

## GESTALT SWITCH IN RUSSIAN FEDERALISM OR WHERE HAS ALL THE REGIONAL POWER GONE UNDER PUTIN?

“Power floats like money, like language, like theory..”  
(Baudrillard, 1994, p. 24)

### Introduction

It has been declared over a decade ago that the ideational variables “moved back to the forefront of the political science agenda,”<sup>1</sup> yet in comparative politics the turn to ideas has not widened much beyond the scholars of the EU.<sup>2</sup> Only few studies of policy choices of postcommunist elites relied on ideational arguments.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies of Russian and comparative federalism, more generally, also frame the analysis of political action privileging interests over ideas and objective over discursive structures.<sup>4</sup> In this paradigm power balance and political actors’ incentive structures are determined by such tangible variables as institutions, economic and financial resources, ethnicity and geographic location. The less tangible ideas, norms and rhetorical frames are absent.

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1 Sheri Berman, “Ideas, Norms, and Culture in Political Analysis,” *Comparative Politics* (January 2001), p. 231.

2 On the EU, see for example, Vivien A. Schmidt and Claudio M. Radaelli, “Policy Change and Discourse in Europe: Conceptual and Methodological Issues,” *West European Politics* 27 (2), 2004, 183-210; Craig Parson, *A Certain Idea of Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Kathleen McNamara, *The Currency of Ideas: Monetary Politics in the European Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Peter A. Hall, “Policy Paradigms, Social Learning and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain,” *Comparative Politics* 25 (3), 1993, 275-96.

3 See Keith Darden, *Economic Liberalism and Its Rivals: The Formation of International Institutions among the Post-Soviet States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Yoshiko M. Herrera, *Imagined Economies: The Sources of Russian Regionalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Hilary Appel, *A New Capitalist Order: Privatization & Ideology in Russia & Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004).

4 Kent Eaton, “Federalism in Europe and Latin America: Conceptualization, Causes, and Consequences,” *World Politics* 60 (July 2008), 665-98. For notable exceptions in the studies of Russian federalism, see J. Paul Goode, *The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia: Boundary Issues* (London: Routledge, 2011); Herrera 2005.

In this article I posit that comparative studies of federalism, including Russian federalism, can be enriched by engaging with the new concepts bringing attention to the power of ideas and discourse. Furthermore, the ideational approach itself could be refined based on new puzzles such as the one from Russian federal politics addressed here. The rationalist models including the bargaining model and rational choice institutionalism have been successful in addressing a variety of important questions about Russian federalism in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> They proved less capable of explaining the dismantling of Russian federalism, providing no convincing answer to the puzzle of the unexpectedly quick submission of powerful regional elites to Putin's centralization policies. Advancing a new approach, I argue that understanding the reaction of regional elites to Putin's centralization requires a reconsideration of the basis of regional power in the 1990s. The rationalist focus on the structural determinants of power considered mostly in material terms needs to be complemented by the focus on the ideational basis of power. With that aim I borrow the concept of discursive opportunity structures<sup>6</sup> from the literature on social movements and argue that the power of regional elites in the 1990s resulted not only from their institutional status, economic wealth or ethnic mobilization but also from relying on discursive opportunity structures - "the discursive terrain[s] in which the meaning contests occur"<sup>7</sup> - that privileged specific rhetorical frames. In the early 1990s the dominant frame centered on the themes of

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5 For selected works, see Steven Solnick, "The Political Economy of Russian Federalism: A Framework for Analysis," *Problems of Post-Communism* 43 (6), 2000, 13-25; Daniel Treisman, "Russia's Ethnic Revival: The Separatist Activism of Regional Leaders in a Post-communist Order," *World Politics* 49 (1), 1997, 212-49; Mikhail Filippov and Olga Shvetsova, "Asymmetric bilateral bargaining in the new Russian Federation. A path-dependence explanation," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 32 (1), 1999, 61-76; Peter Soderlund, "The significance of structural power resources in the Russian Bilateral treaty process 1994-1998," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 36 (2003), 311-24. -68.

6 The term is used interchangeably with "discursive fields."

7 David A. Snow, "Framing Processes, Ideology, and Discursive Fields," in David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi, eds. *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 402.

national self-determination and democratization and allowed for fusing the goals of democracy and federalism. The reliance on this frame made the regions powerful in the 1990s allowing the regional governments to expand their mandates. The discursive field changed towards the end of the 1990s and the new dominant frame advanced by Putin focused on state consolidation. Resonating with popular attitudes and seen as legitimate the new frame constrained the regions by limiting the grounds for claim-making and more assertive actions vis-à-vis the center.

### **The Paradox of Regional Retreat**

The regions have accrued much power vis-à-vis the center in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Some analysts claimed that the Russian Federation was moving towards a confederation or even territorial disintegration driven by the actions of wayward regions and the passivity of an increasingly weak center.<sup>9</sup> Taking advantage of the rivalry between Gorbachev and Yeltsin and later between Russia's legislative and executive powers, the regional leaders pressed for increased autonomy enjoying concessions extended by Russia's central elites.<sup>10</sup> First in the ethnic republics and, later, in mostly Russian provinces, the elites threatened the center with "general strikes and regional tariffs, the confiscation of federal property, local state of emergency and even terrorist attacks."<sup>11</sup> The Kremlin's appeasement to regional demands produced, as some observers described it, the col-

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8 For an overview of the literature on Russian regionalism, see J. Paul Goode, "The Fall and Rise of Regionalism?" *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 26 (2), June 2010, 233-56.

9 Katherine Stoner-Weiss, *Resisting the State: Reform and Retrenchment in Post-Soviet Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Graeme Herd, "Russia: Systemic Transformation or Federal Collapse?" *Journal of Peace Research* 36 (3), 1999, 259-69.

10 Vera Tolz and Irina Busygina, "Regional Governors and the Kremlin: the Ongoing Battle for Power," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 30 (4), 1997, 401-26.

11 Treisman, Daniel. *After the Deluge: Regional Crises and Political Consolidation in Russia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1999), p. 2.

lection of personal fiefdoms<sup>12</sup> across Russia. Others referred to feudal absolutism<sup>13</sup> and contemplated about the likelihood of Russia's breakdown.<sup>14</sup> In this context, Putin's reforms of the institutional, legal and fiscal aspects of Russia's federal system were widely interpreted as countering the disintegrative tendencies of Yeltsin's period.<sup>15</sup> Putin's 'power vertical' that subsumed the governors was conceived as a mechanism of strengthening the Russian state.

Although widely recognized and coherent, this story of the evolution of the Russian Federation is at best incomplete. Politics is not simply bargaining based on the available power resources conceived strictly in material terms and institutions. Politics is "about the definition, pursuit, and distribution of *justifiable* power"<sup>16</sup> (emphasis mine). Political action is taken in the broader socio-political context characterized by shared ideas, beliefs and perceptions about what is relevant, applicable, sound and justifiable. Any political action needs to appeal to cognitive senses and have a normative backing, the underlying interests notwithstanding. The failure to recognize these shared ideas and perceptions and their role in mediating political action leaves an essential variable outside the equation of politics.

