers of participants. A turning point was October 10, when the protesters attempted to plant tents in Lenin Square in front of the regional government building. For the first time since the start of the mass actions, the protest was dispersed by the special forces in anti-riot gear, and dozens of protesters were detained.<sup>371</sup> While in some cases a violent response by the authorities can be the trigger for renewed participation in protest actions, this was not the case in Khabarovsk.<sup>372</sup> By the end of the year the marches had virtually ceased.

#### **4.5. The Khabarovsk Krai protests: concluding remarks**

Multiple factors have probably contributed to the gradual subduing of the Khabarovsk protests. The initial authorities’ response aimed at turning the marches into a routine, which inevitably settled into fatigue as the mass actions’ objectives became more and more unachievable. It should also be noted that while the protest actions inside the territory of Khabarovsk Krai were allowed to proceed smoothly, the same cannot be said of solidarity actions in other federal subjects, where detentions and fines of the protesters were commonplace.<sup>373</sup> Furthermore, as the weeks went by the leading causes moving the participants started to become diluted, responding to events outside the region such as the concurrent anti-Lukashenko protests in Belarus and the poisoning of Alexey

---

<sup>369</sup> Golubeva, A. “Сто дней протестов в Хабаровске: чем запомнились митинги и что с ними будет”, BBC News | Русская служба (October 16, 2020), available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-54575059>

<sup>370</sup> Golova, T. 2021, p. 5

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4

<sup>373</sup> Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V 2020, p. 113

Navalny.<sup>374</sup> By the time the riot police intervened to disperse the attempt to set up a protest camp on October 10, the region's appetite for collective street action had been weakened too much to bounce back.

It would appear, therefore, that the authorities' strategy, however deliberate it might have been, was a winning one. It allowed the initial spark behind the protest to settle and, meanwhile, dissuaded solidarity actions in other cities in the Federation to prevent the anti-Kremlin message spreading outside Khabarovsk. The events of 2020, however, also show that when long-standing popular resentment towards the federal government's policies in the peripheral regions can find an institutional channel (in this case the protest vote against Shport), the limits of the Kremlin's power-vertical emerge starkly. There was no doubt, in the eyes of the Khabarovsk protesters, that the target of their grievances sat at the very top of the Russian Federation.

---

<sup>374</sup> Golubeva, A. 2020



## Conclusion

Through the analysis of two significant recent protest events, as well as the historical background in which they were steeped, this research has sought to evaluate whether local protests in Russia pose a threat to the Kremlin's centralised and increasingly authoritarian power, today embodied by Vladimir Putin. While every federal subject in Russia can be expected to present its own peculiar historical and political trajectory, the first two chapters have illustrated how local dynamics were inevitably played out against a background of rapid changes in the distribution of power between the federal centre and the regions. As we have seen, Moscow's control over the subnational units was considerably strengthened in the early 2000s, with an improved economic situation allowing for a series of reforms that opened up regional regimes, helped the Kremlin's favoured candidates to consolidate their grip, and neutralised the potentially most troublesome sources of opposition to the government. Perhaps most importantly, the 2000s saw a radical transformation of the role of regional leaders, and, in consequence, how they became perceived by their constituents. By the end of the decade, the figure of governor no longer brought to mind a crafty political operative fulfilling an electoral mandate, not afraid to use the leverage at his disposal to defend the region's interest in the federal arena. It now became little more than a technocratic role, appointed by the Kremlin to implement its policies, for which he would be evaluated, rewarded, or dismissed. This perception was often exacerbated by the lack of personal connections between a governor and the region he headed.

