

The Russian federation faced with the challenge of regionalisms

Annie DAUBENTON

Already troubled by the recognition of the independence of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian republics, many regional leaders in the Russian Federation are questioning Moscow's control, and accuse Moscow of managing the economic crisis in an authoritative way. The "power vertical", the main axis of Putin's doctrine to maintain control over the Federation since 2000, could be weakened.

More than the Russian military intervention in Georgia, the emergence and recognition of new entities on the southern borders of the Russian Federation raised a whole new range of questions and the Federation has been accused of double standards in its policy of repression of independence movements within the country, but of encouragement of such movements outside.

Russia seems to forget that it is a Federation and as a result it is currently reeling under two blows: the unilateral recognition¹ of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the economic crisis that has made regions ask questions about the benefits of centralised politics, the "power vertical" that has been the dogma of Putin's Russia since 2000.

If they attained independence, why not us?

Regional leaders like to emphasise that while many residents of the Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia hold Russian passports, the same should apply to citizens within the Federation. In recognition of the two secessionist territories, Moscow could well have

¹ To this day, the independence of the two Republics has only been recognised by the Russian Federation and Nicaragua.

opened its own Pandora's Box, creating a precedent more powerful than the Kosovo situation which it used as a pretext². In any case and for the first time in contemporary history, the press noted, Kremlin leaders implicitly recognised the possibility for their own citizens to attain independence³.

The first countries affected by this new awareness were the republics of North Caucasus: North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Dagestan, and Ingushetia. Ingushetia, on the border of Georgia and Ossetia, is in a situation reminiscent “”of the Chechen republic at the end of the 1990s” on the eve of Moscow's intervention: kidnapping, torture, attacks against the forces of order, civilian murder; the suspicious death of the leader of an independent website⁴ also radicalised opinion. In Dagestan, a crowd tried to prevent the Kremlin-appointed head of the Russian tax department from reaching his office.

The “sensitive” republics are not alone in having problems with the central power. The movement has hit the Federation from all directions, producing economic, financial and political demands.

Tatarstan managed to reach a modus vivendi with the Yelstin presidency⁵, and is today once again making its presence felt. Its president, the politically smart Mintimer Chaïmiev, lost no time in sending an exceptional message to the parliament of the Republic stating that “the crisis has already hit the Tartar economy”; the president was stating the obvious and was reprimanded by the Kremlin.

One head of the Republic's assembly also denounced the progressive ousting of regional cultures, something in contradiction with the Federation's Constitution. He declared that the Kremlin was perpetuating the tradition of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation, who were only preoccupied by regional questions in moments of

² Kosovan independence was recognised 17 February 2008 by the UN Security Council. Russia saw this recognition as a threat to its own territorial integrity.

³ *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 5 September, 2008 (www.ng.ru/politics/2008-09-05/2_pandorasbox.html).

⁴ The owner of the independent new site ingushetiya.ru (now ingushetia.org), Magomed Evloïev was “accidentally” killed during his arrest.

⁵ The only Republic, alongside Chechnya, to have ever signed the Federation Treaty of 31 March 1992 between the autonomous republics.

severe crisis. When he was asked if the crisis was not the inevitable consequence of globalisation, he replied that globalisation affected everybody, including the Tatars.⁶

Republican independence movements are also making their presence felt, affirming that the “recognitions” in southern Caucasus constitute an opportunity for Tatarstan⁷. The Kremlin keeps its eye on the ball: key symbolic historical dates are eagerly observed by the central power who take every precaution necessary to prevent traditional rallies, such as the October 12 commemorations,⁸ from degenerating, and text messages were sent to students at Kazan University to tell them that if they took part in the commemorations they would be expelled from the establishment.

The Centre under fresh attacks

It was believed that central diktats were a thing of the faraway past of Soviet decline, but they are making a comeback; there is a growing revolt against Moscow’s tendency to try and control everything.

