Rescaling space, recapturing power:
The role of Russia’s Federal Districts in Putin’s recentralizing project

by

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In the course of Russia’s history—as an imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet state—the central
government has repeatedly used spatial interventions, such as the manipulation of internal
borders, to strengthen control over its vast and unwieldy territory. The most recent spatial
reconfiguration took place in 2000, when President Vladimir Putin created seven megaregions,
called the Federal Districts (FDs), as part of a “recentralizing” effort to draw power away from
the regional level and reassert federal dominance over the nation. Although the initial consensus
was that the Federal Districts would be a weak and short-lived phenomenon, they have proven to
be an exceptionally resilient and effective new scalar construction within the Russian Federation.
At its core, this work seeks to determine what accounted for the success and staying power of the
FDs by using a historically and theoretically informed perspective.

The primary theoretical lens that this thesis engages in its examination of the Federal Districts is
that of rescaling. In brief, rescaling posits that a state’s spatial organization is a key factor that
influences—and is itself influenced by—the administrative level of authority (e.g. national,
regional, local) at which a state’s political power is concentrated and the scale (e.g.
supranational, national, metropolitan) toward which a state’s circuits of capital accumulation
gravitate. Most frequently this paradigm has been used to analyze conditions within modern
capitalist nations; here it is deployed in the context of a post-Soviet state. The thesis focuses on
an examination of the FDs’ role in the rescaling of political power, with an abridged discussion
of the ensuing shifts in patterns of capital agglomeration.

Following a brief theoretical primer on rescaling in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 considers the way in
which Federal Districts fit within the legacy of space/power relations throughout Russian history.
Chapter 3 contextualizes Putin’s recentralizing agenda in the context of 1990s Russia and details
the creation of the FDs. Finally, Chapter 4 uses anecdotes from the Far East Federal District to
illustrate how the rescaling of power unfolded on the ground and where the Federal Districts
sourced their legitimacy and resilience.

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Professor of Economic Geography and Regional Planning // MIT

Thesis Reader: Neil Brenner
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If there’s anything that graduate school has taught me, it is that sleep may be optional, but true friends are essential. I feel very lucky to have come across so many kindhearted, curious and inspiring compatriots in my time as a DUSP student. I owe my sanity (not to mention many happy memories) to the Pusheen Quorum and for that, Sara Brown, Karen Johnson, Kuan Butts and Michael Waldrep, I am forever in your debt. Angela Garvey, thank you, too, for tirelessly cheering me on in all of my pursuits, no matter the miles.

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I dedicate this thesis to my biggest fan—who also happens to be my grandmother—Sofia Kravets.
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Introduction

“Boundaries within states are both reflections of, and an influence on, the distribution of power in the state. Changes in territorial arrangements, often presented as technical adjustments to promote efficiency of administration, are never independent of changes in power relationships.”

--Malcolm Anderson,
*Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World*

The post-Soviet era: from regionalization to recentralization

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, many heralded the birth of the Russian Federation as the beginning of a new era in Russia’s history. Though no one could predict exactly what the future would hold for the fledgling nation, the overarching belief among onlookers and insiders alike was that as the country made the transition to a democratic government and a market economy, its profile and future trajectory would come to align with those of its former Cold War rivals—the post-industrial, capitalist Western states.

Twenty-three years later, it is evident that the reality could not be further from those optimistic projections. Today, Russia more closely resembles an authoritarian regime than a democratic society. President Vladimir Putin and his party, United Russia, have a tight grip on the governmental administration, not only at the federal level, but at the regional and local scales, as well. Further, although many sectors of the economy were privatized in quick succession when President Boris Yeltsin first assumed office as leader of post-Soviet Russia, since that time, numerous major sectors of the economy have, once again, come under the Kremlin’s authority to one extent or another.

To understand how so many conflicting changes could have come about in such a short time, it is helpful to deconstruct Russia’s recent past in terms of two major periods—the regionalization of power and privatization of the economy that transpired in the 1990s, and the

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subsequent recentralization of power and selective renationalization of the economy that took place following Putin’s ascent to the presidency in 2000.

When the Russian state was just taking shape in 1991, the eighty-nine regions that comprised the newly formed federation leveraged the country’s fragile condition to seize as much autonomy as possible—a reaction to more than seventy years of near-total subordination to the central Soviet government. In order to keep the federation in tact (and his ratings high), Yeltsin ceded tremendous power to the subnational level. While some amount of political decentralization was undoubtedly necessary if democracy was to take root, the chaotic manner and stunning speed with which power devolved to the regional scale shook the nation and left the federal government in a debilitated state. Moreover, the regional power grabbing that ensued did not lead to increased levels of democracy at the subnational scale—rather, the governors who managed to hold on to power quickly set up their own fiefdoms, exploiting the autonomy they had wrested from the central administration in the process.

At the same time, the country sought to move away from a planned economy. In an aggressive pursuit of this goal, Russia embraced the dual strategies of economic privatization and macroeconomic stabilization. Again, while theoretically the state was moving in the right direction, realistically, the reforms left many places and people struggling to meet basic financial and social needs, while enabling a small group of opportunistic entrepreneurs—who became known as the oligarchs—to underhandedly seize a majority of the assets and industries that the Russian state was ceding in its effort to create a market-based economy.

By the late 1990s, the extreme decentralization of political power, the rampant collusion between despotic regional governors and money-hungry oligarchs and the intense economic stress under which the Russian Federation found itself (both as a result of internal challenges and the 1998 global economic crisis) left the nation in an exceedingly unstable condition.

When Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned from office and left the little-known Vladimir Putin in charge in last days of 1999, it marked the beginning of a sea change within the Russian Federation. Over the course of the following four years, Putin instituted a far-reaching set of reforms that fundamentally transformed the federation and set it, once more, on a path toward a centrally-oriented, less-than-democratic—if not altogether authoritarian—ruling order. Politically, Putin reasserted federal control over numerous ministries, security forces and departments that had become impotent or overly reliant on the regions they served. He instituted
reforms that brought regional legislature in line with federal mandates. He took steps to shield his parliament from subnational influence. Finally, four years after coming to power he did away with gubernatorial elections altogether.

Economically, Putin introduced a number of measures that reinforced and amended the federal tax code in favor of the federal government. He reasserted the Kremlin’s dominion over a variety of regionally managed enterprises. And, after he had firmly checked any opposition to his political dominion, he embarked on a course of industry renationalization. On his watch, the federal government has by direct or indirect means assumed partial or full control of numerous previously privatized industries, such as oil, gas, aviation, media and telecommunications. Putin has achieved this by strong-arming oligarchs into selling back company shares to the Kremlin or Kremlin-affiliated firms. Indeed, this renationalizing project continues even today. Over the past year, for instance, Russia has worked to consolidate the country’s space industry under the United Rocket and Space Corporation, a single state-owned firm.

What enabled Putin make such rapid progress with respect to recentralization, and, subsequently, with renationalization, in a country that seemed to have swung so far in the direction of regionalization and private (if oligarchical) ownership at the close of the 1990s? Certainly, there are many factors one could point to. However, I will argue that one strategy which proved instrumental to Putin’s success was the creation of the Federal Districts (FDs)—a new territorial scale that facilitated, and indeed, invited, the rescaling of power upward and away from the regional scale.

**The Federal District enigma**

In 2000, the new president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, assumed control of a country that, as previously discussed, many believed was teetering on the verge of economic and territorial collapse. Immediately upon assuming office, Putin set out to reassert the Kremlin’s authority and recentralize political power to the federal level. To this end, in one of his first actions as the nation’s elected leader, Putin issued a decree that divided the nation into seven

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2 To a very limited extent, this process began under Yeltsin with the renationalization of Gazprom in late 1998 in the wake of the global financial crisis. However, no farther government plans to take over private industries existed until Putin took office.

superregional zones called the Federal Districts. Each FD encompassed anywhere from six to eighteen of the eighty-nine existing regions. Putin appointed representatives with whom he was personally familiar to head up the Federal Districts, the majority of whom came from a military background.

While the Russian constitution did not sanction megaregions as a legitimate building block of the state and some politicians protested the move early on, Putin insisted that his FDs did not amount to a legal reorganization of the nation’s space. Rather, he assured the nation, they would serve as nothing more than a set of administrative subdivisions for the federal government to make use of in wielding its existing authority.

Nonetheless, when the FDs were first rolled out, policy analysts and academics alike anticipated that the megaregions would function as the “eyes and teeth” of the Kremlin in Putin’s Russia. This speculation was not unfounded—Russia’s vast territory had long posed a problem to central governments seeking to maintain authority. Historically, various administrations had

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4 Federal Districts have several translations within the existing literature, including “okrug” and “federal okrug.”
often sought to resolve the challenge by creating or altering internal borders in a manner they hoped would strengthen their influence.

However, it was not long before most experts came to view the Federal Districts, a cornerstone of Putin’s recentralization strategy, rather critically. In general, they were skeptical of the fact that the Federal Districts had few clearly delineated powers and no formal legal standing. As one scholar put it, “the envoys’ [Federal Districts’] offices constitute an administrative anomaly, clumsily grafted onto existing institutions and without constitutional status.” The popular perspective was that the FDs were weak, underfunded and unsuccessful as an administrative tool. Within a few years’ time, many agreed that the Federal Districts had failed—even as the same scholars believed the recentralizing project overall to be a success. The consensus among numerous political scientists during the recentralization period (roughly 2000-2004) was that the FDs had little staying power and that they would be phased out in no time.

And yet despite these bleak forecasts, jumping forward to the year 2014, the Federal Districts are a strong and essential element within the Russian Federation. Politically and culturally, these megaregions have become an indelible feature of Russian society. From weather forecasts to textbooks within the country to scholarly publications and World Bank reports outside of it, the borders delineated by the FDs have become essential to an understanding of Russia, though they remain as extra-constitutional and legally hollow as the day they were created. The Kremlin, too, has become incredibly reliant upon the institution. Federal ministries and departments dedicated to a diverse range of responsibilities including, but not limited to, tax collections, customs, securities and finance all operate using the borders set by the FD megaregions for coordinating their work. Other government bodies with both economic and social mandates, such as the antidrug agency, the state construction agency, and national human rights organization, report directly into the seven FD representatives. Indeed, as Goode

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7 More on this in Chapter 4, but this consensus was largely borne of the fact that in the absence of a policy that outlined what FD success would look like, scholars and analysts had no clear rubric with which to judge the institution’s effectiveness.
observes, “the okrug [Federal District] structures have become so intertwined with the political system that it would now be almost impossible to abolish them without threatening the entire system with collapse.”

Further, looking back to the mid 2000s, the FDs had several important impacts. First, the FDs’ role in weakening the regional governors led, in 2004, to the abolition of regional elections in favor of presidentially appointed regional leaders. The FDs also paved the way and created the necessary supporting political infrastructure for the seven regional mergers that transpired later in the decade at Putin’s urging. And, by playing a heavy role in Putin’s political recentralization project, it can be argued that the FDs also enabled the renationalization of key industries that followed. Thus, ultimately, what was first introduced as a benign, administrative measure has, over time, redefined the structure of the political apparatus and fundamentally shifted the locus of power within the Russian state.

**Thesis statement**

How did the Federal Districts, which for a time had appeared to be a weak and purely administrative device with absolutely no legal clout, cement their place within the Russian political structure? What enabled these megaregions to consolidate so much authority? How can we comprehend the significance of the Federal Districts in a manner that allows us to look beyond the framework of pure policy analysis that most political scientists have applied in their analyses of the FDs? And, lastly, what does the narrative of the Federal Districts contribute to our understanding of Russia’s political geography?

This thesis addresses these questions by examining the Federal Districts in the context of historical space/power relations within Russia, by looking at the circumstances which gave rise to Putin’s recentralization project and by reinterpreting the significance and efficacy of the FDs through the lens of rescaling theory.

More specifically, I argue that the precedent of frequent internal border reconfigurations within Russia gave the Federal Districts a historical legitimacy that would likely have been lacking in other national contexts. I also suggest that it is the recurring motif of the central state

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10 Petrov, “How Have the Presidential Envoys Changed the Administrative-Political Balance of Putin’s Regime?,” 56.
seeking to control its vast domain through territorial reorganization that provided Putin with the precedent for reconsolidating the Kremlin's power through new spatial divisions.

Further, by reinterpreting the role of the Federal Districts in the recentralizing period (roughly 2000-2004) from the perspective of 'state space' theory, and, in particular, through the construct of rescaling, I assert that the territorially articulated nature of the Federal Districts enabled a moment of political, and then economic, rescaling to occur within the Russian state which enabled political recentralization and simultaneously legitimated the borders suggested by the FDs. The theories I apply are described in more depth in the next chapter, but briefly put, they are as follows:

Rather than considering space as a container or a static plane on which political, economic and sociocultural tensions play out, the theory of 'state space', popularized by Henri Lefebvre, posits that space is, in of itself, a malleable, socially constructed entity which can be acted upon and molded and which can, in turn, exert its own gravity on politics, economic and sociocultural dynamics. Thus, different scalar transformations can take hold over time, leading to spatial ‘fixes’ or ‘re-fixes,’ which denote the dominant organizing scale for the accumulation of capital, authority and power. Building on this foundation, the principle of rescaling suggests that a state’s spatial organization is a key factor that influences—and is itself influenced by—the administrative level of authority (e.g. national, regional, local) at which a state’s power is concentrated and, ultimately, the scale (e.g. supranational, national, metropolitan) toward which a state’s circuits of capital accumulation gravitate.