The two case studies that are illustrated in this research present important differences, yet the populations of both Yekaterinburg and Khabarovsk Krai had been affected by changes at the federal level that left them with very limited options in terms of political representation. For Khabarovsk, a region which particularly suffered the federal state's neglect during the economic difficulties of the 1990s, the remnants of the heavyweight governor era ended with Viktor Ishayev's "honourable discharge" in 2009. The population's protest vote for Sergei Furgal, followed by the new governor's

skilful political actions and communicating style, was seen as a regional re-appropriation of a lost sovereignty. It was Moscow's complete disregard for this sovereignty that led to the mass scale protests in the Summer of 2020. In the case of Yekaterinburg, it is likely that the reduction of political space was particularly felt in the capital of a region that, since the 1990s, had enjoyed a comparatively lively political culture. The city's penchant for organised political engagement was encapsulated in the peculiar shape taken in the city by the 2011-2012 federal protests "for fair elections", as well as the victory of Yevgeny Roizman in the 2013 mayoral elections. If Furgal's televised arrest in Khabarovsk was a most direct representation of the Kremlin's power over the regions, Roizman's resignation in 2018 casts him as a more indirect victim of the "vertical of power", as he was forcibly rendered irrelevant by an empowered governor who, in the late 2010s, could only be a Kremlin loyalist. Appearing as a textbook case of the new brand of civic protests that have emerged in Russia in recent years, the 2019 events in Yekaterinburg may instead show the small distance between protesting policies and demonstrating against the political system.

There is little doubt that the invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, has opened a new phase in Russian history, as well as in the country's relations with the international community. Recent events also show that the prolonged war could have a deep impact on the federal centre's relations with the regions. In particular, following Putin's September 21<sup>st</sup> announcement of a partial mobilisation of reservists, protests have erupted across the Federation, most notably in the ethnic republics whose populations are disproportionately represented among the Russian army's ranks, casualties, and recruits. Early reports of over a hundred arrests in Dagestan, where at least six protests against the new wave of recruitments had taken place within a week, 24 detentions in Yakutsk, the capital of Sakha Republic, at a September 25 rally, or the accusations by the very active Free Buryatia Foundation of conducting a "total mobilisation" in the Republic, indicate that the anti-Moscow resentment may be rapidly escalating in the most impoverished federal subjects.<sup>375</sup>

---

<sup>375</sup> See Ilyushina, M.: "Anger flares as Russia mobilization hits minority regions and protesters", The Washington Post (September 23, 2022), available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/23/russia-mobilization-minorities->

Furthermore, 16 regions have seen arson attacks on army recruitment offices in the days following Putin's declaration.<sup>376</sup> While these episodes do not yet constitute a solid enough basis to draw conclusions with regards to the system's stability, studying the war's impact on federal relations in Russia will certainly be a fascinating object of inquiry in the near future.

From the 2000s, strengthening the "vertical of power" has been a priority for the Kremlin. Recent events, however, show that the opposition in Russia has not disappeared, and nor has the challenge of maintaining a large and diverse federal state intact. In this sense, anti-system forces may yet find that it is in the local and regional arenas that the most promising ground for mobilisations can be found.

---

[ukraine-war/](https://www.economist.com/ukraine-war/); Economist, The: "Protests erupt across Russia" (September 29, 2022), available at: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/09/29/protests-erupt-across-russia>

<sup>376</sup> Seddon, M.: "Anti-mobilisation protests spread in Russia", Financial Times (September 25, 2022), available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/6b694942-3501-479e-9b6a-0eabd856b45c>

## **Bibliography:**

Babun, R. V.: “Local self-government in Russia. A new stage of municipal development”, *Problems of Economic Transition*, Vol. 60, Issue 8-9 (2018), pp. 624-639

Belokurova, E.: “NGOs and politics in Russian regions”, in Gel'man V. and Ross, C. ed. *The politics of sub-national authoritarianism in Russia* (New York, Routledge, 2016), pp. 107-122

Belousov, A. B., Davydov D. A., Kochukhova, E. S.: “В постматериалистическом тренде: Мотивация участников протеста в сквере у театра драмы в Екатеринбурге”, *Мониторинг общественного мнения: Экономические и социальные перемены* No. 6 (2020), pp. 53-72

Blakkisrud, H.: “An Asian pivot starts at home: The Russian Far East in Russia regional policy”, in Blakkisrud, H., Rowe, E. W. ed. *Russia's turn to the East: Domestic policymaking and regional cooperation* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 11-30

Bliakher, L. E., Kovalevsky, A. V.: “Что это было? Предварительная рефлексия о хабаровских митингах”, *Полития* Vol. 99, Issue 4 (2020), pp. 108–136