Since 2004, governors are no long elected but named by the Kremlin. The system put in place by Vladimir Putin thus forms a network enabling the distribution of posts that are key to the State, industrial and trade resources, to the officials of Russia’s vast regions in exchange for their loyalty to the power. But what appeared to be a privilege is backfiring. The fall in oil prices added to the arbitrary decision making has paradoxically left leaders without support. Regional elites find themselves caught between a Kremlin that is less generous and a more rebellious population.

During the demonstrations last winter in Vladivostok, Moscow has to send its forces of order to quell the demonstrators. Riot police travelled over 5000 miles across the country, as leaders charged with maintaining order in situ made it clear to the Kremlin that they were not prepared to use force⁹.

⁶ <http://www.rosbaltvolga.ru/2008/11/17/542241.html>. Interview with Valeev Resil, president of the Culture, Science and Education Commission.

⁷ A call was launched on Internet and published by the *Novaia gazeta* newspaper of 4 March 2009 <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/312431.html>

⁸ Anniversary of the victory of Ivan “the Terrible” over the Kazan Khanate, 12 October 1552.

⁹ The movements were triggered by the government’s decision to increase customs tariffs on car imports, penalising the local market. Protests spread due to an increase in inflation and unemployment, and touched on the political arena.

Since 2003, central government has restructured with the aim of reinforcing the unity of the State, including its administrative management. A series of fusions between territories and districts have been carried out with the support of popular referendums. But on balance, considering the background of international crisis, results are mitigated: “Restructuring has not given concrete results,” a local expert says, “as nobody has asked themselves how the withdrawn territories would live and be governed”¹⁰. The result has been the opposite of intentions. The population has not received the financing promised for the economic and social development of the region; restructuring has become once again “a game between civil servants at the federal and regional level”.

The effect of the economic crisis in the regions

For many regions, the question is less about “enacting the reforms” that central government has ordered as “surviving”¹¹, especially as forecasts are not optimistic. In 2009, federal subsidies to regions will have reduced in real terms by 10 to 20 %. In Tyumen, no official knows how to meet their budget with lower tax revenue on oil evaluated at roughly 280 million dollars, loses that would hit Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk in comparable proportions.¹²

To this sense of unease, the Kremlin has added tactlessness and internal dissensions. Considering that local leaders are “incapable of understanding the seriousness of the current economic crisis”, the pro-Putin United Russia party has decided to form “crisis units” to delegate “special advisors” charged with supporting the regions’ governors¹³.

The plan has seen much gnashing of teeth. In the territories of Krasnoyarsk or the region of Kostroma, budgetary measures and anti-crisis groups have already been set up without awaiting the green light from Moscow. Others, like the President of Kalmykia, have cautiously declared that, to the extent that most regional leaders were already members of United Russia, recourse to an extra structure was not totally indispensable¹⁴.

¹⁰ Director of the Perm regional studies agency, *Kommersant*, 25 November 2008. www.kommersant.ru/doc-y.aspx?DocsID=1080633

¹¹ Paul Goble, 16 November 2008 (“Financial Crisis Provoking Regionalist and Separatist Challenges to Moscow”).

¹² <http://mariuveren.wordpress.com/2008/11/17/financial-crisis-provoking-regionalist-and-separatist-challenges-to-moscow/>

¹³ www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1116240 et www.ng.ru/politics/2008-11-24/1_er.html

¹⁴ The members of United Russia who occupy positions of responsibility in 74 regions out of 83.

And the influential governor of Kaliningrad – a Russian enclave situated between Lithuania and Poland – called on Moscow to leave greater responsibility to the subjects of the Federation to confront the crisis.

At the very head of the State, perspectives do not totally converge, despite propaganda attempts to create appearances. A number of observers report that there is a fairly clear difference of approach in the economic management of the country between the Prime Minister and the President. Vladimir Putin continues to draw support from the *siloviki*, the forces of law and order, represented by Igor Sechin, the deputy Prime Minister and former KGB official; Vladimir Medvedev draws his support rather on a group of economists, primarily the finance minister Alexei Koudrin. A report submitted to President Medvedev forecasting grim economic perspectives for the country considers the measures taken by the government as insufficient; Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is reported to have given the report a frosty reception, considering that Medvedev's move showed that he was trying to "take control of the economic crisis himself"¹⁵.

