

Regional Governors, Moscow, and the War

Busygina, Irina

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Busygina, I. (2023). Regional Governors, Moscow, and the War. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 295, 2-5. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000614686>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

ANALYSIS

Regional Governors, Moscow, and the War

Irina Busygina (Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University),
Mikhail Filippov (State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000614686

Abstract

The model of center-regional relations fully developed in Russia before the war has worked practically flawlessly to date. Current regional elites are just as interested in maintaining the stability of Putin's personal rule as the Kremlin itself. Neither unprecedented sanctions nor the transfer of additional responsibilities to the regions has produced a demand for institutional changes on the part of governors. The war against Ukraine has been publicly supported by regional authorities in all Russian regions without exception, even if the degree and specific forms of support by regional executives have varied across Russia. Moreover, the war has served to increase the cohesion of the country's population across regional borders. As any scenario of future change carries threats and risks for regional incumbents personally, it is unlikely that the governors will break away from Putin and inaugurate the transformation of the system.

During the first year of Russia's war against Ukraine, the main principles governing center-regional relations and the incentives for regional governors remained consistent. The system of institutions in Russia operates in such a way that the current regional elites are just as interested in maintaining the stability of Putin's personal rule as the Kremlin itself.

The West has imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia and continues to intensify them. To date, however, these sanctions have not forced regional governors to distance themselves from Moscow. The war has not caused the political or economic fragmentation of Russia. Instead, Moscow has effectively portrayed the war and sanctions as a national challenge that inextricably links elites to the entire nation.

As during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kremlin has delegated new areas of responsibility to the regions in response to the war. As Andras Toth-Czifra (2022) writes, "the federal government is again outsourcing a growing number of tasks—along with the political responsibility and the fiscal consequences—to the regions. These tasks range from maintaining local economies and supply chains to equipping draftees and providing social payments." This time, however, the main political "message" is different. During the pandemic, the governors had to protect Putin's approval rating from the impact of necessary but unpopular measures. The message to the governors was "handle COVID on your own as best you can." As a result, the national challenge was transformed into a series of regional ones, while Moscow retained *carte blanche* to shift blame and responsibility onto the governors.

Following the outbreak of the war, the Kremlin conveyed a different message to the governors: "You represent Russia, which is waging a righteous war, and your

interests align with Russia's interests." At the same time, since the war is exclusively a federal concern and the governors have limited means to influence it, they can only compete with each other in displays of patriotism and loyalty. Consequently, the war has further diminished the regions' desire for institutional changes or more autonomy, effectively eliminating any intentions they might have had of bargaining with Moscow. The volume of federal assistance that the regions can now expect to receive depends not only on their political loyalty, but also on their role in the war effort and the nation's ability to withstand economic sanctions.

The Incentives of Regional Governors in the Current System

A crucial feature of relations between the center and the regions today is that regional governors are essential and inextricable components of Putin's personalized rule. He has established a system of loyalty where incumbent governors rely heavily on Putin for their political survival. Lacking their own legitimacy, governors tend to follow Moscow's directives, thus maintaining the stability of the existing regime. Furthermore, regional politicians are interested in maintaining Putin's approval ratings, as in the Russian personalistic autocracy the entire political system depends on the ruler's popularity.

In Russia, regional governors formally serve the interests of two principals: Moscow and their local population. In practice, however, only Moscow matters for their political survival; given the current non-democratic system, the local population is much less important. Indeed, the stability of the Russian federal model is maintained by minimizing the influence of the local population.

The key instrument for sustaining such stability is strict undemocratic control of regional elections and

political competition at national, regional, and local levels. The tight control of electoral competition in the regions means that Moscow entirely determines the fate of regional politicians: their term in office, transfers to other positions, resignation, or even arrest and conviction for crimes (corruption, financial fraud or hiring a hitman). For instance, two-and-a-half months after the war began, on May 10, 2022, the Kremlin replaced five governors at once. The rotation of governors has long been a step on the path to the September regional elections, although this was historically done at the beginning of the year so that the new appointees would have enough time to take control of their regional political machines and ensure sufficiently high election results. One explanation for the delay in 2022 is that, after the failure of the blitzkrieg in Ukraine, the Kremlin was discussing the cancellation of that September's regional elections (Petrov 2023).