The incompleteness of rationalist characterization of federal relations in the 1990s became apparent with Putin's successful effort to overhaul Russia's federal system. Not only did Putin undertake an increasingly centralizing policy early in his presidency, the puzzling fact is that he did it successfully with no real resistance from the regions. How was that possible if

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12 Cameron Ross, "Federalism and Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 13 (3), 2005, p. 355.

13 Richard Sakwa, "Putin's New Federalism," *EWI Russian Regional Report* 5 (21) 31 May, 2000.

14 Herd 1999.

15 Ross 2005, 355; Vladimir Gelman, *Vozvrashchenie Leviatana? Politika retsentralizatsii v sovremennoi Rossii*, *POLIS* (2) 2006.

16 Consuelo Cruz, *Political Culture and Institutional Development in Costa Rica and Nicaragua* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.1.

regions were powerful and, in fact, most powerful at the end of Yeltsin's tenure?<sup>17</sup> Where have their "structural power resources" - such as economic wealth, geographical location, administrative status - that determined center-regional dynamic in the 1990s gone?<sup>18</sup> Why did not governors use any levers of power to oppose the reforms that endangered their position? Why did they yield to one-sided fiscal recentralization? What does such quick transformation of Russian federal relations say about the nature of regional power? This puzzle became especially striking after Putin's 2004 reform replacing popular gubernatorial elections with an appointment system. Instead of opposing this action that removed the key source of gubernatorial autonomy vis-à-vis the center, most regional governors including most influential backed Putin's reform. Challenges were rare.<sup>19</sup>

The lack of any substantial resistance, the ease and the speed with which the reform of state governance in Russia was implemented is truly baffling, especially when viewed within the analytical frame used to analyze center-regional relations in the 1990s. As Paul Goode noted, "the dominant expectation emerging from the literature on regionalism in the 1990s was that regionalism would persist and the central state would remain weak. Hence, few observers expected at the start of Putin's presidency that his attempts to rein in the governors would succeed."<sup>20</sup> Echoing those expectations *The New York Times* observed prior to presidential elections

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17 Oxana Oracheva "The Dilemmas of Federalism: Moscow and the Regions in the Russian Federation," in Yitzhak Brudny, Jonathan Frankel, Stefani Hoffman, eds., *Restructuring Post-Communist Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 206. See also Graeme B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 109-12.

18 Soderlund 2003.

19 On reaction to this reform, see Darrell Slider, "Putin and the Russian Electoral System: 'Reforms' to Prevent Regime Change," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 34 (1) 2007, p. 55

20 Goode 2010, p 235.

in March 2000 that, “Few expect Mr. Putin to start a costly and even dangerous political clash with regional leaders any time soon.”<sup>21</sup> Yet that is exactly what happened two months later.

The key elements of Putin’s federal reform involved the creation of seven federal districts in May 2000 and the start of a legal harmonization campaign to bring regional charters and republican constitutions in line with federal legislation, the reform of the Federation Council, the reform of the taxation system in favor of centralizing financial resources and the new legislation granting the president the right to dismiss regional governors and dissolve regional legislatures. Less than a year prior to these reforms, the regional governors challenged the Kremlin with a radical overhaul of the national power balance when they organized the electoral bloc Fatherland-All Russia. Citing potential gubernatorial opposition in the fall of 1999 political commentators doubted the Kremlin’s capacity to announce the emergency situation after the Chechen incursion into Dagestan.<sup>22</sup> In the following months the political context in Russia was reconfigured so radically that Putin’s ambitious steps in reforming federal relations evoked practically no open opposition. What was unimaginable a year earlier went practically unchallenged.

This puzzle has been addressed by scholars of Russian federalism, especially in the view of Putin’s 2004 decision to abolish gubernatorial elections. Several experts argued that the shift in gubernatorial selection mechanism, seemingly undermining the autonomy of regional leaders, has actually benefited them.<sup>23</sup> This interest-centered view presented governors as ‘smart guys’ who behaved counter-intuitively because they foresaw the longer-term benefits from this reform.

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21 Celestine Bohlen, “Russian Regions Wary As Putin Tightens Control,” *New York Times* March 09, 2000.

22 Evgenii Iur’ev, “Prezidentskoe ispytanie Chechnei,” *Segodnia* 15 September 1999.

23 Goode 2007; Helge Blakkisrud, “The Rise and Fall of the Russian Governor: Institutional Design vs. Elite Bargaining as Explanatory Factors in Russian Politics.” In *Elites and Democratic Development in Russia*, edited by Anton Steen and Vladimir Gel’man. (London: Routledge, 2003); Slider 2007; Robertson 2011, p. 155.

The problem with this argument is however that it could only be made *post hoc*. It was not obvious that governors would assume this version of *rational* behavior instead of a more *defensive* one.<sup>24</sup> After all, they have been in effect ‘cornered’ by the cascade of federal reforms during 2000-2004. The elimination of gubernatorial elections sought to integrate them into the executive vertical of power removing the autonomous power source allowed by the electoral mechanism. Journalists questioned governors on their attitudes towards reforms expecting a more defiant stance.<sup>25</sup> It is not convincing that the governors themselves perceived these reforms in radically different terms. Even if they did, there is still something missing: how and why have they come to such radical re-interpretation of their interests going against their *modus operandi* in the 1990s?

Putin himself realized that his reform package was an assault on governors and included such palliative measures as creating the State Council and granting regional governors the right to dismiss lower-level state officials. These measures signaled that Putin was concerned with gubernatorial reaction but they could not mask his intentions. The State Council was merely a consultative body ‘near the president’ – a far cry from the constitutionally empowered Federation Council that could play a meaningful role in national politics. As for the governors’ added powers vis-à-vis lower-level state officials, this measure also fell short of becoming a meaningful “carrot.” The mayors of the capital cities - the governors’ main political opponents – were excluded from the list of officials who the governors could dismiss.

Finally, the interest-based logic does not allow for any degree of diversity of interests among regional leaders. The loss of the popular base of power was arguably more costly to the

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24 Goode (2010, p. 233) has also noted the uncertainty surrounding Putin’s federal initiatives.

25 Interviews with Shaimiev by Dorenko and Svanidze in May 2000 are revealing. Available at: <http://shaimiev.tatar.ru/pub/view/672>, and <http://shaimiev.tatar.ru/pub/view/671>

strong leaders of ethnic republics who constructed electoral machines and could use their popularly legitimated positions to bargain with the center. Some type of open and coordinated resistance could have been expected on their part; no *a priori* assessment of interests could have predicted their actual behavior.

Other scholars focused on the structural conditions that allowed for an easy passage of reforms noting particularly the political consolidation in the center and the resulting capacity to implement reforms.<sup>26</sup> This view treats the regional autonomy of the 1990s as an outcome of political and institutional conflicts in the center. The increase in regional influence following the 1998 financial crisis and gubernatorial activity in the 1999 parliamentary elections created the demand for recentralization that was effectively undertaken by Putin, who lacked any debt to the regional elite.<sup>27</sup> The dramatic loss of the gubernatorial electoral bloc in the elections added another reason for gubernatorial compliance and bandwagoning.