In accordance with these notions, this thesis shows, using examples from the Far Eastern Federal District, that it is precisely the fact that the Federal Districts were endowed with physical borders and a geographically tangible organizing logic that enabled them to accumulate power and establish themselves as a lasting fixture of the Russian state. Further, what solidified the influence of the Federal Districts was not just that the administrations of the FDs asserted their authority, but the fact that other entities made use of the FDs' spatial organizing logic to


legitimate and bolster their own related recentralizing reforms. Through this self-reinforcing process, the Federal Districts gradually accumulated power, primarily by inheriting it from the regions, but also, at times, by siphoning it away from the federal level. In the process, they gained wide acceptance, if not legal standing, as a legitimate scale of power within the Russian Federation.

It should be noted that while this thesis focuses on the rescaling of political power that the Federal Districts enabled, as noted earlier, eventually renationalization of capital assets became another project of the Putin administration. Although, it may require further exploration to determine the precise nature of the relationship between political power and capital accumulation in a post-Soviet state (as distinct from Western, capitalist states) vis-à-vis rescaling theory, it should be noted that in keeping with the broad principles of rescaling, a reconfiguration of the circuits of capital accumulation did follow and was enabled by the reconfiguration of political authority that the FDs inspired.

**Existing literature on the Federal Districts**

To date, most, if not all, of the scholarly work on the Federal Districts has been conducted by a cadre of fairly orthodox political scientists. Their contributions, though undoubtedly important, and indeed, central, to the formulation of this thesis, have nonetheless taken a rather narrow approach toward the issue. For the most part, they have focused on determining whether the FDs a constituted “successful” or “effective” policy intervention by evaluating their functionality with respect to Putin’s explicitly formulated aims for the FDs.

For instance, Putin declared that he wanted the FDs to harmonize regional laws, such that they would comply with federal statutes. In their works, Smith, Stoner-Weiss and Isakova each seek to determine whether the FDs carried out this order successfully or not.¹⁴ Likewise, Putin was quoted citing the FDs as central to restoring the “power vertical.” Gel’man and Ryzhenkov dedicate their works to verifying whether this was indeed the case by examining changes in local governance structures in light of the introduction of the FDs.¹⁵ These are just two examples out

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of a large set of similar lines of inquiry where researchers seek to find evidence for ways in which the Federal Districts directly contributed to the recentralization efforts in accordance with responsibilities explicitly assigned to them. Even with these relatively straightforward analytical objectives, researchers studying the FDs have reached a variety of different conclusions—with a few proclaiming the institution of Federal Districts a success and many others asserting that they were, by degrees, a failed project. In summary, while these scholars’ findings may have varied to some extent, the research questions they designed, were, nonetheless, quite similar to one another.

Just as the inquiries that the Federal District researchers formulated tended to follow a pattern, so did their theoretical frameworks and intellectual underpinnings. While most works have given a cursory nod to the fact that megaregions were not a new concept when Putin instituted the Federal Districts in 2000, few have looked at his decision in the context of a broader Russian history. \(^{16}\) And, fewer still have given much consideration to the role of space or the link between the spatial redistribution of authority and the corresponding consolidation of power that the FDs came to embody. Thus, while, as I asserted earlier, the existing analyses of the FDs are critical part of the literature on Putin’s reforms, I believe that they constitute only one approach to considering the role and the significance of the Federal Districts.

**Methodology & thesis roadmap**

This thesis establishes a dialogue between empirical data on the Federal Districts, the interpretations and research of political scientists and sociologists and the ideas of “state space” theorists, with a particular emphasis on reinterpreting the efficacy and significance of the FDs through the lens of rescaling. The contributions this investigation provides are by turns both practical and theoretical. Practically, this thesis offers a new perspective on how the Federal Districts came to occupy such a prominent role in Russian political power relations. Further, as Petrov points out, to understand the “innovation” of the FDs is to gain a better understanding of the Russian political machine as a whole. \(^{17}\) Theoretically, I hope that this thesis can, perhaps, offer a small contribution to the existing conversation on rescaling by offering an example of

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\(^{16}\) A notable exception may be found in Goode, *The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia.*

\(^{17}\) Petrov, “How Have the Presidential Envoys Changed the Administrative-Political Balance of Putin’s Regime?,” 33.
what it looks like when rescaling takes place outside of a nation with a long capitalist legacy. In this respect, the Federal Districts constitute what I believe is an excellent case study.

While on-the-ground research within the Federal Districts themselves was not possible in the course of this project, by triangulating the findings of dozens of scholars who have written about the Federal Districts and fact-checking their interpretations and conclusions against state documents and other points of data whenever possible, this work arrived at what, I hope, is a fairly accurate picture of how the Federal Districts were set up, how they functioned and how they interacted with related reforms.

The thesis strives to consider the Federal Districts reform in a holistic and historically sensitive manner, paying special attention to the fact that space and politics have a long history of dynamic and multifaceted interactions in Russia. Following a brief primer on 'state space' theory and rescaling, Chapter 2 begins by situating the Federal Districts in a long tradition of intertwined relations between Russian politics and Russian space.

Next, in Chapter 3, I provide a look at the regionalization of power that took place in the 1990s and locate Putin’s reforms in the political context of this time period. I also review the finer points of the creation of the FDs themselves and comment on some of the key characteristics that gave these entities their staying power.

In Chapter 4, I analyze the ways in which the Federal Districts contributed to recentralization efforts—both directly, as a standalone political mechanism, and by means of providing other reforms with a new scalar construction and administrative logic with which to bolster their own agendas. In this part of the thesis, I use anecdotes from the Far Eastern Federal District in order to illustrate some of my claims. While a more robust discussion of the rationale behind selecting the Far East is available within Chapter 4, briefly stated, this was the part of the country which had grown the most distant from Moscow in political terms throughout the 1990s—therefore, examples of recentralization efforts succeeding should serve as a solid indicator of similar progress taking place elsewhere in the nation.

Finally, I conclude with a normative analysis of the Federal Districts, highlighting, in particular, their role in the rise of authoritarian rule under Putin over the past fourteen years. I give special consideration to the idea that while the FDs constitute a rescaling of power, it is, perhaps, worth considering that the FD scalar fix enabled a transformation of federal and regional power into something more akin to presidential power. I also offer a short discussion on
the fate, and almost certain eventual dissolution of the Federal Districts, suggesting that perhaps that moment, too, will serve as an opportunity to learn from their story.
Chapter 1 // A primer on ‘state space’ theory & rescaling

‘State space’ theory

Beginning in the 1970s, there has been a shift in the way that some political scientists, human geographers, sociologists and urban theorists conceive of the construction of space and scale (e.g. Jessop, Brenner, MacLeod, Martin, Soja, Sassen). Over the past several decades, space theorists, such as, the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, have argued that “space, and by implication, scale, is produced through the characteristic political-economic processes of certain societal systems, such as capitalism.”18 In contrast to the conventional approach of treating space as a static dimension on which political, economic and social processes unfold, space theorists suggest that space and scale are constantly being defined and redefined, constructed and manipulated by the very actors and developments that play out on, through and in relation to them.

Applied to the study of the state, the notion of space as a dynamic construct and process rather than a fixed arena, and the related concept of the “production of scale,” have underpinned a new way of analyzing, among other things, the geographic dimensions of state power.19 As Brenner points out, conventionally, “territoriality has been treated within mainstream social science as a relatively fixed, unproblematic and inconsequential property of statehood.”20 In contrast, rather than considering the territory that a state occupies as a permanent, atemporal container, ‘state space’ theory examines it as a reflexive, socially mediated and mediating process that exists in a continual mode of mutability.21 As a result, over time different scalar transformations can arise, leading to spatial ‘fixes’ or ‘re-fixes,’ which signify a new privileged scale for the accumulation of power, and ultimately, of capital.22

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21 Ibid.
A note on rescaling

One concept that emerges out of this understanding of space and scale is that of state rescaling. Bob Jessop asserts in his book *The Future of the Capitalist State* that, “the reconstitution of state forms under contemporary capitalism is now said to involve, simultaneously, a reworking of their scalar architectures, which are conceptualized as intrinsic dimensions of the state institutional apparatus and all forms of state intervention.” Consequently, “state scalar organization is examined not only as a site for political strategies but also as one of their key mechanisms and outcomes.”

To this point, the notion of rescaling has been deployed most frequently to examine nations or blocs of nations that have evolved entirely within the bounds of modern capitalism. Typically, scholars use Western Europe and the United States as their sites of investigation and the period from late Fordism (the 1970s) until present day as their timeframe. In very rudimentary terms, the prevailing view among those who work on rescaling holds that, over the past forty years, in modern capitalist states the supranational and subnational scales have assumed much of the relevance previously wielded by the national scale as neoliberalism has supplanted Fordism as the reigning economic configuration. It should be stressed that in this view, it is a restructuring of the architecture of capital accumulation that is the end product of rescaling.

Perhaps the most complete interpretation of rescaling under modern capitalism comes from Neil Brenner’s work on the production of new state spaces. In his analysis, which is built on the contributions of numerous other ‘state space’ theorists, he proposes that beginning in the 1970s, “as the regulatory formation of spatial Keynesianism was destabilized and dismantled, diverse types of urban locational policy were mobilized, at once nationally, regionally and locally, across the western European state system.” In total, Brenner outlines four key phases through which the nations in question passed in the transformation of their scalar architectures and loci of economic and administrative power with respect to urban governance. An exploration of the phases themselves, while very compelling, is not all that important in the context of this

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27 Brenner, “Open Questions on State Rescaling.”
thesis. However, the idea that the various scales themselves contributed and performed an active role in the rescaling process—rather than simply representing the output of other factors playing out on top of them—is critical. This is the idea I seek to carry through my work, as I consider the means by which Federal Districts became a privileged scale of power agglomeration.

**Rescaling in Russia**

Brenner develops the analysis that he presents based on the work of numerous other state theorists, all of whom are preoccupied, primarily, with examining what ‘state space’ and rescaling look like under the conditions of modern capitalism. However, the basic, underlying premises behind rescaling—namely, that space and scale are socially, politically and economically manipulated constructs and that they are often deployed in the name of reconfiguring the privileged site of capital accumulation—are not limited to a single economic system. Scholars have undertaken some efforts at addressing alternative economic systems (a listing of these is available in “Open questions on rescaling”28) but the scope of inquiry has, thus far, been limited. “Open questions on rescaling”29 indicates, in light of the work that has already been conducted on the topic, that “this is an opportune moment for researchers to elaborate more creative, adventurous methodological procedures designed to illuminate exactly how, when, where and why processes of state rescaling unfold, how such processes evolve over time, and how they impact various realms of political-economic life.”

This thesis seeks, in a small way, to respond to this call for further exploration of the “how, when, where and why” rescaling occurs—here, in the context of the post-Soviet Russian state. In addition to the unique power dynamics, politics and economics that exist in Russia, there is at least one other dimension that makes Russia a particularly interesting empirical subject for the study of concepts related to questions of ‘state space’ theory. Namely, as Sergei Medvedev notes, the entirety of “Russian history is about the standoff, interplay and compromise between the power and the space, between the state and the territory... Statecraft in Russia can thus be interpreted as authority’s permanent quest for compromise with territory, with inexplicable, desirable and unattainable Russia. Any political action has a spatial meaning.”30

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28 Ibid.
As this thesis will demonstrate, the creation of the Federal Districts is a clear case of the redefinition of on-the-ground borders as a means for the creation of a new, privileged scalar fix. Further, while this thesis focuses on the initial rescaling that Putin undertook, which was political in nature, there is no doubt that following a reconsolidation of political authority away from the regional level, a reconfiguration of capital agglomeration followed in the form of industry renationalization—a plan that would not proven very difficult to implement had the regions remained strong. In this regard, this thesis broadly echoes the findings of Goodwin and Painter who, in examining the UK under Thatcher, show that the systematic weakening of local governance structures was a precursor to the rescaling of capital that ensued.31

31 Mark Goodwin and Joe Painter, “Local Governance, the Crises of Fordism and the Changing Geographies of Regulation,” Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 21, no. 4 (1996): 635.
Chapter 2 // Space & politics in Russia: a timeless affair

Introduction

In this chapter, I illustrate several different dimensions of the link between territory and power in Russia. I begin with a general description of Russia’s geography and defining characteristics. Then, I highlight some of the key interplays between Russia’s territory and its politics. Lastly, I hone in on one element in particular—that of the internal boundary drawing projects that have taken place in Russia over the centuries—to show that the manipulation of territorial bounds for the purpose of political power consolidation is an enduring phenomenon in Russian history that transcends ideology.

Russia’s formidable geography

Russia’s geography and physical characteristics have always played an essential role in the politics and distribution of power within the country. For centuries, Russia—in the role of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and, most recently, the Russian Federation—has grappled with the unique set of challenges and opportunities that stem from its physical characteristics, its relationship to neighboring nations and its diverse population, among other factors.