Bliakher, L. E., Vasil'eva, L. A.: “The Russian Far East in a State of Suspension. Between the ‘Global Economy’ and ‘State Tutelage’”, *Russian Politics & Law* Vol. 48, Issue 1 (2010), pp. 80-95

Busygina, I., Filippov, M. “COVID and federal relations in Russia”, *Russian Politics* Vol. 6, Issue 3 (2021), pp. 279-300

Chuman, M.: “The rise and fall of power-sharing treaties between centre and regions in post-Soviet Russia”, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 19, Issue 2 (2011), pp. 133-150

Clardie, J.: “Protests in Russia's regions: The influence of regional governance”, *Social Science Quarterly* Vol. 103, Issue 1 (2022), pp. 5-17

Crowley, S., Olimpiewa, I.: "Labor protests and their consequences in Putin's Russia", *Problems of Post-Communism* Volume 65, Issue 5 (2018), pp. 344-358

Dmitriev, M. "Lost in transition? The geography of protests and attitude change in Russia", *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 67, Issue 2 (2015), pp. 224-243

Easter, G. M.: "Redefining centre-regional relations in the Russian Federation: Sverdlovsk Oblast", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 49, Issue 4 (1997), pp. 617-635

Evans, A. B.: "Civil society and protests in Russia", in Ross C. ed. *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation. Civil Society Awakens?* (New York, Routledge, 2016), pp. 16-35

Evans, A. B.: "Protests and civil society in Russia: The struggle for the Khimki Forest", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* Vol. 45, Issue 3-4 (2012), pp. 233-242

Evans, A. D.: "Protest patterns in provincial Russia: a paired comparison of company towns", *Studies in Comparative International Development* Vol. 51, Issue 4 (2016), pp. 456-481

Gel'man, V. "Political opposition in Russia: a troubled transformation", *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 67, Issue 2 (2015), pp. 177-191

Gel'man, V., Golosov, G. V.: "Regional party system formation in Russia: the deviant case of Sverdlovsk Oblast", *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* Vol. 14, Issue 1-2 (1998), pp. 31-53

Golosov, G. V. "The Regional Roots of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia" *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 63, Issue 4 (2011), pp. 623-639

Golova, T.: "Mobilising for regional protests on Russian social media: the case of Khabarovsk", *ZOIS Report* No. 4 / 2021, (Centre for East European and International Studies, June 2021)

Grishin, N. "Regional opposition in Russia: Aliens in a hybrid regime", *Russian Politics* Vol. 1, Issue 3 (2016), pp. 269-290

Hale, H.: “Yabloko and the challenge of building a liberal party in Russia”, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 56, Issue 7 (2004), pp. 993-1020

Hutcheson, D. S., McAllister, I. “Consolidating the Putin Regime: The 2020 Referendum on Russia’s constitutional amendments”, *Russian Politics* Vol. 6, Issue 3 (2021), pp. 355-376

Il’chenko, M.: “The Protest Movement in Yekaterinburg”, in Ross C. ed. *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation. Civil Society Awakens?* (New York, Routledge, 2016), pp. 199-216

Judah, B.: *Fragile Empire. How Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013)

Konyakhina, A. P. “Власть как контрагент: случай российского Дальнего Востока (1985-2014 гг.), *Ойкумена. Регионоведческие исследования* 2015 N. 4 (2015), pp. 43-54

Koryukova, O. P.: “Кейс дискурсы противников и сторонников строительства Храма-на-воде в Екатеринбурге”, in Osintsev, A. V., Mel’nikova E. V. ed. *90 лет Викторову Владимиру Петровичу: материалы круглого стола “Религия и религиоведение на Урале”* (Yekaterinburg, 2018), pp. 133–141

Kynev, A.: “Party politics in the Russian regions: competition of interest groups under the guise of parties”, in Gel’man V., Ross, C. ed. *The politics of sub-national authoritarianism in Russia* (London, Routledge, 2010), pp. 135-150

Kynev, A.: “The Membership of Governors’ teams in Russia’s regions, and the key features of the formation of regional administrations 1991-2018”, *Russian Politics* Vol. 5, Issue 2 (2020), pp. 154-189