Moscow's reaction. The political background

To say that one is more "democratic" than the other is a risky business. But the tension at the top is felt in relations with the regions. The group close to Vladimir Putin, writes Paul Gobble¹⁶, would like to strengthen control over regions during the crisis. President Medvedev, beside him, clearly has the intention of replacing a number of governors who are deemed incompetent, which also means that he is starting to form important sections of the new Russian establishment. The Kremlin has published the names of the one hundred allies who should form the new ruling elite of the country dubbed the "Golden 100"¹⁷.

However, even in a state of division, the Russian power will not hesitate, according to Evgueni Volk, to seek recourse in force if the situation gets worse and "a genuine threat of a coloured revolution as in Georgia or the Ukraine"¹⁸ makes itself felt.

¹⁵ Mentionned by Brian Whitmore (RFE/RL 1 February 2009).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Nezavisimaïa gazeta*, 19 fév. 09 et *Ekho Moskvy* 19 February 2009, Tikhon Dziadko.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*. Evgueni Volk is director of the Moscow office of The Heritage Foundation.

Out of the fifteen or so demands at the Vladivostok demonstrations, nine were purely political¹⁹, calling for the adoption of anti-corruption measures, freedom of speech, the defence of the Constitution, the return of gubernatorial elections by universal suffrage, as well as the resignation of the government.

Divide and rule. “Constructive separatism”

In the exacerbation of tensions there is also a double misunderstanding. On the one side, most regional leaders demand respect for their constitutional rights above all, but “several leaders are incapable of demanding anything else but independence”.

Vadim Shtepa²⁰, an essayist and specialist in Federal matters in Russia, considers that this is symptomatic of an infantile illness in regionalism. But the State sees it as the first steps towards secession.

There is a great contradiction at the heart of the Kremlin’s thinking here. On the one hand they are encouraging separatism on the fringes, while on the other they repress it within to maintain territorial integrity. This is what the analyst Paul Goble ironically calls “constructive separatism”, which, taking a foothold in NATO’s decisions over Kosovo, backs various challenges, sponsors groups like Ruthenians²¹ on the Ukrainian border, and encourages freedom movements in the Donbass or Crimea. From Prague the Belorussian Youth Front launched a call to the West to “extend recognition to all peoples trapped inside the Russian Federation,” and in doing so hoped to unsettle the hold Moscow has over Belorussia, and from which they took exile.

The term “colonial yoke” returns frequently in peoples’ demands. They also talk of “decolonisation” and “decentralisation”. The absence of one encourages the other and no work has been undertaken on the history of the formation of the State—Empire, Union, Federation.

Some remark that at the point when Europe seeks to promote a Europe of the regions, new partitioning could take place through coherence and efficiency – what Boris Toumanov

¹⁹ <http://the-right.org/forum/> (?)

²⁰ www.apn-spb.ru/publications/article4875.htm

²¹ Goble, 29 December 2008 (Moscow's 'Constructive Separatism' in 'Near Abroad' Backfires in Russia).

sees as a redistribution into “natural economic spaces” such as European Russia, the Urals, and Siberia to the east, etc. “For it matters little today,” he notes, “if we exist as a form of confederation or as independent States.”²² This is a vision that Russian ultra-nationalists cannot envisage, and they expressed their concerns after the victory of Barack Obama. To them, the problem is not that the new President will consider changing political line, but that he might serve as a model “to non-Russians to try and access higher responsibilities”.

A former deputy of the Duma wrote in a blog²³ that if the arrival of Obama signified the departure of WASPs – white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants – from the US scene, “in Russia, it signified the decline of ‘Russians’”, that is to say great, orthodox, white Russians.

Translated from French by **Jonathan Sly**

First published in laviedesidees.fr, 30 March 2009

© laviedesidees.fr

²² Allusion to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIE), born from the break-up of 1991. http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2009/02/19_a_2945783.shtml

²³ Andrei Savelyev at the head of the Great Russia party. <http://savliy.livejournal.com/>