In terms of size, Russia has long held the title of being the largest country in the world. Today, the Russian Federation spans eleven time zones and has an area of over 17 million square kilometers (nearly twice that of the United States).\(^3\) As early as the mid-seventeenth century, Russia’s borders stretched from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean.\(^3\) At its height, the Soviet Union covered over one-sixth of the world’s landmass. The territory plays host to a number of topographies, climatic zones and natural resources. Although in the collective imagination Russia may be best known for its remarkably cold winters—and indeed, on most days the coldest spot on the globe is located somewhere in Russia\(^3\)—its southwestern extremities boast a temperate climate that is closer to that of the Mediterranean.

With regard to natural resources, Russia is replete with fossil fuels, biofuels, minerals, rare earth metals and hydropower potential—although, it should be noted that these are not


equally distributed throughout the land area and a majority of reserves are located in some of the more extreme and less hospitable climates. For example, the remote Russian Far East is home to half of Russia’s fish stock, nearly a third of its coal reserves, a quarter of its timber, a third of its hydropower, nearly all of its diamond mines and a vast quantity of oil and gas. As a result, the costs, in terms of labor, transportation, security, technology and infrastructure, required to capitalize on these assets have, in many cases, proven tremendously high. Meanwhile, though Russia has many resources within its bounds, agriculturally, the nation has little land available for high-yield farming.

From a geopolitical perspective, Russia’s location and size leave it in a vulnerable position. As it stands today, Russia maintains twenty thousand kilometers of borders with fourteen other nations. The only nation with more neighbors to account for is China, with fifteen. Furthermore, Russia has 37,653 kilometers of coastland, primarily along its southern and eastern peripheries.

In addition to boasting a complex set of physical characteristics, Russia also plays host to a multicultural and multiethnic set of populations. For instance, given its current borders, it is estimated that Russia is home to at least 128 indigenous groups. The result, as one scholar concludes, is that “Russia is not a single, coherent identity, in part because it is home to numerous ethnic and linguistic minorities living within its borders.”

**A legacy of state/space anxieties**

Russia’s physical enormity and the accompanying features described above have shaped the nation’s political, economic, ideological and social development in countless ways. Indeed, scholars in a variety of fields have long been aware of the inextricable link between Russia’s

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36 The total arable territory within the nation is rather low, at only 7.11%. Central Intelligence Agency, “Russia.”

37 Ibid.

38 If one includes the Kurile Islands, which Russia and Japan dispute the ownership of, the count of borders rises to 15. This is noted in Hill and Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse*, 10.


economic and political development and its geography. While a discussion of many of these relationships is beyond the scope of this thesis, several tendencies and anxieties in particular merit some discussion, as they are integral to a holistic understanding of the involved and enduring relationship between space and power within the Russian state.

In the past few centuries, irrespective of ideological predisposition or governance structure, the Russian state’s responses to its geography have been surprisingly similar. In this section, I cover several central patterns—those of continuous expansion, state size as part of the state identity, the populating project and tension in center-periphery relations.

**Continual expansion**

The Russian state has been expanding steadily over the past five centuries. Although the larger it became, the more difficult it was to govern and protect, throughout history Russia has sought to overcome the difficulty of defending itself by seeking out ever more territory to employ as a sort of buffer zone. Of course, as the newly acquired lands became Russified over time and enemies encroached upon the enlarged state, Russia would embark on a fresh wave of territorial expansion. The strategy of continuous growth as a means of protection has spanned imperial times, Soviet rule and most recently, the post-Soviet administration. The idea of maintaining a *cordon sanitaire*, whether by way of the imperial hinterlands under tsarist rule or by way of the Eastern bloc throughout the Cold War, has long been a consistent theme within Russia. Even today, Russians refer to the independent, former Soviet states as the “near-abroad,” as distinct from the rest of the international community, which they term the “far-abroad.”

At the same time, while the buffer zones Russia created may have done the nation some good, defending an ever-larger territory has always been a costly endeavor. Throughout the nineteenth century, for instance, Russia had to maintain the largest standing army in Europe. During times of war, military spending accounted for as much as 75% of all government revenues. During the Cold War, the spending of the military-industrial complex swelled to a comparable degree largely because of the defense resources required to guard Russia’s expansive

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42 For a full account of territorial expansion, see Hill and Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse*, 59.
43 One notable exception to this practice was the sale of Alaska in 1867.
terrain. Today, Russia’s continues to spend heavily on its military and, in particular, its border policing—it even maintains an active draft, despite numerous underfunded domestic priorities.

Further, transportation is an on-going challenge and economic distance is vast as a result of Russia’s size. The consequences are that complex trade is difficult to execute and many areas of the nation remain disconnected.\textsuperscript{45} Though the Trans-Siberian railroad was constructed at the turn of the last century, only limited advances have been made since then.

\textbf{Enormity as identity}

Despite the challenges associated with its enormity, Russia has tended to view its size as an asset and as a crucial part of its identity as a nation. In past centuries, Russia conceived of its territorial breadth as a saving grace for Western civilization. Without Russia as a sort of buffer against the forces of the barbaric East, the argument went, Europe certainly would have fallen to the infidels long before it had the opportunity to flourish and gain dominance on the world stage. In the words of the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, “[Russia’s] vast plains absorbed the fore of the Mongols and halted their advance at the very edge of Europe... the emergent enlightenment was rescued by a ravaged and expiring Russia.”\textsuperscript{46}

More recently, Russian politicians have taken to citing Russia’s size as an argument for its political dominance.\textsuperscript{47} To some extent, this line of reasoning harkens back to the Heartland Theory, first proposed by British geographer Halford Mackinder at the turn of the twentieth century. But while Mackinder spoke of Russia’s importance as a “geographical pivot” in terms of its size \textit{and} its strategic position at the intersection of Europe and Asia,\textsuperscript{48} in the modern Russian political imagination, the perception of dominance appears to be far less nuanced and far more skewed toward the mere issue of physical enormity.\textsuperscript{49}

\textbf{The populating project}

Russia, in all of its incarnations, has sought to control its physical domain by attempting to spread out its population across it. Rather than pursuing a policy of concentrating its

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{49} Hill and Gaddy go on to add that when it comes to Russia’s size, “It goes without saying that such words are music to the ears of Russia’s nationalist politicians and ideologues. For them, size in the most abstract sense of pure and empty ‘space’ (prostranstvo) has near-mystical power and appeal.” Hill and Gaddy, \textit{The Siberian Curse}, 8.
population in several strategic locations or simply allowing individuals to choose their own preferred settling points, the Russian state has pursued an alternative course of action based on the belief that “all of its territory must be populated to be possessed and governed.” This conviction, particularly in imperial times, was, at least in part, a response to the concept of terra nullis, which suggests that land which is not permanently “settled” by individuals of the claiming nation is not truly sovereign and may be settled and seized by another nation. However, long after Russian sovereignty was well established and the land grabbing of the colonizing era had passed, the mentality of ownership and control through settlement endured.

The Russian tsars began the process of redistributing the population by establishing forts and towns throughout the Siberian hinterland, by directing and restricting the movement of Russians through a practice of “tying” serfs to the land and by setting up penal colonies in remote locations such as Sakhalin Island. After the Russian Revolution, the Soviets continued and expanded the imperial project as they sought to industrialize the countryside and “conquer, tame and settle” the Siberian wilderness by further evening out the distribution of people across the nation. Influenced by an industrially tinged take on Marxist ideology, these planners tended to view the physical environment in terms of “potential productivity rather than potential habitability.” Thus, Soviet planners created cities for hundreds of thousands—even millions—of people in highly remote and frequently extremely cold places. They filled them with residents through the use of many sticks, such as forced relocation and political exile via the GULAG system, as well as a handful of carrots, like the promise of higher wages and Party honors.

Under a planned economy, this pattern of settlement was sustainable, as long as the state played its part. The government provided the mono-industrial, out-of-way cities with reliable,

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50 Ibid., 15.
51 By comparison, other large nations, such as Canada, in particular, and to some extent the United States and Australia, have opted for clustering their populations in dense pockets, along the U.S.-Canadian border in Canada’s case, along the coasts in the case of the U.S. and on the southern and eastern coasts in Australia.
52 It must be pointed out that to some extent, the idea of controlling large, unreachable swathes of land by strewing people across them poses a dilemma in its own right. By sending portions of the population to settle hard-to-access, hard-to-manage places, the state may arrive at a more concrete dominion over the space, but in doing so, the state simultaneously relinquishes some of the authority, access and control that it had over its population. In other words, there is an unavoidable “trade-off between control of territory and control of population.” A more robust discussion of this paradox is available in Hill and Gaddy, The Siberian Curse, 103.
53 Ibid., 2.
large, multiyear orders. At the same time, heavy government subsidies for everything from the transportation of goods coming out, to the cost of food coming in, evened out the discrepancies between the true market value of goods, services and cost of living in the hinterland and made life in these planned metropolises possible.

However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the introduction of a market economy, Russia faced tremendous difficulties as a result of its past planning practices. Cities that once turned an artificial profit and maintained the semblance of economic health thanks to government intervention found themselves entirely uncompetitive under market conditions. Low factory productivity, low product quality and devastatingly high transportation costs stalled factories across the newly formed Russian Federation. The consequence was and remains that, "Russia is, as a result of its old centrally planned system, more burdened with problems and costs associated with its territorial size and the cold than any other large state or country in the northern latitudes, like the United States, Canada or the Scandinavian countries." 56,57

Center-periphery tensions

The Russian territory has repeatedly played host to complex and evolving tensions between a strong central government and a far-flung set of peripheral regions. 58 With approximately 4,000 miles separating Moscow from the furthest eastern territories, the central government has long been prone to asserting control over its territory out a sense of internal anxiety with respect to the massive, unknown and, in some respects, unknowable territory beyond European Russia. 59 External threats, which have come in the form of border disputes with neighboring nations, population shifts, changing economic conditions and larger geopolitical contests have only heightened the motivation to occupy and exert power over the

56 Hill and Gaddy, The Siberian Curse, 3.
57 For a broader discussion of how the vast territory of the Soviet Union exacerbated the mistakes of the planned Soviet state, consult Hill and Gaddy who note that, "While central planning would still have distorted the economy, it would not, and could not, have distorted it as much in terms of locational decisions. In Russia, Siberia gave the Bolsheviks great room for error. Towns and cities grew to huge sizes in places they would never have developed under the influence of free-market forces." Ibid.
frontier. Over time, the quality and intensity of engagement from the central government has varied substantially, often reflecting the governing ideology of the day. The nature of this influence has been spatial, economic and political in nature. For its part, the frontier has responded in a variety of ways, as well.\textsuperscript{60}

One particular manifestation of this tension, which will be covered in depth in the following section, concerns the creation of and modification of political-administrative boundaries by the central government within the state.

\textit{History repeating: boundary projects in Russia’s past}

At the core of this thesis is an exploration of the Federal Districts as a new scale of political-administrative authority in post-Soviet Russia. While I will argue that the FDs constitute a significant and novel rescaling of power to a subnational scale, it is important to note that the general practice of drawing and redrawing political-administrative boundaries has a very long and active history in Russia.\textsuperscript{61} Reconfiguring physical divisions of space within the Russian state has been a hallmark of numerous political administrations, irrespective of their particular ideological orientations. Indeed, the notion that the scales of authority and geographic divisions with a nation’s territory are transformable and transformative—a cornerstone of ‘state space’ theory—has long been a familiar notion in the Russian state.

As indicated in the previous section, the history of political-administrative division-making (and remaking) is, to a great extent, a manifestation of the central Russian government’s anxiety about controlling its space and its population across a vast, inaccessible and unwieldy territory. To quote Nicholson, “For centuries Moscow—imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet—has attempted to impose a top-down administration on a territory whose size and diversity constantly frustrate the effort.”\textsuperscript{62}

In this section, I will highlight the moments of territorial redefinition throughout history in order to illustrate that the appropriation of internal boundary setting as a tool for consolidating power and creating privileged scales of authority has a long record within Russia. I will comment on both the moments of scalar reconfiguration and also the proposed suggestions for crafting

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{60} Sue Davis, \textit{The Russian Far East: The Last Frontier?} (London: Routledge, 2003), 13.

\textsuperscript{61} Vladimir Shlapentokh, Roman Levita, and Mikhail Loiberg, \textit{From Submission to Rebellion: The Provinces versus the Center in Russia} (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).


\end{footnotesize}
new divisions. I will also seek to draw the reader’s attention to a few important themes that arise throughout this discussion. These are: the staying power of the artificial regional boundaries first crafted under Catherine the Great; the manifestation of political “pendulum swings” (and associated reconfigurations of power dynamics) in the political-administrative configuration of Russia; and the rescaling of power and creation of a new privileged scalar fix that comes with each redrawing of boundaries.

**Imperial boundaries**

The first political-administrative boundaries, as we would recognize them, were created by Peter the Great at the turn of the eighteenth century. He divided Russia into ten provinces, known as gubernii, for military, financial and judicial purposes. These units, planned from the top down, were organized “without much attention to historic social bonds or economic connections.” A strong ruler seeking to control an ever-expanding territory, Peter handpicked the governors for his new gubernii, who reported directly to him.

Shortly thereafter, Catherine the Great divided Peter’s gubernii into smaller provinces, thereby giving us the first rough sketch of some of the westerly regions that Russia maintains up to this day. It should be noted that the motivation for her project was the Peasant Revolt of 1773-1775. In an effort to get a tighter grip on the nation, she reduced the size of the administrative units. Again, paying little heed to natural divisions or cultural and historical boundaries, Catherine used a logic ground in population size to construct the regions. She decreed that for an area to be classified as a guberniya under her new terms, it had to host a city center and yield at least 300,000 men for conscription as needed. In total, this yielded forty regions. These borders, with minor revisions and broad swathes of land being incorporated as eastern frontier additions, persisted until the Russian Revolution.