Lankina, T., Voznaya, A. “New data on protest trends in Russia’s regions”, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 67, Issue 2 (2015), pp. 327-342

- Ledyayev, V. “Governors and local elites in Russia: patterns of interaction”, *European Politics and Society* Vol. 20, Issue 3 (2019), pp. 315-332
- Makarenko, B.: “Le istituzioni dello Stato russo: un’evoluzione controversa”, in Aragona, G. ed. *La Russia post-sovietica. Dalla caduta del comunismo a Putin: storia della grande transizione* (Milano, ISPI-Mondadori, 2018), pp. 13-52
- Makarychev, A.: “The Minsk-Khabarovsk nexus: Ethical, performative, corporeal”, *New Perspectives* Vol. 29, Issue 1 (2021), pp. 109-119
- March, L.: “Managing opposition in a hybrid regime: Just Russia and parastatal opposition”, *Slavic Review* Vol. 68, Issue 3 (2009), pp. 504-527
- Mommen, A.: “Boris Nemtsov, 1959-2015. Rise and Fall of a Provincial Democrat”, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* Vol. 24, Issue 1 (2016), pp. 5-28
- Morini, M. *La Russia di Putin* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2020)
- Moses, J. C. “The Political Resurrection of Russian Governors”, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 66, Issue 9 (2014), pp. 1395-1424
- Nikiforova, M. V.: “Стратегия дискредитации в дискурсе регионального политика (на материале речей Мэра Екатеринбурга Е. Ройзмана)”, *Политическая Лингвистика* Vol. 43, Issue 4 (2015), pp. 101-105
- Novikov, D. V.: “‘Воронка причинности’ социально-политического протеста в Хабаровском Крае лета-осени 2020 года”, *Ученые записки Комсомольского-на-Амуре Государственного Технического Университета*, Vol. 56, Issue 8 (2021), pp. 38-44
- Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development, The: *OECD Economic Surveys. The Russian Federation 1995* (Paris, OECD, 1995)
- Paustyan, E. “A Treaty for the rich and politically loyal? Explaining the bilateral center-region treaties in Post-Soviet Russia”, *Russian Politics* Vol. 6, Issue 2 (2021), pp. 185-209

Pechenkin, N. M., Netkachev, K. I.: “Протестные общественно политические настроения жителей Дальнего Востока в 2020 году (на примере Хабаровска, Владивостока, Благовещенска)”, *Гуманитарные науки. Вестник Финансового Университета*, Vol. 11, Issue 4 (2021), pp. 169–175

Petrov, N.: “Regional Governors under the Dual Power of Medvedev and Putin”, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* Vol. 26, Issue 2 (2010), pp. 276-305

Reisinger, W. M., Moraski, B. J.: “Regional changes and changing regional relations with the centre”, in in Gel'man V. and Ross, C. ed. *The politics of sub-national authoritarianism in Russia* (New York, Routledge, 2016), pp. 67-84

Reuter, O. J. “The politics of dominant party formation: United Russia and Russia’s Governors”, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 62, Issue 2 (2010), pp. 293-327

Robertson, G. A.: *The politics of protests in hybrid regimes: managing dissent in post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, 2011)

Ross, C., Turovsky, R.: “The representation of political and economic elites in the Russian Federation Council”, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 21, Issue 1 (2013), pp. 59-88

Sakwa, R.: *The Putin Paradox* (London, Bloomsbury, 2020)

Seliverstov, V. E., Kravchenko, N. A., Klistorin, V. I., Yusupova, A. T.: “Russian regions and the federal center against global threats: a year of fighting COVID-19”, *Regional Research of Russia* Vol. 11, Issue 4 (2021), pp. 405-418

Semenov, A. “Electoral performance and mobilization of opposition parties in Russia”, *Russian Politics* Vol. 5, Issue 2 (2020), pp. 236-254

Semenov, A. “The rationale of organizational control: managing the political opposition in Putin’s Russia”, *European Political Science* Vol. 20, Issue 4 (2021), pp. 580-591