Another important instrument that supports the Russian model of center-regional relations is the mechanism for selecting those who will serve as Moscow's agents in the regions. As Alexey Gusev (2013) points out, regional governors "since Sergei Kiriyenko's appointment as the Kremlin's deputy chief of staff in 2016 have looked more and more alike, from their surnames to their faces to their biographies. The selection of governors has become personnel policy rather than public politics."

Perhaps most significantly, without competitive elections, incumbent governors have little incentive to advocate for greater autonomy or prioritize their regions' interests over those of the central government. Most incumbents do not face the same pressure to address local issues or respond to regional demands as they would in a system with competitive elections. The regional governors do not expect to face competitive elections; instead, they hope to be selected, retained, and promoted by the Presidential Administration, their ultimate principal.

This is not to suggest that the governors are entirely uninterested in their local populations. After the war began, Putin made them personally responsible for maintaining social and political stability in their regions, which increased their concern for their populations. However, this does not mean that the population became a principal; social stability is just one criterion of accountability to the governors' real principal—Moscow.

Before the war, Moscow primarily assessed governors' performance on the basis of their ability to deliver the "right" results in federal elections, fulfill Putin's "May Decrees" and twelve "national projects," and, later, to successfully combat the pandemic. While the war has not changed the basic rules of the game, it has shifted priorities. Regions now concentrate on implementing the federal agenda (the war) and reporting to Moscow

accordingly. The previous tasks remain, but the regions must also be involved in the war and contribute to the nation's defense capabilities.

In 2023, the war is the main theme of the regions' political agendas. Key elements include supporting the mobilized and their families, shaping public opinion in favor of the "people's war" with the West, and mobilizing specific sectors of the economy and businesses to participate actively in strengthening the country's defense capabilities. In addition to all this, demonstrating their regions' support for the president in the form of the highest possible approval ratings for Putin will be a critical task for governors in the run-up to the 2024 elections. That being said, Kremlin-backed gubernatorial candidates will not actively use the topic of the war in Ukraine in their election campaigns. The hostilities are to be only the "background" of the campaigns, with the focus on measures to support "veterans of the armed forces and their families," as well on material aid to the front. The aim of this strategy is to show that all is calm in the country (Verstka 2023).

Importantly, while shifting new responsibilities to the regions, the Kremlin remains preoccupied with maintaining domestic political stability. This is pursued, in particular, by deliberately implementing a territorially asymmetric call to war. Clearly, the higher the number of people mobilized from a region, the greater the expected death toll. Military fatalities, which cannot be concealed, could lead to increased discontent and protests, particularly in the capital and larger cities. While fatalities cannot be avoided, it is possible to concentrate them in weaker and poorer regions far from Moscow. Alexey Bessudnov's (2023) study reveals significant disparities in military fatality rates between Russian regions, with the highest mortality observed among soldiers from impoverished areas in Siberia and the Russian Far East, and the lowest among those from Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The Impact of Sanctions

After the start of the war and the imposition of international sanctions, many experts thought that Russia would in some way repeat the fate of Iran or Venezuela and suffer a macroeconomic disaster. As Sergei Guriev expressed it, because the sanctions were truly unprecedented, they gave rise to unprecedented, unrealistic expectations (Kelli 2023). But no nationwide economic catastrophe has occurred. Nor have individual regional economies collapsed or the scope of inter-regional inequalities grown.

Experts and scholars studying whether—and how—sanctions affect a territorially giant, diverse, and asymmetric Russia have concluded that sanctions have not led to a sharp and rapid rise in inequalities between regions.