It should be noted that although the political-administrative boundaries did not change significantly from the late 1700s until the Russian Revolution, the administration and political

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65 For a complete history of Russia’s regions, 1700-1917, see Shlapentokh, Levita, and Loiberg, *From Submission to Rebellion*, 29–52.
67 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
structure within the gubernii transformed—and deteriorated—dramatically. What was a rather orderly system (further stabilized by the practice of serfdom) in Catherine’s time devolved into an “erratic, semifeudal administration by a class of widely differentiated landlords” by the turn of the twentieth century.

**Soviet boundaries**

The Soviet era ushered in a new organizing logic for the Russian territory. Although initially the Bolsheviks opposed the idea of federalism and the region-based organizing structure that existed in imperial Russia, citing it as oppressive and reflective of “bourgeois” principles, Treisman points out that relatively quickly “the Bolsheviks in power found federal structures a useful expedient to contain and gradually reverse the spontaneous decentralization occurring during the revolution and civil war years.” Thus, under Soviet control, the principle of political-administrative areas was also deployed in the interest of reigning in and reconsolidating control.

The territory of Russia, known as the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) under Soviet rule, became the largest of a number of republics with a “nominally federal structure.” These large divisions served as the privileged scale of authority within the USSR. Throughout Soviet rule, the Party maintained a firm grip on the entirety of the RSFSR and nearly every decision was highly centralized.

Despite maintaining top-down order, the Soviets still felt a need to create regions through which to funnel their authority. Soviet ideology dictated that in a harmonious society the administrative-territorial hierarchy must respond to issues of ethnicity, urbanization and population size. From the outset, Lenin criticized the guberniya system for failing to account for the distribution of industry and for failing to acknowledge non-Russian nationalities. As a result, the foundations for the regions’ new borders were, by turns, both technocratic and ethnographic in nature, a set of logics that were not without their own tensions.

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72 Goode, *The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia*, 44.
74 For a more complete discussion of Soviet locational policies and decisions see, Kirkow, *Russia’s Provinces*, chap. 2; Hill and Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse*.
76 Ibid.
77 Goode, *The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia*, 43.
The Russian Communists operated under the belief that in order to achieve proletarian unity in the future, it was first necessary to allow various ethnic group the space to exist on their own and to recognize and celebrate their identities (a privilege long denied under imperial rule). Bolsheviks took this project seriously—not only by creating ethnocultural districts for groups already settled in particular locations, such as the Sakha Republic, which was set aside for the Yakut people—but also by resettling ethnic diasporas in new, artificially designated ethnic zones (often, strategically, in rather far-off places). An example of this is the Jewish Autonomous Okrug, located in the Russian Far East, which was created for the supposed benefit of the Russian Jews (virtually none of whom resided in the JAO territory prior to its establishment).

The rest of the states that the Bolshevik state set up within the RSFSR were based on rather vague concepts of economic productivity and hazy projections for population expansion and industrialization. As in the case of the imperial partitioning, historical and cultural logics did not play into the decision-making process.

The ethnic republics, as they were called, were, in theory, given more privileges than the non-ethnic regions. While under Soviet rule this distinction had little bearing, since virtually every decision made its way to the regions—republic or otherwise—from the top down, as we will see later in the discussion, the practice of endowing some areas with additional rights on the basis of an ethnic coherence gave way to a challenging system of asymmetric federalism which persists in the Russian Federation to this day.

In addition to the regional divisions created by the Bolsheviks, which remained fairly stable, there were also macroeconomic zones that shifted continuously throughout the Soviet rule. At the time of the first Five Year Plan, there were twenty-four designated economic macroregions. These were further divided into thirty-two when the second Five Year Plan was introduced and changed nine more times between over the next three decades. Nikita Khrushchev instituted the last set of divisions in 1961 when he reduced the number of macroeconomic regions to eighteen. This restructuring was representative of a broader decentralizing project that Khrushchev undertook. By reducing the number of regions, he sought to create conditions that would mitigate the control of the central authorities and allow for more intraregional cooperation at a lower level. Although the reform was largely unsuccessful, it

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78 Kirkow, Russia's Provinces, 25.
79 Treisman, After the Deluge, 29.
80 Shlapentokh, Levita, and Loiberg, From Submission to Rebellion, 65.
still bears observing that the economic-political maneuver was promoted through yet another reconfiguration of the spatial scales within the Russian territory.

Although the motives of the Communists may have appeared somewhat different from those of the imperial rulers, the underlying anxiety associated with using spatial scale to achieve the ideal level of political control remains a common thread. Goode sums up well the sentiments of numerous scholars:

The Soviet Union’s state-building experience was bound-up with the seemingly endless quest begun during the Tsarist era to find the optimal internal division of state power and territory. Regions continued to expand or contract in alternation, but the dynamics now followed somewhat different logics from those of the Tsarist period. If the Tsarist period sought to overcome the morass of inherited provincial structures and rationalize them in the interest of empire-building, the Soviet leadership found multiple uses for provincial boundaries—in pacifying the countryside during the Civil War, as vehicles of revolution, and as instruments for the consolidation of power. 81

Post-Soviet boundaries

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the eighteen Soviet macroeconomic regions dissolved, but few changes took place with respect to political-administrative divisions in the newly founded Russian Federation. Nonetheless, there was no shortage of proposals for potential boundary reconfigurations. While a broader discussion of the political climate and center-periphery struggles that played out during the tumultuous late 1980s and early 1990s follows in Chapter 3, for now it is sufficient to say that as the central state ceded power to the regions in an attempt to prevent a complete disintegration of the newly formed federation, internal boundaries, however illogical from an economic or cultural standpoint, became extremely inflexible as the regions gained autonomy and sought to protect whatever territory they had. Thus regions as they stood (and, to large extent, as they remain today), represented a motley and highly variegated assemblage of states, with respect to legal rights and economic profiles—as well as physical characteristics.

From a legal standpoint, as stated earlier, when the Soviets created the regions, they endowed ethnic republics with more authority than non-ethnic states. While the effects of this policy were relatively limited during the Soviet era, when the RSFSR was a federation in name alone, the full effects of this asymmetry revealed themselves during and following the formation

81 Goode, The Decline of Regionalism in Putin's Russia, 43.
of the Russian Federation. The Soviets had devised a system with autonomous republics, districts (obests), territories (krais) and autonomous regions. Now, these various states, eighty-nine in total, collectively represented a highly fragmented space.

Economically, the different regions found themselves in a variety of different circumstances after the collapse of the planned economy. Some, located in the far northern reaches of Russia, had been over-settled under Soviet rule and had depended on subsidies from the state for even basic survival for the preceding seventy years. Others, replete with natural resources, faced issues of reduced demand but no shortage of potential for taking whatever goods they produced to the market (though they would soon confront the realities of privatization and oligarchy). Others still grappled with problems of monoindustrialization or rapid depopulation.

Physically, both in terms of climate and size, the regions also differed dramatically. As an example, the largest of the regions, Sakha Republic (also known as Yakutia) constitutes today, as it did then, 3.1 million square kilometers. If it were a country, it would be the sixth largest nation in the world—even larger than India. By contrast, the Republic of Ingushetia, at four thousand square kilometers is 775 times smaller. However, as two titular republics, these territories would have held identical legal status within the Federation.

Suggested Post-Soviet boundaries

Even as regional borders entered a period of temporary calcification, politicians’, economists’ and academics’ imaginations soared with respect to the potential for redrawing the internal boundaries of the Russian state once more. A reconfiguration of political-administrative divisions held appeal for several reasons. The move would have dissolved existing states, leading to the dissolution of any juridical asymmetries, thereby quelling separatist tendencies; it had the potential to unify different parts of the nation along more economically strategic fronts; and it could reduce the number of subunits to a more manageable number.

While the particular order of proposals for new state configurations is not vital, the breadth of the discussion around wiping the slate clean and constructing a new scale of subfederal regions is significant. The debate began in earnest in the early 1990s when the RSFSR was still under Soviet control. In June 1990, the Russian Soviet put out a draft of a federal treaty

84 Isakova, Russian Governance in the Twenty-First Century: Geo-Strategy: Geopolitics and Governance, 140.
draft that sought to redefine the relationship between the Kremlin and the regions. The treat
would have “reduced the ethnoterritorial hierarchy to two levels: on the one hand, ‘national and
territorial state formations, having the status of equal republics’—that is, the former autonomous
republics—and, on the other, “federal territories”—that is, the oblasts and krais (Teague 1994a,
31).” However, as Treisman goes on to point out, “this was intended as only a temporary
accommodation. Ethnic territorial definitions were to be gradually phased out and replaced by
about 50 new territorial units with equal rights and status, similar to Germany’s Länder.”

Around the same time, or perhaps even a bit earlier, Russian constitutional scholar Oleg
Rumyantsev introduced a proposal, also with the semi-autonomous Länder in mind, to create
twenty new administrative units. Another suggestion, similarly structured, suggested 24. Then
in 1991, Boris Yeltsin, who initially supported the federal treaty that would have created 50
states, put forth an even more radical suggestion for just eight to ten new regions. While his
primary argument for this consolidation was economic in nature, the new, enlarged states were
also “seen as a vital counterbalance to regional and ethnic separatism” that threatened Russia’s
survival—not to mention Yeltsin’s presidential ambitions.

Though eventually Yeltsin withdrew his proposal for the enlarged regions, owing to a
lack of support among voters and regional politicians, the idea of macro-units endured, albeit in
an altered, much less powerful form. Between 1990 and 1992, the state established eight

91 In 1990, “There was some discussion at the beginning whether to change administrative boundaries and to set up larger subnational units, for example, along the lines of former planning regions. However, as Hanson (1994b, p.2) noted, the centre feared that a smaller number of larger provinces could exert stronger power against Moscow and even enforce separation from the RF.” Nicholson, “Characterising Centre-Periphery Relations in the Yeltsin Era,” 14.
92 While for the most part regional authorities were not amenable to the idea of enlarged political-administrative boundaries, as it threatened their own authority and political statuses, to the extent that such a proposal could merge “donor” and “debtor” regions, some poor territories supported the plan, “insofar as it was economically advantageous.” Goode, *The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia*, 114.
interregional associations.\textsuperscript{94} Though their powers were relatively minor—as one scholar puts it, they functioned much like “an informal consultative club of interactions between governors and federal authorities”\textsuperscript{95}—they nonetheless represented a manifestation of the macroregional ideal. Furthermore, the powers of these associations actually grew with time.\textsuperscript{96}

At the height of regionalism, roughly spanning the mid-1990s, talk of expanding or redrawning boundaries largely came to an end. However, following the financial crisis of 1998, the discussion resurfaced once more. As various suggestions for getting the country back on its feet emerged, Moscow’s mayor, Yury Luzhkov, suggested reorganizing the nation into a confederation based on the existing interregional economic associations.\textsuperscript{97} Although the governors of the regions rejected the proposal, this nevertheless illustrates yet another moment of an attempt to rescale political authority by means of spatial reorganization.\textsuperscript{98}

**Territorial reconfiguration: a familiar motif**

As this final section demonstrated, political-administrative boundaries have long been an object of debate and reconfiguration within the Russian state—whether imperial, Soviet or post-Soviet. Consequently, when he introduced the Federal Districts, the idea of shifting internal boundaries and the notion of superregional zones were hardly a novel concept to the Russian population. Perhaps as a result, while one could easily imagine the citizenry of a state unaccustomed to shifting territorial boundaries balking at the idea of a new political-administrative scale, this was a familiar notion which caused far fewer waves within Russia.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 140–141.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} “Since 1997 heads of the interregional economic associations were representing governors in the round table debates with the president in the Kremlin. In 1997, during PM’s Primakov’s government, they were admitted as members to a special presidium in order to intensify co-ordination between the regions and the federal centre,” Isakova reports. Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{98} Reddaway, “Historical and Political Context,” 14.
Chapter 3 // Making sense of the Federal Districts

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I established that Russia has a long history of political regimes that have used internal boundary setting with the aim of consolidating power and authority to a particular scale. Thus, the creation of Putin's Federal Districts was not an entirely novel one. But what circumstances motivated the newly elected Putin to use his limited political capital to establish the Federal Districts? And what, precisely, did he seek to achieve by introducing the FDs to the nation?

In this chapter, I will give readers a sense for the political climate and the power that the provinces had amassed in the years leading up to Putin's rule; I will shed light on the circumstances under which Putin's recentralizing project took shape; and, I will outline how the Federal Districts were formed and structured.

Context for Federal District creation

When Vladimir Putin assumed office in the year 2000 and declared his intentions to "recentralize" authority, regionalization—defined as "the devolution of economic and political power from Moscow to the provinces"—was at its height. Since the end of the Gorbachev era, a contest for legal, economic and political supremacy had been playing out between the federal level and its constituent regions. By the late 1990s, it was clearly the regions that were winning.