Sharafutdinova, G., Steinbuks, J. “Governors matter: A comparative study of state-business relations in Russia’s regions”, *Economics of Transition and Institutional Change* Vol. 25 Issue 3 (2017), pp. 471-493

Slider, D.: “A federal state?”, in Sakwa, R., Hale, H. E., White, S. ed. *Developments in Russian politics* 9 (Red Globe Press, London, 2019), pp. 119-132

Slider, D. “How United is United Russia? Regional sources of intra-party conflict”, *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* Vol. 26, Issue 2 (2010), pp. 257-275

Starodubtsev, A.: *Federalism and Regional Policy in Contemporary Russia* (London, Routledge, 2018)

Stuvøy, K.: “The foreign within’: State-Civil Society relations in Russia”, *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 72, Issue 7 (2020), pp. 1103-1124

Tertychnaya, K.: “Protests and voter defections in electoral autocracies: evidence from Russia”, *Comparative Political Studies* Vol. 53, Issue 12 (2020), pp. 1926-1956

Traub-Merz, R., Gerasimova, E.: “Trade Unions in Russia – Between Survival and Subordination”, in Traub-Merz, R., Pringle, T. ed. *Trade Unions in Transition. From Command to Market Economies* (Berlin, Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, 2018), pp. 163-209

Troyakova, T.: “The political situation in the Russian Far East”, in Bradshaw, M. J. ed. *The Russian Far East and Pacific Asia. Unfulfilled Potential* (London, Routledge, 2001), pp. 51-72

Turovsky, R.: “Opposition parties in hybrid regimes: between repression and co-optation: the case of Russia’s regions”, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* Vol. 15, Issue 1 (2014), pp. 68-87

Turovsky, R.: “The systemic opposition in authoritarian regimes: a case study of Russian regions”, in Ross C. ed. *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation. Civil Society Awakens?* (New York, Routledge, 2016), pp. 121-138

Valliant, R.: “The political dimension”, in Akaha, T. ed. *Politics and economics in the Russian Far East. Changing ties with Asia-Pacific* (London, Routledge, 1997), pp. 3-22

Vatoropin, S., Ruchkin, V.: “The Protest Potential of the Population of Sverdlovsk Oblast”, *Sociological Research* Vol. 57, Issue 1 (2018), pp. 80-91

White, D. “State capacity and regime resilience in Putin’s Russia” *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 39, Issue 1 (2018), pp. 130-143

Zafesova, A.: “La Società civile: tra progresso e ostacoli”, in Aragona, G. ed. *La Russia post-sovietica. Dalla caduta del comunismo a Putin: storia della grande transizione* (Milano, ISPI-Mondadori, 2018), pp. 53-81

## **Webography:**

Antonov, S. “Храм ведет на улицу”, Kommersant (April 12, 2010), available at:

<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1353136>

Baunov, A.: “Russians are getting sick of church”, Carnegie Moscow Center (June 12, 2019),

available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2019/06/12/russians-are-getting-sick-of-church-pub-79305>

Chivers, C. J.: “Cash vs. benefits: efficiency, or assault on Russia’s soul?” The New York Times

(June 18, 2004), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/18/world/cash-vs-benefits-efficiency-or-assault-on-russia-s-soul.html>

DV Novosti: “Дегтярев заявил, что в протестах в Хабаровске замешаны иностранцы” (July 24,

2020), available at: <https://www.dvnovosti.ru/khab/2020/07/24/117803/>

Economist, The: “Protests erupt across Russia” (September 29, 2022), available at:

<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/09/29/protests-erupt-across-russia>

Ferris-Rotman, A.: “Keep Your Eyes on the Protests in Russia’s Provinces”, Foreign Policy (April

28, 2017), available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/28/keep-your-eyes-on-the-protests-in-russias-provinces-putin/>

Foy, H. “Protesting Putin: Kremlin faces revolt in the regions”, Financial Times (August 6, 2020),

available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/a66161bf-a136-4329-91ec-c194570b6784>

Golubeva, A. “Сто дней протестов в Хабаровске: чем запомнились митинги и что с ними

будет”, BBC News | Русская служба (October 16, 2020), available at:

<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-54575059>

Holcomb, F., Dossymov, A.: Consolidated power and growing unrest: Putin’s Russia in Summer

2020”, The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (September 30, 2020),

available at: <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/30/consolidated-power-and-growing-unrest-putins-russia-in-summer-2020/>

Ilyushina, M.: “Anger flares as Russia mobilization hits minority regions and protesters”, The Washington Post (September 23, 2022), available at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/23/russia-mobilization-minorities-ukraine-war/>

Irisova, O.: “Yekaterinburg protest shows cracks in Kremlin’s media manipulation”, The Wilson Center (May 31, 2019), available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/yekaterinburg-protest-shows-cracks-kremlins-media-manipulation>

It’s My City: “Судья показала, что в Екатеринбурге не дебилы сидят” (Interview with Yevgeny Roizman, August 26, 2022), available at: <https://itsmycity.ru/2022-08-26/intervyu-evgeniya-rojzmana>

Koldunova, E.: “The curious case of State-driven regionalism in the Russian Far East”, Ponars Eurasia (December 18, 2020), available at: <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-curious-case-of-state-driven-regionalism-in-the-russian-far-east/>

Kolesnikov, A.: “Protests in Russia: Between Civil Society and political opposition”, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) (November 9, 2020), available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/protests-russia-between-civil-society-and-political-opposition-28047>

Kolesnikov, A.: “Russians find new ways to protest”, The Moscow Times (May 9, 2019), available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/02/russians-find-new-ways-to-protest-a65467>

Kolossov, V., Eckert, D.: “Russian regional capitals as new international actors: the case of Yekaterinburg and Rostov”, *Belgeo. Revue belge de géographie* Issue 1, 2007 (January 1, 2007; available online since December 9, 2013), available at: <https://journals-openedition-org.proxy.bnl.lu/belgeo/11686>

Kulaev, M. “Russian Trade Unions and the de-escalation of protests in Russian regions”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* (2020), available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10767-020-09369-1>

Leighton, J.: “The Roizman Phenomenon”, Carnegie Moscow Center (September 13, 2013), available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/52961>

Levada-Center, The: “Protests” (August 7, 2019), available at: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2019/08/07/protests-3/>

Levada-Center, The: “Protests in Khabarovsk Krai” (September 21, 2020), available at: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/09/21/protests-in-khabarovsk-krai/>

Litvinekno, I., Mingazov S.: “Жители Хабаровска вышли на стихийный митинг в поддержку арестованного Фургала”, Vedomosti (July 11, 2020), available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2020/07/11/834380-miting-furgala>

Luhn, A.: “New mayor of Russia’s fourth-largest city says he is not Putin’s ‘opposition’”, The Guardian (September 13, 2013), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/13/new-mayor-russia-fourth-largest-city-not-putins-opposition>

Meduza: “Евгений Роизман отказался от участия в выборах губернатора Свердловской области” (July 18, 2017), available at: <https://meduza.io/news/2017/07/18/evgeniy-roizman-otkazalsya-ot-uchastiya-v-vyborah-gubernatora-sverdlovskoy-oblasti>

Moscatelli, O.: “‘Mosca, vattene!’. L’Estremo Oriente russo preoccupa Putin”, Limes, Rivista italiana di Geopolitica (July 30, 2020), available at: <https://www.limesonline.com/rubrica/khabarovsk-proteste-furgal-sviluppo-economico>

Moscow Times, The: “Roizman inaugurated as Yekaterinburg mayor” (September 24, 2013), available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/09/24/roizman-inaugurated-as-yekaterinburg-mayor-a27954>

Moscow Times, The: “Yekaterinburg Mayor Yevgeny Roizman on why Russians should boycott the elections” (January 29, 2018), available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/01/29/-not-voting-is-a-matter-of-principle-a60319>

Movchan, A.: “Putin’s botched pension reform” Carnegie Moscow Center (October 9, 2018), available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2018/10/09/putin-s-botched-pension-reform-pub-77451>