This structural argument adds an important missing piece to the picture, balancing out the actor-centered perspective with an understanding of structural circumstances in which the reforms were undertaken. It does however run into a danger of confusing the reform outcomes with the cause of their success if no further attempt is made to elaborate the various dimensions of those structural circumstances that also involve discursive opportunity structures or “ideas in the larger political culture that are believed to be ‘sensible,’ ‘realistic,’ and ‘legitimate’”.<sup>28</sup> Federal reform was Putin’s first big initiative crucial for state centralization and power consolidation. The claim that regional autonomy was a result of a weak center while centralization was

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26 Gelman 2006; Donna Bahry, “The New Federalism and The Paradoxes of Regional Sovereignty in Russia,” *Comparative Politics* 37 (2), 2005, pp. 127-146.

27 Gelman 2006; Bahry 2005, pp. 127-128.

28 Holly J. McCammon, Harmony D. Newman, Courtney Sanders Muse, Teresa M. Terrel, “Movement Framing and Discursive Opportunity Structures,” *American Sociological Review* 72 (5), October 2007, p. 731.

enabled by a strong center cannot be sustained because the center's strength is endogenous to reforms. In both cases, center-regional relations were an essential factor making the central state weak or strong. The acclaimed centralization under Putin was in large part the outcome of federal reforms rather than a condition for their success.

In a more unorthodox fashion, Donna Bahry challenged the conventional wisdom on Russian federalism suggesting that the degree of regional autonomy in the 1990s was in fact very limited.<sup>29</sup> According to Bahry, it was limited by the inability of the center to develop effective market infrastructure, by the center's direct control of foreign trade through quotas and licensing, by fiscal centralization and other dependences on the center that impeded regional ability to create an independent economic base. Echoing Bahry's assertion that regional autonomy was limited in the 1990s in this article I draw attention to different, non-material, sources of these limitations. The rationalist analysis of the evolution of Russian federalism places too much emphasis on regional power and self-assertion as presumably unavoidable process determined by objective structures. It downplays and even ignores the importance of ideas and, specifically, a powerful discourse legitimizing the project of regional autonomy made available by the historical juncture of the early 1990s. The regional elites benefitted from mobilizing the dominant frame promoted by Russia's central elites but found themselves stripped of influential justifications for continuing the 'autonomy-oriented' course of action when Russia's new president articulated a new frame. Better matching the new historical momentum the new frame did not leave any space for regional demands.

### **The Determinants of Regional Action: Integrating Ideas with Interests and Objective with Discursive Structures**

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<sup>29</sup> Bahry 2005.

Social action has different dimensions and can be analyzed according to different logics. An actor (in our case regions and the center) can act rationally (or instrumentally, with a view to realizing a goal) or normatively (in accordance with socially-sanctioned norms and ideas). There is *dramaturgical* action that involves “the purposeful and expressive disclosure of one’s subjectivity (feelings, desires, experiences, identity),”<sup>30</sup> and communicative action or interaction that refers to “the linguistically mediated, intersubjective process through which actors establish their interpersonal relations and coordinate their action, through negotiating definitions of the situation (norms) and coming to an agreement.”<sup>31</sup> These different dimensions or logics of actions are not necessarily contradictory and incompatible with each other. Combining the instrumental and the normative logics Consuelo Cruz has posited that actor’s behavior should be comprehended using the concept of “normative realism:” “Actors are realistic because in the pursuit of their agendas, they seek a reasonable grip on the possibility of things... Their realism is normative because difficult it may be to quantify normative imperatives, any seasoned actor knows that in politics, as in other domains of life, people look for compelling reasons to select one alternative over another when facing a difficult choice.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, neither the interest-based nor the norms-based conceptions of behavior are complete by themselves. Interests and intersubjectively shared ideas about what is appropriate and acceptable in a particular context must be analyzed together to understand the logic of regional action.<sup>33</sup> Such integration of instrumental and normative logics still is not sufficient for understanding political behavior and outcomes. Intersubjective under-

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30 Jean Cohen, “Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements,” *Social Research* 52 (4), 1985, p. 706.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 707.

32 Cruz 2006, p. 2.

33 Schmidt and Radaelli 2004.

standing emerges as a result of communicative action whereby different political actors advance their, potentially clashing definitions of the main problems and their solutions, and negotiate to arrive at a mutually shared understanding of the situation, indicating that a particular *rhetorical frame* becomes dominant.

The idea of rhetorical frames and their role in politics has been advanced by constructivists focusing on ideas and collective meaning systems. Particularly, the term is commonly used in social movement literature that introduced the term “discursive opportunity structures”<sup>34</sup> and focused on the role of framing (or meaning construction) done by movement activists to mobilize for political action.<sup>35</sup> Politicians use rhetorical frames to construct persuasion strategies in establishing competitive power claims. Cruz argued that political rivalries give rise to particular rhetorical frames that emerge as dominant at critical junctures in the history of a nation and that engender a collective field of imaginable possibilities defined as “a restricted array of plausible scenarios of how the world can or cannot be changed and how the future ought to look.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, different frames could compete but those that emerge as dominant set the boundaries for political action.

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34 Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, “Ethnic and Civic Conceptions of Nationhood and the Differential Success of the Extreme Right in Germany and Italy,” in Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam and Charles Tilly, eds., *How Social Movements Matter* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 225-51.

35 See for example McCammon et al. 2007; Ruud Koopmans and Susan Olzak, “Discursive Opportunities and the Evolution of Right Wing Violence in Germany,” *American Journal of Sociology* 110 (1), July 2004, 198-230; William Gamson and David Meyer, “Framing Political Opportunity,” in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 275-90; David A. Snow, “Framing Processes, Ideology, and Discursive Fields,” in David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 380-412.

36 Consuelo Cruz, “Identity and Persuasion: How Nations Remember Their Past and Make Their Futures,” *World Politics* 52 (3), 2000, p. 277.

That persuasion strategies are constructed does not mean that politicians could freely invent and use any argument to defend their power claims. Political invention is a constrained activity embedded in the pre-existing “collective field of imaginable possibilities.”<sup>37</sup> To become influential the frame must be relevant in the context of the recent social and political experience and resonate with public attitudes. In fact, resonance has been theorized as one of the elements of discursive opportunities (along with legitimacy and visibility) that make political mobilization more likely.<sup>38</sup>

The discursive fields encompass “master frames” defined as “a kind of master algorithm that colors and constrains the orientations and activities of other movements”<sup>39</sup> and “cultural frames” referring to culturally embedded “primary frameworks of everyday life.”<sup>40</sup> These concepts have been shown to matter for the political effectiveness of frames.<sup>41</sup> Political actors can use these discursive elements to enhance the legitimacy and public resonance of their frames and the likelihood that they become dominant. Visibility is another factor that influences a frame’s effectiveness and is particularly important in the authoritarian context with communication channels controlled. The nature of the public sphere and the mass media condition how frames are delivered and whose messages get heard.

With these concepts in mind, below I focus on the evolution of dominant rhetorical frames in post-communist Russia to argue that regional behavior – assertive in the 1990s and

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37 Ibid.

38 Koopmans and Olzak 2004.

39 Nancy Whittier quoting Benford and Snow (2000), “Consequences of Social Movements for Each Other,” in David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 536. Robert Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, 2000, 611-39.