What began as a set of protests for additional rights and privileges in the last years of the Soviet Union—lodged primarily by some of the titular ethnic republics—turned into a massive, albeit predominantly nonviolent, struggle for greater autonomy among all of the regions after the formation of the Russian Federation. The circumstances surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of regionalism are undoubtedly more complex than a short introduction can impart. However, at the most fundamental level, to understand why the struggle intensified to the extent that it did, and to understand how all of the regions came to acquire as much authority as

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100 For a full account, please consult: Koehn, Popson, and Ruble, “Introduction.”
they did, one need only recall the fact that federalism in Russia, as inherited from the Soviet RSFSR, was asymmetrical in nature.”

The RSFSR, under Soviet control, which contained a variety of different types of provinces, had, on paper, ascribed different degrees of autonomy to the different types of regions, with the ethnic republics being entitled to far more freedoms than all other types of (non-ethnic) provinces. Though these distinctions had little bearing on reality during Soviet rule, beginning in the late 1980s, ethnic republics began to clamor for the right to exercise the full extent of their privileges. Seeking support for his political ambitions, Yeltsin, then chairman of the RSFSR’s Supreme Soviet, responded to the republics’ calls for autonomy by calling upon the republics within Russia to “take all the sovereignty you can swallow.”

As a result, when the RSFSR broke apart and the Russian Federation was established, the internal divisions that the Soviets had settled upon endured. As Kirkow describes it, the post-Soviet treaties and the 1993 Constitution, which legitimized the boundaries and powers of the various provinces, led to a “juridical petrification of the arbitrary territorialisation of ethnic groups that was inherited from Stalin’s policy.” Under the laws of the newly formed Russian Federation, the republics, as the highest-ranking units in the federation, were afforded the right to determine their own, secondary state languages, to design their own governmental structures, to control their natural resources and to exercise some independence with regard to matters of taxation, trade and legislation.

Although initially Yeltsin’s concessions were primarily targeted at only the ethnic republics, it was not long before the new president was forced to compromise with all of the

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101 Ibid., 23.
102 Republics were based on national divisions and took their names from the name of the titular ethnic population, regardless of whether it constituted a majority in the republic. The districts on the other hand, were divided on the basis of geographic lines and named after geographic regions.” Ibid.
103 The republics within the RSFSR were emboldened by the “parade of sovereignties,” which took place from November 1988 to July 1991, during which time all 15 union republics within the USSR declared sovereignty. Ibid.; Martin Nicholson, Towards a Russia of the Regions: Adelphi Paper 330 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13; Herrera, Imagined Economies, 27–28.
106 Kirkow, Russia’s Provinces, 47.
regions in numerous ways in order to maintain their support. Non-ethnic regions were emboldened to seek additional autonomy from the center not just because they saw the republic counterparts receive concessions, but also because they viewed the republics’ “ethnic” composition as a basis for enjoying additional power as less than legitimate. Indeed, among 21 ethnicity-based republics, the titular group only constituted the majority in four of them, with plurality in an additional three. It should be noted that the implementation of asymmetric federalism was not, in of itself the issue. As Teague points out, other states, such as Canada and Switzerland, endow ethnic minorities with additional autonomy and subnational territories to call their own without any problem. Rather, the problem stemmed from the fact that, as Paul Goble of the Carnegie Endowment sums it up, the newly formed Russian state included “an anomalous class of territories that purport to be founded on the ethnic principle but where the indigenous nationality is heavily outnumbered by ethnic Russians.” Further complicating the situation was the unequal distribution of tax payouts. Although the non-ethnic regions paid more than 80% of the federal taxes, the ethnic republics, many of which were in poor economic shape after the collapse of the USSR, often reaped the payouts, even while contributing little or nothing to the communal pot due to the special dispensations afforded to them within the federation.

Without dwelling on the political complications that this situation created for Yeltsin, it sufficient to point out that the outcome was such that in a state where the central authority was already significantly weakened by the dissolution of several key mechanisms, the president was forced to allow for a number of policies that led to an astonishing regionalization of authority in a very short time. First, the Constitution signed into effect in 1993 allowed for the creation of bilateral treaties between the federal government and individual regions. Within a matter of five years, 46 out of eighty-nine regions had signed such a treaty with the federal government—a situation that inspired one leading scholar to comment that the basis of federal relations in Russia

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109 Republics in which the titular group constituted the majority: Chechnya, Chuvashia, North Ossetia and Tuva. Republics in which the titular group constituted a plurality: Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia and Tatarstan.


111 For a comprehensive overview of boundary drawing up to early 1990s, see Teague, “Center-Periphery Relations in the Russian Federation,” 27.

112 For a comprehensive overview of boundary drawing up to early 1990s, see ibid.


was more contractual rather than constitutional\textsuperscript{115} and another to declare that “the existence of these bilateral treaties have [sic] made a nonsense of Russian federalism [although] they did make the republics and regions look to President Yeltsin as a source of patronage.”\textsuperscript{116}

Further, Yeltsin was forced to capitulate on allowing regional governors to hold presidential elections, following a fight in which Yeltsin sought to maintain governorships as presidentially appointed.\textsuperscript{117} In short, in order to ensure the survival of the nascent Russian Federation (which, particularly in the early 1990s was very much in question), Yeltsin had to forfeit a tremendous amount of power to the regions whose consent legitimized the very existence of the Russian state.\textsuperscript{118} Otherwise, he risked revolt or secession by dissatisfied states or the formation of regional coalitions that could threaten his political standing.\textsuperscript{119}

As the 1990s got underway, the regions, both ethnic and non-ethnic, continued to amass power. As Stoner-Weiss succinctly summarizes,

Policymaking authority devolved quickly and completely from center to periphery throughout the 1990s... The center lost an effective governing presence in many Russian provinces. Even just prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, regional governments had begun to openly defy the central state and usurp central authority. This phenomenon accelerated throughout the 1990s as regional political actors declared their laws sovereign on provincial territory, usurped federal taxation privileges, imposed illegal internal tariffs, established citizenship requirements distinct from those of the Russian Federation, and even issued their own currencies. By the late 1990s, unbridled provincial ambition threatened the cohesion of Russia as a single political and economic expanse.\textsuperscript{120}

It should be noted that the decentralization of authority that occurred throughout the 1990s was not entirely unwelcome by a federal government seeking to pursue a course of market liberalization and democratization—but neither was it well-planned or controlled.\textsuperscript{121} Political

\textsuperscript{116} Catherine Danks, Russian Politics and Society: An Introduction (Essex: Longman, 2001), 139.
\textsuperscript{117} Nicholson, Towards a Russia of the Regions: Adelphi Paper 330, 38.
\textsuperscript{118} While a comparatively minor point, Yeltsin also actively encouraged regional, city and local governments to “assume substantial responsibility for, and control of, many of the federal institutions on their territories” so that he and his political allies could focus their limited resources on maintaining control in the center, after closing down the functionally essential Communist Party offices in every town throughout the country. Reddaway, “Historical and Political Context,” 6–8.
\textsuperscript{119} Goode, The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia, 90; Treisman, After the Deluge.
\textsuperscript{120} Stoner-Weiss, Resisting the State, 4.
\textsuperscript{121} Gel’man argues an even stronger point: “Decentralization in Russia during the 1990s was anything but the result of a considered policy from the federal Centre. It was more of a side-effect of the transformational processes that in
scientists looking in on the situation as it was occurring, as well as scholars who examined the events after the fact, generally agree that the federal government welcomed some degree of decentralization as the federation found its footing—but the manner in which the events of the 1990s unfolded left little doubt that by the end of the decade, the balance of power had swung disproportionately in the direction of the regions and far beyond what the center could have desired.

The strength and unruliness of the regions manifested themselves in almost every political and economic dimension imaginable. The governors within the regions were frequently corrupt, with many behaving like “modern-day tsars or feudal lords” despite the presence of popular elections. With respect to legislative authority, the regions brazenly violated federal law and even constitutional guidelines whenever it suited them. Regions habitually collaborated in myriad illegal ways with businesses within their jurisdictions. Further, they frequently shirked their responsibilities to collect taxes, opting to strike mutually beneficial, though wholly unlawful, agreements with big businesses, instead. Eventually, the situation grew so dire that one-third of the country’s regions were withholding some portion, or even all of, their assessed taxes. In response to this statistic, the Russian finance minister, Boris Fyodorov, blamed the provinces for seeking to destroy the federal government through “financial asphyxiation.”

Thus, in the years immediately preceding Putin’s ascent to the presidency, the state was facing a political crisis, leading several scholars to refer to the country as a “federation without federalism.” To quote Smith, “the flow of power from the centre to the regions was part of a

Russia were accompanied by sharp inter-elite conflict, a severe and sustained economic collapse, and a serious falling away of state capacity.” Gel’man, “Leviathani’s Return: The Policy of Recentralization in Contemporary Russia.”

124 Danks, Russian Politics and Society: An Introduction, 135.
125 It may be of interest to readers to note that Katherine Stoner-Weiss’s analysis of violations by region shows that in non-republics the violations were primarily economic while in republics they were primarily political in nature. Stoner-Weiss, Resisting the State, 68.
126 Ibid., 98.
127 Nicholson points out that throughout the 1990s “the working pattern of tax and budget relations was based on a presidential decree of January 1993 but was subject to constant change. The regions had many justifiable reasons for unhappiness with the [tax] system—for example, the centre allocated to itself the steady, indirect taxes, such as VAT and excise, that were easy to collect, while leaving the regions to collect profit and income tax, which were both cyclical and easier to evade.” Nicholson, “Characterising Centre-Periphery Relations in the Yeltsin Era,” 15.
128 Treisman, After the Deluge, 2.
129 Chebankova refers to Russia as ‘a federation without federalism’ . Chebankova, “Adaptive Federalism and Federation in Putin’s Russia.”
broader disintegration of the Russian state. As late as 1998, those observing the circumstances unfolding in Russia considered the dissolution of the federation a distinct possibility.

Political recentralization, broadly considered

Putin became president of the Russian Federation rather abruptly when Boris Yeltsin resigned unexpectedly in December of 1999. While Putin acted quickly with respect to some urgent matters upon assuming the post, he did not undertake any substantive domestic transformations until he was elected to the post of president several months later. When he was finally inaugurated as Russia’s president, however, Putin moved swiftly to institute a program of reforms that would recentralize authority. Even those analysts skeptical of his particular path forward tend to agree that the general spirit of his attempts to reconsolidate some amount of power away from the regions came “not a moment too soon.”

As Putin made his intentions for domestic reform clear, he introduced the country to several new terms that would come to define his recentralization strategy. He spoke of strengthening the “power vertical” or “ruling vertical” (властная вертикаль) and of his plans to institute a “dictatorship of law” (диктатура закона) in order to establish a clear demarcation of authority between the center and the regions. Speaking concretely, he called repeatedly for Russia to become “a single legal and economic space.” While it would be several years before

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130 Smith, “Putin: An End to Centrifugalism?,” 19.
131 Kirkow, Russia’s Provinces, 50–51; Treisman, After the Deluge, 2.
132 It is worth noting that although the decentralization of authority was stronger than ever, federal outlays remained high and the size of the central state bureaucracy was hardly diminished. From 1995 to 1998, for instance, state expenditures accounted for thirty-eight to forty-two percent of the Russian GDP, and “the Russian state apparatus actually grew throughout the 1990s relative to its size in the first few years following the collapse of the Soviet Union.” Stoner-Weiss, Resisting the State, 5.
134 Quoting Gel’man and Ryzhenkov: “The building of the ‘power vertical’ in the context of Russia’s politics of the 2000s was one of the cornerstones of the recentralization of governance and institutionalization of both nationwide and sub-national authoritarianisms (Gel’man 2009, 2010). In political terms, the mechanism of the ‘power vertical’ is based upon several formal and informal ‘rules of the game’ for local regimes and their actors: the hierarchical subordination of regional chief executives (governors) as well as city mayors to the Kremlin; the de facto prohibition of open political competition of local elites on electoral and legislative arenas, and the forced co-optation and integration of the majority of key actors of local regimes into the ‘party of power’, United Russia (Edinaya Rossiya) (Golosov 2008); and making actors of local regimes responsible for the provision of favourable results of national and regional elections, requested by the centre, and for the prevention of actual mass protests.” Gel’man and Ryzhenkov, “Local Regimes, Sub-National Governance and the ‘Power Vertical’ in Contemporary Russia,” 451.
135 Goode, The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia, 92.
137 Danks, Russian Politics and Society: An Introduction, 137.
his economic “unification” would begin in earnest—primarily through the renationalization of key industries—he took on federalizing the legal and political dimensions right away.

The first of the reforms that he made public was the creation of the Federal Districts, which he announced just one week after he assumed office as an elected leader. Several other policies were introduced in quick succession. These policies made changes to the way that members were chose for the Federation Council (the upper chamber of the national parliament); gave federal authorities the power to remove governors for noncompliance with federal law; created a consultative State Council; elevated the powers of the Security Council; reorganized the nation’s financial structure in favor of the federal government; and ushered in a new era of “legal harmonization.” To some extent, the success of each of these policies depended, in one way or another, on the existence of the new FDs. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

The Federal Districts in detail

Putin’s Federal District vision

In mid-May of 2000, Vladimir Putin called for the creation seven Federal Districts each of which unified between six and eighteen geographically proximate regions under the control of a presidentially appointed envoy, officially known as a plenipotentiary representative, or plopredy (plopred in the singular). The reforms were prepared in secret, and likely with some measure of haste, in the weeks prior to the official announcement.