For instance, Shida empirically examined the economic impact of the sanctions imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, paying particular attention to interregional heterogeneity. He found no regional variation in the impact of the sanctions. The sanctions targeted the entire nation, exerting a significant but geographically uniform impact. No region—even those located very far from the European part of Russia, as in the Far East, and with strong economic ties to Asian countries—managed to avoid the impact of sanctions. Nor did the sanctions increase the heterogeneity of the Russian territory (Shida 2020).

Furthermore, according to Natalya Zubarevich, the logic of a crisis caused by sanctions is simple: stronger, economically advanced regions that are better integrated into the global economy suffer much greater losses. They pay dearly for their earlier development, while peripheral and structurally weaker regions suffer less (TVK6 2022). Logically, therefore, it follows that sanctions should not increase territorial inequality, but rather mitigate it by lowering the national “common denominator.” Just as globalization increases interregional inequality, deglobalization resulting from sanctions should reduce it.

So far, sanctions have not required the introduction of emergency measures in most Russian regions. Manifestations of gubernatorial opposition to the sanctions have boiled down to the signing of official documents on cooperation between the regions (Artem'ev and Vasin 2022); public statements by governors that the Russian economy “is stronger and more stable now than it was a few years ago. We have long ago worked out mechanisms that allow us to withstand sanctions and successfully develop” (*Den' vo Vladimire* 2022); and calls for unity in the face of difficulties (*Nevskie Novosti* 2022).

Not only that, but the war has served to increase the cohesion of the population across regional borders. Even before the war, the population of most of Russia's regions shared the same basic values and attitudes—a phenomenon known as “aspatiality”—and as Alexey Gusev (2023) argues, “the outbreak of war has sooner closed the values gap between Russia's provinces than widened it.”

Conclusion: What Next?

The model of center-regional relations fully developed in Russia before the war has worked practically flawlessly to date. Neither unprecedented sanctions nor the transfer of additional responsibilities to the regions has produced a demand for institutional changes on the part of governors. On the contrary, the behavior of regional governors is becoming more uniform.

In 2023, amid high uncertainty regarding the war in Ukraine, the Russian budget is expected to see a further increase in military spending, which could lead to a sequestration of budget expenditures, primarily in the

regions of the country. It is highly unlikely that sanctions against Russia will be lifted; indeed, their further tightening is more likely. But will this lead to the collapse of the current model of center-regional relations? It is very unlikely to do so.

The absence of competitive elections and the existence of centralized control over regional politics combine to minimize the risk of regional challengers and opposition movements gaining traction. There is limited space for alternative political forces to emerge and challenge the status quo in the regions.

Under the current conditions, any individual deviation from official lines is tantamount to political suicide. The governors have had no choice but to support the war. Indeed, the war has been publicly supported by regional authorities in all Russian regions without exception, even if the degree and specific forms of support by regional executives have varied across Russia. Despite differences in the behavior of governors, not one of them would cross the threshold of the Presidential Administration doubting their loyalty. Each governor has a keen sense of where this threshold lies. Even approaching the threshold could be fatal. Unless they coalesce into a critical mass or a new post-Putin system begins, the governors will not oppose or betray Moscow. Maintaining their position—being re-elected or re-appointed—depends on it.

There are two broad ways in which the Russian system could feasibly change. The first is that another undemocratic leader could replace Putin. The second is that a sequence of reforms could lead to the democratization and liberalization of the country. For incumbent governors, both alternatives reduce their chances of remaining in office. A new undemocratic leader would undoubtedly appoint new loyalists to the regions. In the event of an awakening of genuine democratization, there would be a revival of competitive politics and governors would have to go through competitive elections, reducing their chances of retaining their positions while exacerbating elite divisions.

The Russian authoritarian model of center-regional relations serves the interest of Moscow and, no less importantly, of Russian governors. Neither the pandemic nor the war has created incentives for the model to be reformed. It is unlikely that the governors will break away from Putin and inaugurate the transformation of the system, as any scenario of change carries threats and risks for them personally. There are conditions (e.g., an attempt to launch political reforms) under which it might collapse, but so far these have not arisen.