40 Snow 2004, p. 385.

41 McCammon et al. 2007

acquiescent in the 2000s – is best understood in the context of changing discursive opportunity structures and shifting rhetorical frames defining the key challenges confronting the Russian state and society.

### **The Achilles Heel of the Republican Sovereignty**

Regions were among the first ‘victims’ of the restoration of the ‘power vertical’ commenced by Putin in 2000. To understand the unexpectedly quick regional retreat we need to change our view about the basis of regional power in the 1990s, paying more attention to the source of the regional sense of entitlement in that period. The ethnic republics - the most notorious ‘separatists’ and ‘power-wielders’ – drew their sense of entitlement from the rhetorical frame that privileged the ideas of democracy and national self-determination and allowed for fusing the pursuit of democracy with the pursuit of federalism and regional autonomy.

Tracing discourses across Russia’s vast territory is an immense task. To surmount it, I focus on the Republic of Tatarstan, the pivotal case, and rely on the analysis of speeches, interviews and writings of Tatarstan’s first president, Mintimer Shaimiev,<sup>42</sup> one of the most politically astute regional leaders in the Russian Federation; as well as the annual addresses to the Federal Assembly of Russia’s first two presidents and other sources. The choice of Tatarstan and its president is not accidental. Shaimiev was widely recognized as one of the role models for other regional (and especially ethnic) leaders in Russia<sup>43</sup> that had most to lose from recentralization and whose acquiescence is most surprising and in need of careful analysis.

Most explanations for the greater autonomy obtained by ethnic republics point to greater structural resources and particularly the privileged status conferred to republics by the institu-

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42 Replaced by Rustem Minnikhanov in March 2010.

43 Among the first regions to declare sovereignty in August 1990, Tatarstan first signed a bilateral agreement with Moscow in February 1994, and led in creating the electoral bloc that posited political challenge to the Kremlin in 1999 elections.

tional structure of Soviet and then Russian federalism.<sup>44</sup> The institutional explanation focused on the federal design and the higher status of ethnic republics is powerful and speaks to their sense of entitlement. The status was however enshrined both in the Soviet and the Russian constitutions. Why were the claims made in the early 1990s? How and why were the republican elites able to obtain as much autonomy when they did? While federal design represented a necessary pre-condition, the historical momentum prioritized specific resources (such as ethnicity) and created an opening for concrete actions legitimated by the rhetorical frame that came to dominate at the time.

Specifically, the late 1980s in the Soviet Union gave rise to the frame in which the ideas of democratization and national self-determination were amalgamated. Such ideological concoction became possible as Gorbachev's ideas of glasnost and democratization awakened and linked up with the cause of national self-determination in the union republics of the USSR. "[T]he idea of nationalism is impossible--indeed unthinkable—without the idea of democracy, and [that] democracy never exists without nationalism. The two are joined in a sort of complicated marriage, unable to live without each other, but coexisting in an almost permanent state of tension," suggested in 1992 Ghia Nodia, political philosopher from Georgia.<sup>45</sup> This blend was behind most of the claims made by various political forces not only in the late Soviet Union but also in newly democratizing Eastern Europe and, later, Russia.<sup>46</sup> Political entrepreneurs who tied democratization and national self-determination won political battles as exemplified by the

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44 Soderlund 2003; Treisman (1997); Solnick (2000).

45 Ghia Nodia, "Nationalism and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 3 (4), 1992, 3-22.

46 On Eastern Europe, see Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). On Russia, see Jeffrey Kahn, *Federalism, Democratization, and the Rule of Law in Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002), pp. 87-96.

Baltic republics<sup>47</sup> and made this frame powerful. The same frame assisted Yeltsin's victory in his rivalry with Gorbachev.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, it is Yeltsin's political victory in 1991 that legitimated these ideas further. His ideology and strategy of "sovereignization" of Russia is crucial for understanding the subsequent process of regional "sovereignization."

Considered as "homelands" for specific ethnic minorities, republics within Russia had all the structural preconditions (i.e., sizable ethnic minorities) enabling them to use this frame in their autonomy claims vis-à-vis the federal center. Revealingly, Rafael Khakimov, Tatarstan's chief political ideologue, starts the compilation of his political essays with two 1989 articles that advocate democratization through reforming Russian federalism and national self-determination of the Tatar people.<sup>49</sup> Not only did the regional elites rely on the frame made available by the Union Republics, but they reframed it into the pursuit of *democratic federalism*. The advocacy of 'democratic federalism,' 'truly democratic federation,' and 'principles of democratic federation' is the most continuous theme in Shaimiev's speeches during the 1990s. The words democracy/democratic and federation/federalism are almost inseparable in most of his speeches. On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Tatarstan's Declaration of Sovereignty he posited that, "federalism is nothing but the territorial carcass of democracy."<sup>50</sup> "No doubt," claimed Shaimiev, "that Russia made a pro-democracy choice which also means a pro-federalism choice. Any retreat from federalism in multinational Russia is likely to mean a retreat from democracy."<sup>51</sup>

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47 On Baltic states, see Daina Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation: History, Modernity, and Revolution in Latvia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

48 Archie Brown, *Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin: Political Leadership in Russia's Transition* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2001).

49 Rafael Khakimov, *Ternisty put' k svobode* (Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo, 2007), pp. 6-24.

50 Mintimer Shaimiev, "Desiat' let po puti ukrepleniia suvereniteta," August 29, 2000.

51 Ibid.

The reframing of national self-determination theme into the discourse of federalism was helpful to the elites in territorially (rather than ethnically) defined regions that did not have the opportunity to claim national self-determination. The process of Russian regionalization therefore was not confined to ethnic republics only. The availability of this framing strategy encouraged and enabled the elites in predominantly Russian regions to advocate for autonomy.<sup>52</sup> Not surprisingly, it was Shaimiev advocating for federal Russia rather than Chechnya's Djohar Dudaev equating national self-determination with full independence, who became one of the most respected regional politicians in Russia.

This framing strategy enabled the elites in Russia's ethnic republics to not only claim autonomy from the federal center but also enact these claims in a series of performative actions, whereby the republics asserted their rights over greater political and economic resources than those available to the rest of regions in Russia. Paradoxically, the ethnic republics simply copied Yeltsin's moves adopting declarations of sovereignty, introducing the post of the president and holding elections. Shaimiev noted with regard to these developments that,

Tatarstan declared its sovereignty after Russia has adopted its declaration of state sovereignty which extended the right of national self-determination to Russia's people. I should also note that all the following steps undertaken by Tatarstan corresponded to Russian and international norms adhered to by Russia and did not cross the boundaries of the civilized legal space.<sup>53</sup>

The republican strategies in "projecting sovereignty" are best explored in Tatarstan's case. Katherine Graney's examination of it reveals that the process of "formulating a new vision of itself" by the republic involved both "an institutional, material dimension and a discursive,

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<sup>52</sup> Goode 2011, Herrera 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Shaimiev 2000.

symbolic dimension.”<sup>54</sup> Institutional strategies included adopting and spreading official national documents, establishing the norms and practices of citizenship, creating universal educational systems.<sup>55</sup> Symbolic strategies involved building the collective memories by writing and rewriting national histories, creating national symbols and holidays, building museums and monuments.<sup>56</sup> Although Tatarstan’s sovereignty project was most “comprehensive, sustained and effective” relative to other ethnic republics,<sup>57</sup> Graney’s analysis applies to other republics as well. Bashkortostan, Sakha, Tuva and others have emulated these strategies, learned from each other and from Russia itself in the first place.