Although Putin’s stated intentions for the Federal Districts were confined to the realm of the administrative, it is of some significance to note that the borders of the FDs mirrored those of the existing military districts. Further, five of the seven original plopredy, all of whom Putin personally knew and selected, had served either in the military or the security services. Consequently, comparisons with Peter the Great’s gubernii, which were also founded on the basis of military districts, were not far behind.

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139 For a complete discussion of Federal Districts see: Goode, The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia, 61.
140 Petrov, “How Have the Presidential Envoys Changed the Administrative-Political Balance of Putin’s Regime?,” 33.
141 Isakova, Russian Governance in the Twenty-First Century: Geo-Strategy, Geopolitics and Governance, 144–145.
142 Ibid., 145.
143 Hill and Gaddy, The Siberian Curse, 115.
Putin’s explicit goals for the Federal Districts were “to rationalize the system, increase administrative efficiency, restore and strengthen the “vertical of power” (vertikal’ vlasti)—or the administrative connections between the center and the regions—and to reign in the regions and their leaders politically and economically.” Presidential decree No. 849 ‘On the Plenipotentiary Representative of the President of the Russian Federation in Federal Districts,’ (signed 13 May 2000) laid out the following as the explicit objectives of the FDs:

- to unify the system of state jurisdiction on the federal and local levels;
- to prepare the regions for sustainable development on the basis of maximum self-sufficiency, and to initiate and monitor economic development plans for the short-term, mid-term and long-term future;
- to secure and implement strict vertical subordination of the military and security services to the president, neutralize any possible influences the local elite might exert on the power structures and support the implementation of military reform;
- to prepare the districts/territories to withstand any military intervention and repel any challenges to its internal security from within.

It should be noted that upon assuming the office of the president, Putin “almost wholly retained the government and the PA [presidential administration],” contrary to many expectations. Even when he added the FDs—his one big amendment to the existing structure—he refashioned the existing role of “presidential representative” for use at the level of the Federal Districts. The seven envoys that he appointed were a consolidation of the eighty-nine presidential representatives that Yeltsin had assigned to each individual region back in the mid-1990s. Putin’s logic was that while Yeltsin’s representatives lobbied for regional interests in Moscow, instead of representing federal interests in the regions, by elevating the plopredy (presidential representatives) to oversee several regions simultaneously, they would be far less likely to fall under the influence of the regional governors. In addition, Putin moved away from the practice of appointing regionally familiar individuals to the envoy positions, opting instead for nationally loyal, personal associates. As Robinson explains, “Being responsible for

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144 Ibid., 114.
146 Petrov, “How Have the Presidential Envoys Changed the Administrative-Political Balance of Putin’s Regime?,” 34.
several provinces would mean that the [envoys] would not be likely to compromise with any one regional leader.**150**

**The design of the Federal Districts**

While the idea of megaregions was not new in of itself (as discussed in Chapter 2), Putin’s decision to introduce Federal Districts nonetheless proved to be somewhat of a controversial move.**151** However, I would argue the legally questionable nature of the Federal Districts actually helped to enable their long-term success and survival.

When Putin introduced the Federal Districts, he was no stranger to the intricacies of the strained relationship between the center and the regions. In fact, Putin got his first up-close look at the state of relations in 1997-1998 when he worked in Yeltsin’s presidential administration (PA) on matters of regional relations.**152** During his time under Yeltsin, Putin became convinced that Russia did not represent a “full-fledged federal state” but rather a “decentralized state.” Further, he commented that “regional independence often is treated as permission for state disintegration,” a diagnosis with which, as Taylor points out, both Russian officials and foreign experts alike agreed.**153**

Given Putin’s familiarity with the center-periphery struggle that was underway, the nature of his reforms could have proceeded in a number of different ways. For instance, he could have bolstered various departments by allocating more resources to them one by one. He could have removed ineffective leaders within the subnational federal offices of various departments. He could have called for a major overhaul of the different institutions—such as the taxation department or the court system—**ad hoc.** While it may seem natural that he would gravitate toward the introduction of an intermediate level of administration, the maneuver was actually just short of unconstitutional and a potentially risky proposition.

In designing the FDs, Putin knew that eliminating or enlarging regions would win him no support with subnational leaders or their constituents—the regions had a staying power of their own that would be impossible to surmount.**154** Further, from a legal standpoint he could neither do away with the regions entirely, nor could he create new regions or state-recognized territories

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**150** Ibid.
**151** Stoner-Weiss, *Resisting the State*, 148.
**153** Ibid.
within the boundaries of the Russian Federation. Article 5 of the 1993 Constitution explicitly states that, “the Russian Federation shall consist of republics, territories, regions, federal cities, an autonomous region and autonomous areas which are equal subjects of the Russian Federation.” Further, the same document made clear that any changes to regional territory would need to pass in the Federation Council, which was stacked with regional governors, who would certainly have been less than amenable to the idea.

Thus, when instituting the Federal Districts, Putin was careful to explain that the FDs would not constitute a new legal space, but would, instead, “ensure the realization of the president’s constitutional powers, increase the effectiveness of the federal agencies, and improve the system of monitoring the implementation of their decisions.” In other words, the FDs were supposed to be an innocuous administrative subdivision of presidential authority. At the same time, it should be noted that Putin and onlookers to the situation both rationalized the spatially grounded nature of the FDs by citing the enormity of Russia’s physical expanse.

The result however, was anything but innocuous. As Hill and Gaddy conclude, “By creating this new structure [the FDs], Putin cleverly fashioned for himself an administrative instrument directly subordinate to himself, independent of existing institutions, empowered to monitor and if necessary harass these institutions, and staffed by handpicked individuals whose political and administrative skills he could now test out before deciding whether to promote them to higher office.”

In addition, as the Hill and Gaddy quotation hints at, while general guidelines for the Federal Districts were outlined in Decree 849, in practice, the duties that they were charged with were rather vague and therefore incredibly flexible and accommodating of the president’s shifting agenda. Indeed, it is likely because the FDs have no legal standing and no clear agenda that they have been able to achieve so much. To quote Petrov:

They [the Federal Districts] are sufficiently compact and mobile to readjust to all newly arising tasks. They are a universal political tool, something like a monkey wrench that

158 Goode, The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia, 136.
159 For instance, Orttung explains, “One of Putin’s key goals was to set up a uniform system of administration, essentially appointing intermediaries to deal with Russia’s vast territory.” Orttung, “Key Issues in the Evolution of the Federal Okrugs and Center-Region Relations under Putin,” 24.
can be adjusted to solve a variety of tasks, apart from their official duties: the attraction of investment, help in the development of small business, the collection of compromising material on national and regional oligarchs, the preparation of the regions for winter, the doubling of GDP, and so on.  

As with the issue of their constitutionality, more than a weakness, which is how many political scientists initially perceived it, the ambiguity of the FD’s responsibilities and powers proved, in the long run, to be an asset. Thus, the design of the Federal Districts, which the majority of scholars and policy analysts interpreted as constitutionally weak and technically under-scoped, actually bolstered their efficacy.

Practically speaking, Putin maintained a close relationship with the FDs throughout the recentralization reforms. The president formally met with his envoys at least once per month in a closed session, and he interacted with them in a variety of other settings, as well. When he traveled throughout the country, for instance, he was typically accompanied by whatever FD represented the area he was visiting.

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162 Petrov, “How Have the Presidential Envoys Changed the Administrative-Political Balance of Putin’s Regime?,” 56.
163 Ibid., 44.
164 Ibid., 46.
Chapter 4 // Rescaling in motion: anecdotes from the Far East

Theorizing the Federal Districts

Up to this point, this thesis has demonstrated the enduring, intimate connection between political power and Russia’s territory and internal borders (Chapter 2). It has also given a sense for the political conditions leading up to the creation of the Federal Districts, as well as an account of the Federal Districts themselves (Chapter 3). In the following section, I will examine the Federal Districts and supporting recentralization reforms keeping in mind the principles of rescaling (outlined Chapter 1).

In particular, I will argue that the various reforms of the recentralizing process (beyond those taken on by the Federal Districts themselves) gradually legitimated and reified the new megaregional scale of authority that the FDs represented. Accordingly, the moment at which Putin announced the creation of the FDs was not the pivotal moment for the rescaling of authority—thought it did serve as a foundation for the gradual creation of a new scalar fix. Rather, what elevated the FDs to the privileged scale of power within Russia was the fact that many of the mechanisms—regulatory, legislative and more informal in nature—that aimed to recentralize political authority used the boundaries and logic of the Federal Districts to do. In ‘state space’ theory terms, the creation of the FD scale exerted a gravitational pull on the flows of political power being recentralized. As power shifted to the FD scale and the scale gained “mass,” the gravitational pull of the scale grew, pulling in ever more power as a result.

Thus, while Putin may have postured that the Federal Districts were nothing more than an administrative helping hand the federal government would use to restore its authority, in reality, over time the Federal Districts harnessed a substantial amount of power to their megaregional level and concentrated it in the hands of the president (since the FDs, technically, were presidentially instituted and managed). At the same time, they gained permanency both within Russia’s institutional framework and within the collective imagination. Since their creation just fourteen years ago, textbooks have been rewritten to focus on the Federal District scale; government enterprises map the country in terms of the Districts; and even the weather forecasts
for Russia are reported by FD. As Goode asserts, “[The Federal Districts] have begun to take root as elements of reality, forming the ontological map.”

Political scientists studying the Federal Districts have critiqued them for having vaguely defined powers and for failing to meet a clearly enumerated set of goals. They also interpreted the FDs’ extra-constitutional nature as a point of weakness. Further, in considering the function of the FDs, they have tended to examine the institution in isolation, rather than observing how the FDs have strengthened or otherwise interacted with other recentralizing efforts.

In this chapter, I will first briefly revisit how Putin justified the creation of the FDs and the skeptical reception that the Federal Districts received from political scientists, both in terms of their “staying power” and their “effectiveness.” I will also discuss how the Federal Districts actually enabled the success of numerous rescaling reforms. In particular, because they represented discrete groups of regions and embodied a set of territorial boundaries that clearly defined their reach, they successfully provided a spatial organizing logic for new policies to lean on. I will illustrate how specific reforms relied upon this logic, using anecdotes from the Far East Federal District—the most peripheral and, by many accounts, the most decentralized of the FDs—to illustrate my points. I will conclude on a theoretical note, with a brief discussion of how the case of the FDs contributes to and fits in with the latest scholarship on rescaling.

**Political scientists underestimate the Federal Districts**

In the early years of the Federal Districts, many political scientists, Russian government officials and policy analysts alike questioned the staying power and legitimacy of the Federal Districts. By and large, the criticisms centered on the fact that it was very difficult to conclude that the FDs had, by any clear, measurable outcomes, proven to be a success. In large part, this is because although Putin was quick to announce the creation of the FDs, his administration never made it a priority to spell out the objectives of the FD (and indeed, likely failed to do so intentionally). Without a clear policy benchmark against which to evaluate the Districts, and with substantial variation in how the plopredy in different FDs behaved or what sort of projects they carried out, there were few conclusions about the FDs that political scientists were with respect to their effectiveness. Smith echoes the conclusions of many of his peers when he writes, “Some

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166 Goode, *The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia*, 86.
have argued that the presidential representatives have achieved relatively little, other than creating an extra level of bureaucracy in the country. The State Duma deputy, Vladimir Ryshkov, argues that Putin’s decree creating the presidential representatives is vague in defining their powers.\(^{167}\)

As a result, political scientists tended to focus on what was clear about the Federal Districts—namely: that their powers were poorly defined; that they were extra-constitutional in nature; that their responsibilities often appeared to be \textit{ad hoc}; and that they seemed underfunded or understaffed for the stated tasks they were supposed to carry out.\(^{168,169}\) As a result, commonly, the Federal Districts were discounted as a cumbersome, unimpressive and largely impotent construct that would soon fade away. One authoritative, often-cited text, \textit{The Dynamics of Russian Politics: Putin’s Reforms of Federal-Regional Relations, Volume 1},\(^{170}\) argues for all of the shortcomings listed above, even going so far as to conclude that, consequently, the Federal Districts are “not desirable as a long-term institution.”\(^{171}\)

In addition, some researchers interpreted Putin’s decision to cancel future gubernatorial elections beginning in 2005 as a signal that the Federal District reforms had failed. For instance, one scholar suggests that, “the reasons behind the launch of these initiatives [the cancellation of elections] were... likely to be associated with the limitations and failures of the federal reforms conducted from 2000 to 2004.”\(^{172}\) Further, speculating from 2003, just one year before Putin proceeded with cancelling elections, another scholar posited that, “The only way to ensure more submissive governors would be to appoint governors instead of having them elected, or for the

\(^{167}\) Smith, “Putin: An End to Centrifugalism?,” 29.

\(^{168}\) Chebankova says: “The staff in federal districts’ headquarters numbered on average 150 including chief federal and federal inspectors, which is small given that the office is responsible for at least ten regions with much larger administrations. The ‘administrative resource’ of the presidential representatives was also marred by the fact that the centre, while bringing in undoubtedly stronger plenipotentiary representatives, reappointed old personnel to these structures. According to an estimate made by the Moscow Carnegie Centre, approximately a third of the ‘old’ representatives found employment in the new structures.” Elena Chebankova, “The Limitations of Central Authority in the Regions and the Implications for the Evolution of Russia’s Federal System,” \textit{Europe-Asia Studies} 57, no. 7 (November 2005): 943.