Mukhametov, R. S.: “Политические процессы в Свердловской области при Губернаторе Е. Куйвашеве”, *Studia Humanitatis* No. 4 2016 (2016), available at: <http://st-hum.ru/content/muhametov-rs-politicheskie-processy-v-sverdlovskoy-oblasti-pri-gubernatore-e-kuyvasheve>

Narayeva, A.: “Обвиняемый в дискредитации армии Ройзман будет частично свободен” (Vedomosti, August 25, 2022), available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2022/08/25/937659-roizman-chastichno-svoboden>

Newlin, C.: “Patterns of dissent in Russia’s regions”, Centre for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) (July 17, 2020), available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/patterns-dissent-russias-regions>

OVD-Info: “Акции в поддержку народа Украины и против войны” (February 24, 2022), available at: <https://ovd.news/news/2022/02/24/akcii-v-podderzhku-naroda-ukrainy-i-protiv-voyny>, accessed on August 31, 2022

Pagani, C.: “The fragmentation of Russia’s discontent”, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) (November 4, 2019), available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/fragmentation-russias-discontent-24315>

Petrov, N.: “The Kremlin’s New Man in the Far East”, Carnegie Moscow Center (May 12, 2009), available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2009/05/12/kremlin-s-new-man-in-far-east-pub-23114>

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: “Yekaterinburg mayor resigns over scrapping of direct mayoral elections” (May 22, 2018), available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-yekaterinburg-mayor-resigns-over-scrapping-of-direct-mayoral-elections/29241745.html>

RIA Novosti: “Биография Виктора Ишаева” (March 28, 2019), available at: <https://ria.ru/20190328/1552178325.html>

RIA Novosti: “Биография Вячеслава Шпорта” (April 30, 2013; updated March 1, 2020), available at: <https://ria.ru/20130430/935357613.html>

Roth, A.: “Russia detains opposition politician for calling Ukraine war ‘an invasion’” (The Guardian, August 24, 2022), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/24/russia-detains-opposition-leader-yevgeny-roizman-over-criticism-of-ukraine-war>

Roth, A.: “Russian city cancels elections in move to oust maverick mayor”, The Guardian (April 3, 2018), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/03/russian-city-cancels-elections-in-move-to-oust-maverick-mayor>

Rudenkin, D. V.: “Импульсы роста протестной активности российской молодежи: кейс Екатеринбурга”, *Конфликтология / nota bene* No. 1, available at: [https://nbpublish.com/library\\_read\\_article.php?id=32326](https://nbpublish.com/library_read_article.php?id=32326)

Seddon, M.: “Anti-mobilisation protests spread in Russia”, Financial Times (September 25, 2022), available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/6b694942-3501-479e-9b6a-0eabd856b45c>

Shurmina, N., Balmforth, T.: “Rebel Russian mayor resigns over move to scrap elections”, Reuters (May 22, 2018), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-mayor-resignation/rebel-russian-mayor-resigns-over-move-to-scrap-elections-idUSKCN1IN1ZY>

Stanovaya, T.: “The end of Kremlin’s dominance in the regions”, The Moscow Times (April 2, 2019), available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/02/the-end-of-kremlins-dominance-in-the-regions-a65058>

TASS: “Свердловский губернатор прокомментировал задержание Ройзмана” (August 24, 2022), available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/15548531>

Troianovski, A.: “‘The fish rots from the head’: how a salmon crisis stoked Russian protests”, The New York Times (August 15, 2020), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/15/world/europe/Khabarovsk-Russia-Amur-protests-salmon.html>

Vatoropin, A. Vatoropin, S., Chevtaeva N.: “Protest activity of youth in Yekaterinburg in 2017-2021: cases and determining factors”, *SHS Web of Conferences* Vol. 128 (2021), available at: [https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2021/39/shsconf\\_ifsdr2021\\_01033.pdf](https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2021/39/shsconf_ifsdr2021_01033.pdf)

Ventsel, A.: “The background to the protests in the Russian Far East”, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) (August 27, 2020), available at: <https://icds.ee/en/the-background-to-the-protests-in-the-russian-far-east/>

Zhilin, I.: “Крест, кулак и власть”, *Novaya Gazeta* (May 14, 2019), available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/05/14/80510-krest-kulak-i-vlast>