In short, the reliance on the dominant rhetorical frame that fused ideas of democracy and federalism enabled regional elites in Russia to act boldly vis-à-vis the federal center, not only demanding more rights, but effectively asserting them. Remarkably, democratic federalism was not only the goal declared by regional elites but by Russia’s national leaders. The idea that federalism is the territorial basis of democracy in Russia first appeared in Yeltsin’s 1994 annual address to the Federal Assembly. The words democracy/democratic and federal/federalism were used heavily in Yeltsin’s other speeches and his 1994 annual address has an entire section dedicated to issues of federalism, positing it as a central theme on the agenda of the Russian government. As shrewdly noted by Shaimiev with regard to Yeltsin’s famous declaration in Kazan “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow,” “you had to be there, along with him, to understand that he could not say anything else! The person who lead the country on the path of

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<sup>54</sup> Katherine Graney, *Of Khans and Kremlins: Tatarstan and the Future of Ethno-Federalism in Russia* (Lexington Books, 2009), p. xxv.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. xxviii

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. xxviii.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. xxxii

reforms simply did not have the right not to say something along those lines.”<sup>58</sup> There was a clear societal demand for a specific rhetoric and any reasonable politician had to deliver.

Admittedly, the republican strategies for ‘projecting sovereignty’ would not have worked if it were not for a particular political context. While the republican claims were well grounded in the dominant narrative, mere existence of this narrative was arguably not sufficient for undertaking such radical actions as declarations of sovereignty or non-payment of taxes to the center. This discursive strategy became consequential in a given political context. At the height of their rivalry, both Gorbachev and Yeltsin tried to maintain ethnic republics’ support, thus strengthening the republican elites’ bargaining position.<sup>59</sup> Gorbachev invited the republics to participate in the negotiations over the new Union treaty,<sup>60</sup> while Yeltsin offered republican leaders to sign a Federation treaty, both leaders promoting the same discursive frame. Although this political dynamic setting the republics in between the two rival leaders disintegrated with the collapse of the Soviet Union, even with the elimination of one of the power centers, the authorities in Moscow did not consolidate. In 1992-93 the republics could maneuver between the conflicting executive and legislative branches of power, taking advantage of the existing political rivalries.<sup>61</sup>

The existence of such political opportunities, however, still leaves analytical space for taking into account the discursive field and the particular frame that provided the rationale for claim-making by regional elites. The bold autonomy-seeking actions of the early 1990s were in no way “natural” for the regional elites and were not predetermined by the rivalries in the center.

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58 Mintimer Shaimiev, “Iz slabyh regionov sil’noi Rossii ne postroish,” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* 12 February, 2000. Available at: <http://pred.president.tatar.ru/pub/view/650>

59 Kahn 2002, pp. 93-101.

60 Ibid, p. 95.

61 See, for example, Cameron Ross, “Federalism and Democratization in Russia,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 33 (2000), p. 406.

It is worth remembering that most of these regional leaders represented the former Soviet nomenklatura and were socialized into a different type of behavior vis-à-vis the center. Being shrewd politicians however they adapted to the changing political environment and to the new rhetorical frame that both burdened them with the expectations of greater local accountability and vested them with the greater sense of entitlement.<sup>62</sup> After all, the new autonomy claims and the insubordinate behavior were part and parcel of the political toolkit whereby not only regional but Russia's national elites represented what/who they were. Regional autonomy was framed to be the new regional interest within the discursive field that was constitutive of Russia's political space in the early 1990s. The regional behavior was driven by both a careful consideration of what is appropriate and acceptable (the dominant political discourse) and the regional interests in autonomy promoted by that new discourse. Such view adds an important nuance to understanding regionalism of the 1990s and helps unravel the puzzle of 'easy' recentralization of the 2000s.

**Putin and the New Rhetorical Frame: "Bei Chechniu, Spasai Rossiuu!"<sup>63</sup>**

The discursive field constitutive of Russia's political space was radically reconfigured under Putin. The analysis of Putin's annual addresses to the Federal Assembly during 2000-2007 reveals a striking discursive shift away from the ideas of federalism and democracy and towards the ideas of strengthening the state and building an effective 'vertical of power.' If in 2000 address Putin made twelve references to democratic/democracy (compared to Yeltsin's 30-40 references in 1994-1996), in 2001 and 2002 the number of references drops to 1, and increases insignificantly in the following years (between 2 and 9) but only to refer more to the newly

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<sup>62</sup> Suffice to say that those who did not adapt, such as Doku Zavgaeu, the party leader in Chechnya, were quickly sidelined.

<sup>63</sup> In English, "Beat Chechnya, Save Russia."

invented notion of ‘sovereign democracy.’<sup>64</sup> The references to the concept of federalism are absent entirely in Putin’s addresses starting in 2001. How do we explain such radical discursive shift? Understanding it requires an assessment of the political situation in Russia in the late 1990s and the presence of structural conditions inviting political change. It is also important to look at the tactical aspect of how political change was brought about: which political actors had mobilized, what methods they used, and how they justified their actions.

The structural opening for the radical re-orientation of public discourse in Russia occurred as a result of several events that included the 1998 financial crisis and a series of events in August-September of 1999 involving a new crisis in the Caucasus and a wave of terrorist bombings in Moscow and several other cities in Russia. The 1998 financial crisis hit the population with the rising prices resulting from a significant ruble depreciation.<sup>65</sup> Facing political backlash Yeltsin nominated Yevgenii Primakov to head the new government that proved to be successful in averting the widely expected and feared social, political and economic collapse. Primakov’s personal popularity grew rapidly, while Yeltsin was confronted with plunging popular support rates and the impeachment proceedings started in the State Duma.<sup>66</sup> By the spring of 1999 Primakov emerged as a politician that could respond to the growing popular desire for change and offer an alternative path for Russia. Doubting his loyalty, in May 1999 Yeltsin

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64 See Masha Lipman, “Putin’s Sovereign Democracy,” *Washington Post*, July 15, 2006.

65 On crisis and its impact, see Jacques Sapir, “Russia’s Crash of August 1998: Diagnosis and Prescription,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 15 (1) 1999, 1-36; Philip Hanson, “The Russian Economic Crisis and the Future of Russian Economic Reform,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 51 (7), 1999, 1141-66.

66 For popular opinion about Primakov’s government, see polls by FOM, (Public Opinion Fund) at: [http://bd.fom.ru/cat/power/pow\\_gov/government\\_primakov](http://bd.fom.ru/cat/power/pow_gov/government_primakov).

On Yeltsin’s ratings, see [http://bd.fom.ru/cat/pres/eltzin/\\_rating\\_eltzin](http://bd.fom.ru/cat/pres/eltzin/_rating_eltzin).

sacked Primakov, replacing him with Sergei Stepashin, the head of Russia's Ministry of Interior<sup>67</sup> who was also replaced three months later by Vladimir Putin.