\(^{169}\) Reddaway, on the topic of underfunding has this to say: “In any case, it does not seem logical in my view for the envoys’ position to remain unchanged for the indefinite future. As this book shows, some of their tasks have been at least formally accomplished, while others concerned with promoting greater integration between the regions of their okrugs appear hard to push forward without their being given a serious budget so that they can fund more than just their staffs’ salaries.” Reddaway, “Historical and Political Context,” 15.


Kremlin to engage in more blatant attempts to influence the outcome of gubernatorial elections.” The same author goes on to add that, “Both [strategies] would be highly controversial and damaging to Putin’s image. Such moves would therefore be more trouble than they were worth.”173 Contrary to this forecast, however, there were virtually no repercussions or serious protests lodged when Putin abolished elections just months later. It follows that it is at least as plausible to interpret Putin’s ability to cancel gubernatorial elections without any substantive backlash as a sign that the initial round of recentralization had actually succeeded.174 Gel’man, for instance tell us that, “the switch (or reversion) to appointing rather than electing governors was the logical consequence of the policy of centralization in 2000,” rather than an indication of its failure.175

Further, most analyses tended to look exclusively for what I term the “primary” effects of the FDs—that is, specific reforms carried out by the envoys or the FD staff—rather than considering some of the potential “secondary” effects that the FDs may have created by virtue of their interface with other recentralizing reforms and, in particular, by virtue of the new administrative logic that they offered. In fact, I believe that secondary effects constitute a major part of the Federal Districts’ impact on recentralization. In particular, the fact that each FD represented a territorially contiguous set of regions was the feature that contributed most to the FDs’ ability to play a supporting role for the other recentralizing reforms, such as the reconfiguration of the Russian parliament, the enforcement of federal tax collections and the mollification of regional governors. In turn, as more and more reforms relied on the organizing principle of the Federal Districts, the FDs gained staying power and legitimacy.

The Russian Far East as a case study

In the section ahead, as we examine some of the impacts of the Federal Districts and the interactions between the FDs and related centralization reforms, I will introduce anecdotes of success from the Far Eastern Federal District, as applicable. While there is no shortage of similar examples of the FDs’ impacts from around the Russian Federation, I selected the Far East as the site for my case studies for several reasons. First, the RFE’s history of strained relations with the center makes it an excellent test bed for the success of recentralization efforts. If recentralization

173 Smith, “Putin: An End to Centrifugalism?,” 34.
175 Ibid.
took root in the Far East, it is likely that it succeeded elsewhere, as well. Relatedly, it represents a part of Russia where regionalization established a very strong hold during the 1990s and where regional authority had perhaps made the most progress in disassociating itself from the center. In addition, the regional composition of the Far Eastern Federal District is such that many different kinds of regions are represented (republic, okrug, krai, autonomous oblast, autonomous okrug), which is helpful for getting a sense for how any given FD may have handled the different types of jurisdictions under its purview. In total, the Far Eastern Federal District as it existed in 2000 contained nine regions: Amur Oblast, Jewish Autonomous Oblast, Kamchatka Krai, Magadan Oblast, Primorskii Krai, Sakha Republic, Sakhalin Oblast, Khabarovsk Krai and Chukotka Autonomous Okrug.

To expand on the above, as one of the most remote areas of the country and the one furthest from the center, the Russian Far East (RFE) has had a long history of strong regionalism and separatist activity. Wishnick explains, "the great distance separating the Russian Far East from central Russia has enabled political regionalism to flourish, and political challenges have appeared whenever central control has weakened." As early as the 1800s, shortly after the RFE first came under Russian control as its outermost frontier, the roots of the center-periphery conflict took hold. As such, the imperial, Soviet and, most recently, federal administrations have each experienced a measure of anxiety about maintaining the Far East as a part of the nation. This anxiety, it is worth noting, has only been amplified by a persistent fear of Chinese territorial expropriation through settlement.
The local identity of the Far East has long been at odds with that of far away European Russia, a situation further exacerbated by the reality that the area has been populated by a variety of people with one commonality—the fact that they represented, in various ways, an opposition to central power. Peasants fleeing from serfdom, several generations of “criminals” or political prisoners, as well as old believers and others seeking greater religious freedom all found their home in the Russian Far East over the centuries. As a result, “this concentration of protest potential gave life to a certain type of “pioneer mentality,” which can easily be compared to the Wild West in the United States.”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the RFE, which had served as a hotbed of industrial activity and a key source of natural resources for the USSR experienced some of the worst of the post-Soviet fallout. Although the area contains great natural wealth, the region was, and remains, very dependent on imports for food, consumer goods and energy. In the early 1990s, parts of the Far East were cut off from food and energy sources due to “interrupted economic links” and high transit costs. A sharp drop in industrial production led to soaring unemployment and the rapid depopulation of areas that had been heavily over-populated in the course of the Soviet project of conquering Russia’s vast territory through human settlement. Rocked by economic downturn and at the mercy of a far off federal government unable to provide the necessary subsidies, a spirit of self-sufficiency and regionalism, already embedded in the identity of the area, gripped the Far East with particular strength throughout the 1990s.

In the years following the establishment of the Russian Federation, nearly all of the regions in the RFE negotiated bilateral agreements with Moscow and several attempted to declare sovereignty, as well. The RFE’s governors were notorious for going against the

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182 Davis, The Russian Far East, 23.
184 Before 1991, 75% of goods produced in the RFE were consumed domestically; only 6% were exported. Wishnick, “Far East Federal Okrug,” 246.
185 Ibid., 245.
186 Ibid., 245–246.
189 As of 2000, industrial production in RFE amounted to less than forty-four percent of 1990 production levels (compared to 54.4 percent for Russia as a whole) Ibid.
190 Chugrov, “Peculiarities of the Region’s Political Mentality,” 349.
wishes and behind the back of the federal government, sometimes for personal gain, and other times, for what they likely perceived as the best interests of their regions. For instance, the governor of Sakhalin Oblast, Valentin Fyodorov, who became known as the “Napoleon of Sakhalin,” circumvented national authority in an attempt to attract foreign direct investment from nearby Japan, striking deals with foreign firms to develop offshore oil and gas deposits. Furthermore, “Fyodorov came up with idea of marketing indigence, offering the West a chance to donate cash, securities, and technology to his Sakhalin Fund,” to the complete bewilderment of the federal authorities. In Primorskii Krai, the infamously difficult governor Yevgeny Nazdratenko, a “corrupt and unyielding” politician, waged a very public campaign against Yeltsin’s attempts to bring his region in line, earning Primorskii Krai the reputation of being “Russia’s most defiant region,” after only Chechnya and Dagestan. The Sakha Republic (also known as Yakutia, after the Yakut ethnic group who lives there) also proved to be a particularly recalcitrant state during the 1990s, negotiating a special relationship with the federal government via a bilateral treaty that endowed it with near-autonomous control over its natural resources and steep tax exemptions, among other privileges.

It should come as no surprise, under these circumstances, that when Putin created the Far Eastern Federal District, he appointed a personal contact with a military background, Lieutenant-General Konstantin Pulikovskii, to the post of plopred. For his part, Pulikovskii stated repeatedly that his chief task, upon assuming the position, was “to bring presidential power closer to the regions.”

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192 Thornton and Garnett tell us, “Still, regional leaders can do little to restructure their local economies, for the regions are hostages to policies set in Moscow. They must operate in a domestic environment that provides weak legal and financial infrastructure and an intrusive and sometimes corrupt government infrastructure. In this environment, newly privatized firms and regional political leaders face stark choices: they may operate within punitive, centrally determined rules of the game; they may seek an exemption, avoiding the centrally determined rules; or they may attempt to evade the rules, risking punishment or retaliation. When the rules of the game are expropriatory, local decision makers survive through one or another form of noncompliance.” Thornton and Garnett, “Reform in the Russian Far East: Implications for Economic Cooperation,” 258.


197 For a full biography of Pulikovskii, please see Thornton and Ziegler, “The Russian Far East in Perspective,” 18.

198 Wishnick goes on to add that Pulikovskii “has faced many difficult challenges in the process—harmonizing regional legislation with federal laws, securing the removal of governors at odds with the Kremlin, addressing the ongoing energy crisis in Primorski Krai and floods in Sakha, promoting business development and foreign economic relations, fostering interregional economic cooperation, monitoring the use of federal funds at the regional
Thus, in short, given this state of affairs leading into Putin’s recentralization reforms, if recentralization efforts and the implementation of the new Federal District level administration were going to fail anywhere, they would fail in the RFE. Conversely, seeing signs of success in the Far East region serves as a strong indication that Putin’s reforms enjoyed similar or greater gains elsewhere in the Federation.

**Enabling recentralization: the Federal Districts in action**

As described earlier, the Federal Districts enabled the recentralization of power in two distinct ways. First, the Federal Districts made some contributions to the recentralizing project directly. As an example, Putin tasked the seven plopredy with bringing regional laws into accord with federal laws—a task they carried out with the assistance of their respective FD staffs within the first year. Additionally, but no less importantly, the existence of the FDs was critical to the effectiveness of numerous other recentralization efforts. As the examples in this section will illustrate, in both cases, the flexible nature of the FDs with respect to their power—such as their extra-constitutional nature and their loosely defined mandates—combined with their rigid spatial boundaries were key to their success.

In the pages that follow, I will cover six broad elements of recentralization, commenting on how the Federal Districts played, both directly and indirectly, into the success of each, and offering examples from the Far East, as appropriate and how the FDs’ role further bolstered their standing as a new, scalar fix. The six elements are: harnessing the authority of the power ministry; curtailing regional power; reigning in regional governors; reestablishing federal authority at a subnational scale; reasserting federal property ownership; and lastly, restricting regional participation in matters of foreign policy.

**Harnessing power ministry authority**

One of the first orders of business that the Federal Districts took on was to begin monitoring all internal security forces, such as the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, firefighters, tax police, border guards and special services.\(^{199}\) Within a month of creating the FDs, Putin also appointed his FD envoys to the Security Council.\(^{200}\) Some scholars, like

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\(^{199}\) Taylor, *State Building in Putin’s Russia*, 145.

\(^{200}\) Ibid., 144.
Taylor and Petrov, actually argue that this was, in the initial years of the recentralization effort, the FDs’ most important contribution. By assuming full control over security structures, initially through monitoring efforts and, subsequently, by transferring security budgets to the federal level, Putin’s administration was able to proceed with all of the other centralizing efforts without fear of repercussions from regional security.

As Taylor explains, shifting control of the enforcement agencies away from the regional scale was one of the most fundamental reforms, and “it was necessary to start with the power bodies because they were both more reliable mechanisms for changing the terms of the federal bargain than other possibilities, and because they could help determine outcomes in other aspects of federal reforms.” By using the Federal District level for monitoring activities, the center was able to get a hold on security forces that had become more and more regionally aligned throughout the 1990s. In this case, the FD scale was literally meant to consolidate power in a new geographical configuration.

Curtailing regional power
The Federal Districts were instrumental in several regards with respect to restricting regional authority, both on their own terms and with respect to bolstering several related reforms. In their own stead, following the creation of the FDs, all regional communications with the Kremlin had to pass through the Federal Districts. In this way, the FDs served as a sort of clearinghouse for requests, protests and all other matters. This significantly limited governors’ access to Putin and his administration, which, in turn, made it more difficult for the governors influence federal officials. Further, because there was no close and regionally unaffiliated monitoring and enforcement, the presence of the FDs “destroyed the governors’ monopoly on power in many regions and created more competition on the regional political market.”

201 Isakova, Russian Governance in the Twenty-First Century: Geo-Strategy, Geopolitics and Governance, 169.
203 Taylor, State Building in Putin’s Russia, 145.
204 It should be noted that while in a country like the U.S., the federal government may look to its military for support in the case of an internal security forces uprising, in Russia, this would not be possible. As Taylor describes, “the army is a much less useful ‘weapon’ in federal-regional bargaining than law enforcement. Neither the center nor the regions can call on military units to use force as a part of this process, absent an armed secessionist movement. The Russian military traditionally has seen its primary focus as external defense and generally has not intervened in domestic policies.” Ibid., 127.
The new sub-federal organization of regions that the FDs offered was also integral to limiting regional authority, albeit in a more roundabout manner. One of Putin’s early decrees stated that regional governors would no longer serve as their states’ representatives to the Federation Council (the upper chamber of the national parliament)—a major blow to regional representation at the federal level. However, in place of this benefit, Putin created a new State Council, which was comprised solely of the president and the eighty-nine regional governors. Putin argued that within the State Council, governors would actually have a greater opportunity to bring matters of regional concern to the attention of the president and to interact with him directly. However, rather than assembling all of the governors at each meeting, the State Council convened presidiums, or working groups, of seven governors at a time—with one chosen from each Federal District. Thus, although the State Council technically had nothing to do with the Federal Districts, it was still structured around the organizing logic of the FDs. This, in turn, led governors to work together along FD lines to ensure that their State Council delegate brought all of the regions’ problems to the presidium, which only further reinforced the Federal District delineations.

In addition, once the Federation Council was rid of regional governors, the presidential administration, primarily through the use of the FD envoys, began to influence the selection of new delegates to the parliament. By 2003, 75-80% of all appointments were either recommended, or at the very least, cleared by the presidential administration.