The Russian opposition and some researchers are now debating how to reform center-regional relations and federalism in Russia after Putin. Among other things, they are discussing at what stage of democratic reforms the

rules of “true federalism” should be implemented—at the beginning or after a fairly long transitional period during which the central government would have to exercise significant control over the regions (see, for

instance, *Holod* 2023). We, however, consider the question of under what conditions the current model might collapse to be much more pressing (and more difficult).

About the Authors

Irina Busygina is a Visiting Scholar at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. Her research areas include comparative federalism and decentralization, Russian domestic politics, Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet region, and Russia–European Union relations.

Mikhail Filippov is Professor of Comparative Politics at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Binghamton, NY. His research focuses on comparative federalism and decentralization, Russian domestic politics, European integration, and human rights.

Further Reading

- Artem'ev, Anton, and Vladimir Vasin. 2022. “Cheliabinsk i KhMAO nashli sposob vmeste protivostoiat' sanktsii.” *Ura*, August 9, 2022. <https://ura.news/news/1052576985>.
- Bessudnov, Alexey. 2023. “Ethnic and Regional Inequalities in the Russian Military Fatalities in Ukraine: Preliminary Findings from Crowdsourced Data.” <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/s43yf?fbclid=IwAR2A6BjQnXsZVs-h2kWGJp3wCNrcM1RvLGj1q57n4XO3JBk9E5XhSbsxZLw>.
- *Den' vo Vladimire*. 2022. “Vladimirskii gubernator: ‘U nas otrabotany mekhanizmy, pozvoliaiushchie protivostoiat' sanktsiiam.’” *Den' vo Vladimire*, March 3, 2022. <https://vladday.ru/news/2022/03/03/vladimirskij-gubernator-u-nas-otrabotany-mekhanizmy-pozvoliyayushie-protivostoyat-sankciyam/>.
- Gusev, Alexey. 2023. “Why Russia Won’t Disintegrate Along Its Regional Borders.” *CarnegiePolitika (blog)*, April 20, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89581>.
- *Holod*. 2023. “Rossiia dolzhna stat' nastoiashchei federatsiei.” *Holod*, April 26, 2023. <https://holod.media/2023/04/26/federalizm/>.
- Kelli, Sara. 2023. “Sergei Guriev: Poka Putin u vlasti, voina budet prodolzht'sia.” *DW Russian*, April 23, 2023. <https://www.dw.com/ru/sergej-guriev-poka-putin-u-vlasti-vojna-budet-prodolzatsa/a-65395433>.
- *Nevskie Novosti*. 2022. “Gubernator Podmoskov'ia rasskazal, kak protivostoiat' sanktsiiam Zapada.” *Nevskie Novosti*, March 26, 2022. https://nevnov.ru/22364231-gubernator_podmoskov_ia_rasskazal_kak_protivostoyat_sanktsiyam_zapada?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=mobile.
- Petrov, Nikolay. 2023. “Deti, cheboli i ad”iutanty: kadrovaia politika pervogo goda voyny.” *Re:Russia*, March 22, 2023. <https://re-russia.net/expertise/061/>.
- Shida, Yoshisada. 2020. “Russian Business under Economic Sanctions: Is There Evidence of Regional Heterogeneity?” *Post-Communist Economies* 32 (4): 447–467.
- Tóth-Czifra, András. 2022. “Russia’s Costly War Saps Its Regions.” Center for European Policy Analysis, October 28, 2022. <https://cepa.org/article/russias-costly-war-saps-its-regions/>.
- TVK6. 2022. “Glubokoi periferii budet legche”: Natal'ia Zubarevich o vliianii sanktsii na rossiiskie regiony.” *TVK6*, June 28, 2022. <https://tvk6.ru/publications/news/67624/index.html>.
- *Verstka*. 2023. “Voina daleko: Kreml' postaraetsia izbezhat' temy voyny v gubernatorskikh kampaniiakh.” *Verstka*, April 21, 2023. <https://verstka.media/kreml-postaraetsia-izbezhat-temy-voyny-v-gubernatorskih-kompaniyah>.