This string of political reshuffling in the upper echelons of the Russian government revealed Yeltsin's acute insecurity. Hemorrhaging power and influence, Yeltsin was leaving the political scene with the sense of defeat: the rhetorical frame that brought him to power, motivated and underpinned his reforms was 'burnt out.' The once popular rhetoric of democratization was discredited as a result of political and economic developments in the 1990s.<sup>68</sup> Not surprisingly, the references to democracy diminish in Yeltsin's annual addresses starting in 1997 and drop to the low of three references in 1997 from the high of 42 in 1994. Any sense of earlier accomplishments was overwhelmed by popular frustrations and disappointments, the perceived and real decline not only of Russia's economy and people's personal well-being, but also of Russia's stature in the world.<sup>69</sup> The rhetoric of self-determination and federalism that drove political events in the early 1990s appeared dangerous with the new flare of conflict in the Caucasus. Yeltsin's final address to the Russian population on December 31, 1999 reflected this sense of defeat:

Today, on this incredibly important day for me, I want to say more personal words than I usually do. I want to ask you for forgiveness, because many of our hopes have not come true, because what we thought would be easy turned out to be painfully difficult. I ask to forgive me for not fulfilling some hopes of those people who believed that we would be able to jump from the grey, stagnating, totalitarian past into a bright, rich and civilized future in one go. I myself believed in this.[...]<sup>70</sup>

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67 Over 80% of respondents reacted negatively to this Yeltsin's decision ([http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/power/pow\\_gov/government\\_primakov/of19992002](http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/power/pow_gov/government_primakov/of19992002)).

68 Ellen Carnaghan, *Out of Order: Russian Political Values in an Imperfect World* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2007).

69 See the results of a public opinion poll in January 2000 at: [http://wciom.ru/arkhiv/tematicheskii-arkhiv/item/single/502.html?no\\_cache=1&cHash=5f8ad22565](http://wciom.ru/arkhiv/tematicheskii-arkhiv/item/single/502.html?no_cache=1&cHash=5f8ad22565)

70 The English version is available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6584973.stm>

In short, this juncture in Russia's history provided an opening for new ideas. At least two alternatives emerged: Primakov and political forces supporting him, and Putin, Yeltsin's chosen successor. The resolution of the clash between these two rival forces determined the path Russian politics took after Yeltsin's resignation and the rhetorical frame that came to dominate and constrain the type of policies that could be realistically pursued by political actors.

The first political grouping consisted of powerful regional governors and two parties organized in 1998-1999 that merged in May 1999 to form an electoral bloc *Otechestvo-Vsya Rossia* (OVR, Fatherland-All Russia).<sup>71</sup> This electoral bloc featured such influential regional leaders as Yurii Luzhkov (mayor of Moscow), Vladimir Yakovlev (mayor of St. Petersburg) and Mintimer Shaimiev (president of Tatarstan). Primakov joined OVR as number one in its list of candidates for the December 1999 parliamentary election. Having attracted influential regional leaders, this electoral bloc was perceived as a real threat to the Kremlin. It was however weak ideologically advancing no clear ideas and policies aside from such vague and catch-all goals advocated in OVR manifesto as, (1) supporting domestic manufacturers and protecting the domestic market; (2) developing the real sector and reinforcing the regulatory role of the state; (3) supporting agriculture; (4) increasing people's income; (5) supporting the Russian family, etc."<sup>72</sup> This manifesto reflected the governors' understanding of Russia's problems including their vision of federal relations:

The major problem facing the current phase of political development in Russia is the imbalance in relations between the federal center and the regions. Russia is strong not only in its entirety, but also in the diversity of its constituent parts. We must preserve this

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<sup>71</sup> On electoral politics in 1999-2000, see Henry Hale, "The Origins of United Russia and the Putin Presidency: The Role of Contingency in Party-System Development," *Demokratizatsiya* 12 (2) 2004, 169-94.

<sup>72</sup> Aleksandr Buzgalin, "Fatherland-All Russia: Governors of All Oblasts, Unite?" *Prism* (5) 18, Jamestown Foundation, October 22, 1999.

asset. The federal center must continue to be strong. But in a democratic state it is essential to combine its authority and might with the authority and might of the regions....<sup>73</sup>

In essence, these governors were calling for strengthening the state and the regions. This federal part of their message was rendered incongruous by the political developments in August-September 1999.

The chain of events that “changed the course of history”<sup>74</sup> involved first an armed assault on Dagestan undertaken in August 1999 by the extremist military groupings from Chechnya. Along with this incursion, a series of apartment bombings occurred in Moscow and several other Russian cities. These blasts were blamed on the Chechens as well, setting a stage for public outrage directed against Chechens, which in real life meant anyone with dark skin and Caucasian appearance.<sup>75</sup> These shocking events and the reaction articulated by Putin explain his quick rise as an undisputed leader and the shift to a new rhetorical frame that reflected and embodied a reconfigured political scene.

How can Putin’s reaction be characterized? A regional leader Ruslan Aushev described it most laconically, assessing Kremlin’s position by the slogan “*Bei Chechniu, spasai Rossiiu*” (beat Chechnya and save Russia).<sup>76</sup> Putin’s reaction to these events was quick and tough both in words and actions. Action-wise, Putin started an immediate military operation to quickly free Dagestan and re-establish federal control over Chechnya. In terms of rhetoric, one of Putin’s infamous phrases, “We’ll follow terrorists everywhere... Should we catch them in an outhouse,

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73 Ibid.

74 William Sewell “Historical events as transformations of structures: Inventing revolution at the Bastille,” *Theory and Society* 25 (December 1996), 841-81.

75 See for example John Russell, “Terrorists, bandits, spooks and thieves: Russian demonization of the Chechens before and since 9/11,” *Third World Quarterly* 26 (1), 101-16.

76 “Bei Chechniu, spasai Rossiiu,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda* (October 2, 1999).

we'll kill them there"<sup>77</sup> was coined during Putin's press-conference in Astana (Kazakhstan) in September 1999. Such resolve and tough action was exactly what the Russian public craved for.<sup>78</sup> From a relatively unknown Kremlin bureaucrat, one of many such state officials, distrusted by the weary public Putin quickly rose to public limelight. His popularity ratings surged reflecting people's growing confidence in Russia's government and Putin personally.<sup>79</sup>

The war in Chechnya is widely considered to be a key to Putin's victory in the 2000 presidential election in Russia.<sup>80</sup> It also determined the most important item for Russia's new agenda in the new millennium - the rebuilding of the state and a consolidation of the centralized power vertical. In retrospect, it is not surprising that in the context of an ongoing war in Chechnya Putin's first steps as a president involved measures aimed at reintegrating Russia legally and politically. The introduction of seven federal districts, the legal harmonization campaign and the reestablishment of control over regional branches of federal bureaucracy had all made a good political sense. Putin's July 2000 address to the Federal Assembly conveyed his understanding of country's main problems: "Ineffective state is the main reason for the long and deep economic crisis Russia has been undergoing... [ ] Restoring order in state authorities is the main task we face today."<sup>81</sup> The resonance of this message with societal hopes and aspirations is clear from Putin's popular ratings<sup>82</sup> and support for his federal and other initiatives.<sup>83</sup> Instructive is also

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77 Even cruder in Russian: "v tualete poimaem, my i v sortire ih zamochim."

