

Russia Can't Ignore Federalism Forever

By [Fyodor Krasheninnikov](#)

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The recent torrent of perverse Kremlin propaganda has tarnished the worthy concept of federalism. First, the Russian government turned it into "federalization" and began persecuting a neighboring country with it. They began calling the pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine "armed supporters of federalization," turning what had been an absurd political vaudeville act into a full-scale bloody drama, simultaneously eclipsing the growing domestic debate over federalism as it applies to Russia.

In fact, federalism is a burning issue in Russia, however much national leaders and their loyal local elites pretend that the problem does not exist.

Vast areas of Russia are poorly governed: The Kremlin often haphazardly appoints local officials based solely on their absolute loyalty to the federal center and their willingness to sacrifice local interests at the first sign from the top.

In most cases, the power vertical extends all the way down to the municipal level, with the result that, whenever the occasion demands, even the interests of major cities are also easily sacrificed to the Kremlin's short-term interests.

Unfortunately, Russia's current model of political authority precludes the existence of any local interests, rights or meaningful local government whenever the federal center feels its interests are at risk.

The Kremlin makes exceptions for several national regions like Chechnya, but that only exacerbates the problem. In turns out that the authorities grant special rights and preferences not for good behavior but for bad, thereby dangerously undermining the entire state structure.

There is no forum in Russia for discussing federalism, nobody to discuss it with, and very real danger for anyone who tries.

In fact, the people who should have a vital interest in federalism make every effort to avoid the topic because they know the authorities will respond quickly and cruelly if they make any attempt to discuss an expansion of their rights.

The collective silence of local elites does not signify their solidarity with the Kremlin as is commonly believed.

It is simply a sign of the universal fear that prompts people to sacrifice even their most pressing interests for the sake of career, wealth and personal freedom.

But Russia is too large and has too many problems for this situation to last forever. This country will inevitably have to engage in a serious discussion of federalism at some point.

What's more, the people who will seek greater autonomy for the regions already hold government posts and run major businesses, although they are not yet in the public spotlight.

The unified support for including federalism in the Soviet constitution played a significant role in the collapse of the Soviet Union:

Just read the biographies of those whose actions led to the Soviet collapse: All emerged from the same Soviet system, and none were nationalists or separatists rallying on central squares and waving anti-Soviet banners.

No sooner did the regions begin demanding — and receiving — the independence due to them than the whole fragile imperial structure crumbled to pieces.

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