78 [http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/power/pow\\_gov/government\\_putin/ifp00477](http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/power/pow_gov/government_putin/ifp00477)

79 See opinion polls at: [http://bd.fom.ru/cat/power/pow\\_gov/government\\_putin](http://bd.fom.ru/cat/power/pow_gov/government_putin)

80 Peter Rutland, "Putin's Path to Power," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 16 (January-March) 2000, p. 322

81 Vladimir Putin, "Neeffektivnoe gosudarstvo – glavnyaya prichina dlitel'nogo krizisa," *Nezavisimaya gazeta* 11 July 2000.

82 <http://www.levada.ru/prezident>

83 <http://www.levada.ru/press/2000072401.html>

how regional leaders reacted to Putin's federal reforms. Shaimiev, for example, noted that Putin's initiatives were driven by "real necessity"<sup>84</sup> and suggested that,

All of Putin's initiatives remain within the framework of Russia's Constitution. Whoever would have had become the president of Russia would have been obliged to start strengthening the state power [...]. Therefore Putin's initiatives should have been expected. [...] Without strong and effective power reforms would have to be stalled. I for one cannot imagine Tatarstan without strong and effective power. Only the person who does not know what the state power is could doubt the need for it to be stronger.<sup>85</sup>

In another interview Shaimiev noted that, "without the effective vertical of power Putin will not be able to deliver on his promises to people."<sup>86</sup> In an ironic contrast to the 1990s when the regional leaders copied Yeltsin, this time it was Shaimiev's turn to recognize that Putin was building a system akin to the one erected in Tatarstan even if it was happening at the expense of the republican sovereignty. An astute politician, Shaimiev, who stood most to lose from these reforms, recognized their rationale reiterating Putin's rhetoric of strengthening the state power.

The regional leaders found themselves disarmed and demobilized by the new rhetorical frame. The new state-building agenda advanced by Putin meant that the basis for regional action driven by the sense of self-entitlement disappeared. In fact, the discourse combining the ideas of democratization, national self-determination and federalism was in the process of being dismantled for a while. Starting with the 1996 presidential election Russian politics had been defined by such negative messages as the fear of communist come-back<sup>87</sup> and, later, the need to avoid chaos in the wake of the 1998 financial crisis. No strong positive messages emerged until Putin's new agenda that focused on strengthening the state and, in the wake of August 1999

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84Svanidze interview, 21 May, 2000. Available at: <http://shaimiev.tatar.ru/pub/view/672>

85 Mintimer Shaimiev, "Diktatura v Rossii uzhe iskliuchena," available at <http://shaimiev.tatar.ru/pub/view/688>

86Dorenko interview, 20 May, 2000. Available at: <http://shaimiev.tatar.ru/pub/view/671>

87 Michael McFaul, *Russia's 1996 Presidential Election: The End of Polarized Politics* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1997).

events, received wide popular endorsement. No alternative visions could be legitimated given the rapid rise of the ‘Putin’s majority’ (*putinskoe bol’shinstvo*) – the alleged two thirds of Russian citizens who supported Putin.<sup>88</sup> It is in this sense that the regional leaders were disarmed. In terms of the political action, Putin’s new agenda involved measures aimed at reining in the forces considered a threat to state’s integrity. Regional elites along with some of the influential oligarchs were the first target. Under serious political assault, the ‘rhetorically’ disarmed governors quickly surrendered.

### **Interest-Based Argument**

The main alternative argument is driven by interest-based logic and could be outlined as follows. The post-1998 context strengthened regional governors responsible for the painful adjustment to post-devaluation economic realities. The upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections played an additional role in inciting governors’ political action in 1999 and formation of new political parties including Luzhkov’s *Otechestvo*, Yakovlev-Shaimiev-Rahimov’s *Vsya Rossiia*, Titov’s *Golos Rossii*, and Kremlin-supported *Yedinstvo* (Unity). This wave of political mobilization is best comprehended by analyzing the structure of incentives driving regional political behavior at this particular moment characterized by political uncertainty and governors’ increased weight in the post-crisis context.<sup>89</sup> The open clash between the Kremlin and the rival electoral bloc ended with regional defeat. Political uncertainty has cleared and regional governors joined the winning side, supporting the new leader. Given such simple and powerful account, why invoke the concepts of discursive opportunities and rhetorical frames; why look

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<sup>88</sup> Yirii Chernega, “Putinskoe bol’shinstvo ochen’ ustoichivo,” *Kommersant* March 27, 2001. Found at: <http://kommersant.ru/doc/251642>.

<sup>89</sup> Hale 2006, Robertson 2011.

into the ideational basis of power? I argue that the interest-based account is incomplete. Even when accepting their defeat in the 1999 parliamentary elections, the governors did not have to quietly acquiesce to Putin's radical reconfiguration of federal relations. Losing parliamentary elections did not mean that they had to give in to centralization without any resistance. These were the regional leaders still popularly elected and entrusted with legitimacy and authority by their respective populations. The assault on regional leaders meant an assault on the regional population - the argument especially resonant in the case of ethnic republics meant to ensure self-governance for Russia's largest ethnic groups. The following analogy with political developments surrounding the 1993 Russian constitution elucidates this point.

The 1992 Federal Treaty enshrined the special status of ethnic republics within the Russian Federation. The regional leaders that took part in the Constitutional Assembly to draft Russia's new constitution attempted to institutionalize their status as a preamble in the new constitution. They lost this cause however as the crisis over new Constitution escalated to a stand-off between Yeltsin and the parliament in September 1993. This painful stand-off resolved through force created a new political environment comparable in some respects to post-1999 parliamentary elections context. In both cases regional leaders mobilized for a cause and lost. Their subsequent course of behavior however differed dramatically. In 1993, despite the evidence of Yeltsin's political resolve and clearing of uncertainty, the regional leaders did not relent. The case of Tatarstan where Shaimiev's administration actively discouraged voter participation in the referendum over the new Russian Constitution is exemplary. The government of Tatarstan also insisted relentlessly on signing a bilateral treaty with Moscow to further institutionalize their special status and privileges. Eventually successful in signing such treaty in February 1994, Tatarstan set a precedent followed by other regions.

Historical analogies are never entirely accurate in accounting for all the factors that matter in each unique situation. The important lesson here is that an obvious political defeat in one instance does not necessitate an acquiescent behavior subsequently because political structures “do not come with an instruction sheet”<sup>90</sup> as to what type of behavior is “normatively realistic” at each particular moment. Other factors have to be taken into account. In the case of Tatarstan and other regions, I argue, it was the nature of discursive opportunities and specifically the power of the rhetorical frame highlighting ideas of democracy and self-determination that resonated strongly with politicians and the public enabling the republican leadership to persevere with assertive political action despite the changes in power configuration in the center. Such discursive opportunities were not available to regional leaders in the 2000s. The dominant ideas of state consolidation swept away the basis for claim-laying by the regional leaders.

### **The Rise and Fall of Rhetorical Frames: Theoretical Observations**

The discursive opportunities and rhetorical frames are not the only meaningful causal variable in politics but rather one of the salient factors that help explain the choices made by political actors. Along with institutions and more tangible resources that define the incentive structure for political action, discursive field provides the normative environment within which political action takes place. What can we learn about rhetorical frames from this case and how do these findings bear on theoretical concerns central to ideational analysis? What do we learn about how ideas become dominant (or lose their eminence), how they get institutionalized, and how they affect political behavior?

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<sup>90</sup> Mark Blyth, “Structures Do Not Come with an Instruction Sheet,” *American Political Science Review*, December 2003, 1 (4), 695-706.

With regard to the first question, this study supports the findings from earlier studies demonstrating that ideational shifts are generated by the dissatisfaction with pre-existing ideational structures that fail to solve society's most urgent problems and are frequently instigated by exogenous shocks that propel a rapid reconsideration of traditional frameworks.<sup>91</sup> In Russia's case, the dissatisfaction with the discourse focusing on democracy and federalism was fermenting throughout the second half of the 1990s as the public witnessed the painful realities of corrupt oligarchic capitalism and competition playing out regionally as well as nationwide.<sup>92</sup> But the hasty search for new solutions was forced by the exogenous shocks of, first, the 1998 financial crisis, and the 1999 apartment bombings and Chechen terrorism that opened the political space for new ideas. The Russian case also fits well with Peter Hall's concept of policy paradigms. In Western European context Hall noted that "issues of authority are likely to be central to the process of paradigm change," and that "the movement from one paradigm to another is likely to be preceded by significant shifts in the locust of authority over policy."<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the shift of the rhetorical frame in Russia occurred at the moment of power transition from Yeltsin to Putin, although various measures aimed at changing the nature of center-regional relations have been advanced earlier.<sup>94</sup> Under Yeltsin these policies remained as half-measures and were frequently ignored by regional leaders. It took the transformation of the public field to bring the idea of strengthening the state to political prominence.

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91 See Berman (2001, p. 234).

92 See for example Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *Political Consequences of Crony Capitalism Inside Russia* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).

93 Hall, p. 280.

94 See for example Andreas Heineman-Gruder, "Is Russia's Federalism Sustainable?" *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 3 (1), 2001, pp. 67-91; see also Tolz and Busyгина 1998.

Notably, the respect for centralized power and strong state are frequently argued to be elements of the ‘surviving past’ of ‘communism as a lived system of ideas.’<sup>95</sup> Putin’s new frame therefore might be an ‘old wine in a new bottle’ and its wide popular appeal might result not only from the perceived chaos of the 1990s but also from the ideas more deeply rooted in the Russian culture and that might be considered as a ‘master frame.’ No wonder both political groupings rivaling in 1999 appealed to the idea of a strong state.

There is an additional theoretical leverage in using the term discourse rather than ideas. Although discourse is commonly defined in terms of its content, as a set of ideas and values, it is also defined in terms of its usage, as the process of interaction focused on policy formulation and communication.<sup>96</sup> As such, it draws attention to how ideas are communicated and how the means of communication influence their prominence. It is with regard to this issue that the Russian case contributes most analytically and points to differences in ideational shifts in a democratic and an authoritarian political context. Putin revealed an acute awareness of the importance of public discourse early in his presidency advancing in September 2000 the doctrine of national information that legitimized state control of mass media. It was implemented in the following months and years as the government initiated a political campaign against such media owners as Gusinsky and Berezovsky, getting rid of private media outlets along with these notorious oligarchs.<sup>97</sup>

The media coverage of war in Chechnya that was crucial for Putin’s rise to power was tightly controlled by the state. If the first war in Chechnya occurred in the context of free media, the

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95 Karen Dawisha, “Communism as a Lived System of Ideas in Contemporary Russia,” *East European Politics and Societies* 19 (3), 463–93.

96 Schmidt 2004, p. 184.

97 See for example Masha Lipman, “Constrained or Irrelevant: Media in Putin’s Russia,” *Current History*, October 2005.

information released regarding the second war was mostly propaganda directed by strict censorship from the Kremlin.<sup>98</sup> No negative information about the Russian army was permitted; the amount of casualties was grossly underreported and the journalists that did try to report more truth from the war were harassed.<sup>99</sup> This smooth coverage of war was complemented by an aggressive media attack on Kremlin's political rivals prior to the 1999 parliamentary election. OVR's top two leaders, Luzhkov and Primakov, were drowned in an ugly smear campaign broadcasted on the Kremlin-controlled television channels ruining the chances of "the best-placed of all the parties."<sup>100</sup> Careful attention to media coverage was also evident in the subsequent election. Putin's presidential campaign was conspicuous in its absence showing him as an administrator and a manager rather than a politician fighting for power. Putin refused to use his allocated free TV time and to engage in debates with his opponents while still receiving "about a third of the coverage that was given to all the candidates across all channels." His campaign was dominated by 'Putin at work' images placing him, in public opinion, above the 'crowd' struggling for power.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, strengthening the ideas that resonated with the Russian public was their mode of articulation and 'delivery' that occurred in the context of restricted media, making Putin's message the only one *visible* to the public. Both the ideational content of this frame and the way it was communicated to the public were important in the case of this discursive shift. Without the heavy-handed control of the media and an ugly negative campaign unleashed against the rivals, the outcome of the political clash in the country might have been different. It is plausible

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98 Journalists like Anna Politkovskaya reporting against Kremlin's line were harassed or killed.

99 Andrei Babitsky case, for example.

100 See for example, Stephen White, Sarah Oates and Ian McAllister, "Media Effects and Russia Elections, 1999-2000," *British Journal of Political Science* 35, 2005, 191-208.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 197

though that even if the outcome of the political struggle were to be different, the new leadership of Russia would have had to adopt some version of the ideas outlined by Putin. The widespread perception that the Russian state was captured under Yeltsin was there and, even if the specific policies were to be different, the idea of strengthening the state would have arguably been promoted by Primakov-Luzhkov coalition as well. Neither of the political alternatives would have involved an advocacy of further democratization and national self-determination on the part of Russia's ethnic minorities. The new momentum called for new (or newly rediscovered) ideas.

## **Conclusion**

When and how do political actors pick their fights? The puzzle of Russian governors' inaction in response to Putin's centralizing reforms is used here to argue that interests are not sufficient by themselves to account for political behavior. Understanding political action requires uncovering the grounds for its justification and legitimation. Using the concepts of discursive opportunity structure and rhetorical frames, I reconsider the sources of power accrued by regional governors in the 1990s and draw attention to the ideas of democracy and federalism that together propelled autonomous behavior on the part of regional elites. The shift of the dominant frame that occurred in Russia in 1999-2000 under Putin's leadership brought to prominence the idea of strengthening the state power while retracting on the ideas of democracy and federalism. Defiant and autonomy-seeking behavior by regional elites became untenable and even seem dangerous to state's integrity in such political context. This ideational shift is central to understanding the regional behavior in response to centralization reforms in Russia.