Reigning in regional governors

The Federal Districts were also instrumental not just in curtailing the formal powers of the regions, but also in altering the behaviors, motivations and elections of individual governors. Once again, to some extent the FDs played a direct role; at another level, the existence of the FDs, but not their direct involvement, helped to push this aspect of recentralization along.

Directly, the Federal Districts came into play with respect to monitoring governors’ behavior and influencing the outcomes of regional elections. One of Putin’s reforms stated that while regional constituents would still elect their governors, the president now reserved the right

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to dismiss governors for noncompliance with federal laws. Although Putin did not wield his
authority in this regard frequently, just six months after issuing the decree, he ousted Primorskii
Krai’s Nazdratenko, with the help of FD plopred Pulikovskii, after the notoriously uncooperative
governor, who had often successfully defied Yeltsin throughout the 1990s, perpetuated yet
another energy crisis in his region.209

As for influencing regional elections, the envoys were informally charged with the task of
using federal resources to remove governors unfriendly to Putin’s administration via elections.210
While the plopredy were not all that adept at first, “they quickly gained experience and grew
effective in influencing the outcomes of gubernatorial elections.”211 Although the plopredy
frequently backed incumbents, Goode, citing Hale, reports that, “they were strikingly successful
in supporting regional outsiders to displace incumbent governors,” as well.212

While it is undoubtedly the case that the FDs played a significant role in enabling Putin to
monitor and enforce his new policy toward the governors and in influencing the outcomes of
elections, their indirect influence over the governors arguably did more to contribute to their
staying power and significance within the governmental structure.

Specifically, by creating a superregional scale of authority within the Russian state,
however informal, the FDs provided governors with new career opportunities that would take
these politicians out of their designated regions. In other words, the FDs gave governors the
opportunities to work either at the FD level (and thereby break into the federal legions via the
Presidential Administration) or to transfer laterally across regions within their FD with greater
ease. Both types of career shifts—either working within a different region for some time or
climbing the ladder to the federal level—discouraged strong regional loyalty and misconduct
with respect to the center, especially as FD envoys came to have a strong grip on regional
elections.213 Even in places where regionalism flourished, such as Primorskii Krai, with

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recentralization efforts on the rise and new professional opportunities opening up outside one’s home province, poorly behaved regional elites found motivation to shape up.\textsuperscript{214} Indeed, this was even the case for the infamous Nazdratenko, who chose to resign (citing health problems), rather than fight Putin when the latter made moves to oust him from office—a wise decision that ultimately earned Nazdratenko a privileged position as Head of State Fisheries Committee.\textsuperscript{215}

Beyond simply reigning in unruly governors, the process of giving the regional elites career mobility with the FDs also served to legitimize the FDs themselves. In the words of one political scientist, the “rotation of cadres” that the FDs enabled also meant that the “unnatural” territorial shape of the FDs was naturalized through manipulation of cadres policy.\textsuperscript{216}

**Restoring federal power**

The FDs served in numerous direct and indirect ways to reassert federal laws and reinvigorate various federal authorities, as well. The envoys directly worked to bring federal and regional laws into accord with each other, and they facilitated the regions’ moves away from bilateral treaties. In addition, the new, intermediate scale of administration that the FDs represented allowed dozens of federal departments, ministries and organizations to reorganize and reinvent themselves outside the confines of the eighty-nine regions that had previously hosted them. In turn, by using the boundaries of the Federal Districts for their own means, these institutions helped to further embed the Federal Districts within Russian politics and to shift power to the FD scale.

One of the earliest accomplishments of the FD envoys, and one that nearly all scholars agree upon, is that of bringing regional laws into accord with federal ones—a process referred to as “harmonization.” The newspaper *Izvestiya* reported in 1997 that after examining 44,000 regional legal acts, the Justice Ministry concluded that, “nearly half of them do not correspond with the Constitution of the Russian Federation.”\textsuperscript{217} While harmonization efforts began in the late 1990s—indeed, Putin even organized a conference for Yeltsin’s administration on the matter\textsuperscript{218}—success was very limited until the FDs were charged with the task.\textsuperscript{219} While harmonization efforts coming from Moscow had enjoyed little success, within just six months of

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{215} Thornton and Ziegler, “The Russian Far East in Perspective,” 19.
\textsuperscript{216} Goode, *The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia*, 86.
\textsuperscript{217} Stoner-Weiss, “The Russian Central State in Crisis: Center and Periphery in the Post-Soviet Era,” 121.
\textsuperscript{218} Taylor, *State Building in Putin’s Russia*, 139
\textsuperscript{219} Smith, “Putin: An End to Centrifugalism?,” 29.
assuming their responsibilities, the FD people and their staff had resolved 80-90% of inconsistency cases. 220

To offer an example from the Far East, under Pulikovskii’s watch, the Far Eastern FD staff examined upward of eight thousand legal acts by mid-2002. After finding violations in 1,500 of these, predominantly in the Sakha Republic, Amur Oblast and Primorskii Krai, and lodging protests against 740, Pulikovskii’s administration ultimately brought 625 acts in line with federal legislation. 221

Further, once harmonization was by and large complete, a new federal policy dictated that regions had to submit all future laws passed at the provincial level to their supervising Federal District within seven days of adoption. 222 Beyond bolstering the reputation of the Federal Districts’ as an effective administrative collective, the harmonization also sought to limit the individuality of the various regions, thereby facilitating the creation of a unified legal space for the FDs to more easily oversee.

In a similar vein, the FDs also served to prevent the establishment of any further bilateral treaties between the regions and the federal government—a practice that had substantially undermined federal authority throughout the 1990s. To a limited extent, presidential envoys encouraged regional governors to dissolve existing treaties. More importantly, the intermediate level of authority that the FDs represented thwarted regional efforts at winning favors in Moscow and establishing new side deals. 223

The creation of the Federal Districts also endowed many federal administrative bodies and agencies with a much-needed fresh start in terms of organizational restructuring. Although the Russian state apparatus had actually expanded throughout the 1990s (when compared to its size following the collapse of the USSR), its effectiveness did not improve as it grew. 224 While more and more personnel were being dispatched to the regional offices of federal organizations, it was only with the advent of the FDs that the efficacy of these institutions increased. Because the Federal Districts were not “burdened with old feuds,” they served to revitalize protocols and regenerate the system of staffing the state bureaucracy. 225

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222 Ibid.
224 Stoner-Weiss, Resisting the State, 5.
Shortly after the creation of the Districts, FD structures were set up for numerous federal offices previously headquartered in each of the eighty-nine regions. While the Federal Districts’ envoys or staffs had nothing to do with these changes, the borders of the Federal Districts “acted as matrices for the geographic reorganization of numerous federal structures, and this has led to a manifold strengthening of the momentum that drives administrative change.” 226

The sequence in which the departments fell in line followed its own internal logic as prescribed by the Presidential Administration, with departments and ministries under the president’s control reorganized at the FD level in the first wave; followed by those of the prime minister; followed, last, by quasi-governmental companies and groups, such as state-sanctioned investment companies. 227, 228 Once aligned with the FDs, some organizations, such as Gosstroi (the state construction agency), simply ceased to exist at the federal level entirely. 229 Others, like the Justice Ministry, first consolidated its authority to the FD level, removing itself from the regions, before setting up small departments within the regions once more—only this time, under the supervision of geographically proximate FD level offices. This new organizational structure was so effective that within just a few years the ministry’s staff, which totaled had 3,500 in the mid to late 1990s swelled to nearly half a million employees as the agency took on more and more responsibilities. 230 In general, in the years immediately following the initial restructuring, more and more powers were transferred to the FDs, not only from the regions below, but also from the federal authorities above. 231

Overall, this restructuring of the federal administration to the FD level was one of the most integral processes by which power was systematically rescaled to the level of the Federal Districts. As Petrov explains, “The intention declared at the beginning of the reforms of building a vertical axis of power has been variously implemented. In some cases numerous departments were transformed from federal to a joint federal and okrug status with a dual system of

226 Ibid., 11.
227 Petrov, “How Have the Presidential Envoys Changed the Administrative-Political Balance of Putin’s Regime?,” 35.
229 Petrov, “How Have the Presidential Envoys Changed the Administrative-Political Balance of Putin’s Regime?,” 35.
230 Ibid., 42.
231 Ibid., 35.
supervision, both from Moscow and from the okrugs. In other cases the regional level was brought firmly under federal control. In all cases, the okrugs played the role of the key link.\textsuperscript{232}

**Reasserting federal control over natural resources**

Another means by which the Federal Districts further solidified their place in Russian government was by playing a role in the recentralization of the country's natural resources. As highlighted in Chapter 3, through various concessions, bilateral treaties and vague legal delineations of ownership, the center lost much of its grip on property and natural resources in Russia over the course of the 1990s. The establishment of the Federal Districts provided the central authorities with a new opportunity to recoup property by renewing negotiations with some of the regions, and, more specifically, some of the republics.

While the federal government had controlling how regions managed their assets, charging the FD envoys with the task of controlling trade within their jurisdictions led to a successful renegotiation of ownership arrangements in the case of numerous republics.

One of the best examples of this is with respect to the Sakha Republic. Sakha, which accounts for nearly one hundred percent of diamond production within Russia had, over the course of the 1990s, come to manage their mining and sales operations almost entirely without the Kremlin's oversight. In fact, shortly before the recentralization efforts began, Sakha had, for the first time, negotiated its own foreign contract with the DeBeers, leaving Moscow out of the transaction entirely. However, after the creation of the Federal Districts, plopred Pulikovskii began a tireless campaign to bring the republic's diamond industry back into the federal fold.\textsuperscript{233} While full renationalization took almost eight years to achieve, with many tussles between the FD and the republic in that time, the industry was eventually brought under the supervision of the Federal District.

Today, the Far Eastern FD is responsible for managing the diamond industry, as well as numerous other resources that are considered to be national assets. In the case of asset renationalization, deploying the FD to handle the renationalization process enabled the Kremlin to achieve its recentralizing aim. Simultaneously, the FD gained additional staying power and credibility by taking control over and managing a key asset in the country's portfolio. Further, it should be pointed out that in taking on the renationalization of natural resources, the FDs impact

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 42.
\item \textsuperscript{233} Wishnick, "Far East Federal Okrug," 262.
\end{itemize}
not just the configuration of political power, but also the pattern of capital accumulation within Russia.

**Restricting regional participation in foreign policy**

Throughout the 1990s, numerous regions had come to develop relationships with representatives from foreign nations and foreign investors, particularly in the Far East. As part of the recentralization efforts, the federal government sought to curtail regional-level interactions with foreign entities. While the Federal Districts had no formal charge to represent the nation in matters of foreign policy, it was not long before they took on this set of responsibilities. The logic that legitimated the change in protocol was that since the envoys were part of the Presidential Administration, they were also his emissaries, with respect to foreign dignitaries. Therefore, they would best represent the nation in formal interactions. At the same time, the FDs also became a critical backchannel for the president, owing to their flexible, loosely defined set of priorities.

If there is any doubt of the extent to which the responsibilities of the FDs extended with regard to foreign policy, one need look no further than plopred Pulikovskii’s enigmatic memoir, *Orient Express*. In this book, published in 2002, Pulikovskii chronicles his six-week train trip across Russia with the North Korean leader Kim Jong II. Pulikovskii was charged with accompanying the leader on his journey across Russia to a summit meeting in August of 2001. Pulikovskii went on to visit North Korea and fostered strong relations with the nation, even inspiring Kim Jong II to refer to him as “an old friend, who is well-known to the Korean people.” In the case of North Korea, as with many other states, like Japan, China and other neighboring countries, rather than dispatching a representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or charging the prime minister or another high ranking official with the responsibility of international diplomacy, the president instead sought to use the most geographically proximate FD envoy, instead.

In addition to tending to responsibilities of international diplomacy, the plopredy were also responsible for attracting and fostering economic development. Speaking of Pulikovskii, Wishnick writes, “while all of the presidential envoys have played a role in Russia’s foreign policy, particularly trying to attract foreign investment, Pulikovskii has gone much further in this

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234 Ibid., 267.
235 Ibid.
area than any of the others. Accordingly his foreign policy efforts deserve special attention.” In the course of his term, Pulikovskii regularly coordinated economic cooperation efforts with Asiatic nations and actively worked to improve the Kremlin’s relations in the region. While most Far East regions were rather passive about the envoy stepping in to manage their external relations, Pulikovskii had to actively wrest control of foreign relationships away from Primorskii Krai and Sakha Republic.236

Today, Federal District representation in matters of political and economic international negotiation remains high. By using the FD level delegates in foreign talks, the Russian state places power, and even some level of international recognition, into the Federal District scale.

**Theoretical summary**

This chapter sought to demonstrate the ways in which the Federal Districts were transformed from an administrative footnote into a *bona fide* and privileged scale of political authority—not despite, but because, of their extra-constitutional status and vaguely defined set of responsibilities. By considering both the ways in which the Federal Districts asserted their authority, and by looking at the manners in which other reforms relied on the Federal Districts as matrices for geographic reorganization,237 one can see that the case of the FDs is a compelling example of the rescaling of political power, in which the scale itself takes an active part in shaping the privileged site of power agglomeration.

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Conclusion

While, with any luck, this work has convinced its readers that the Federal Districts did, indeed, constitute a new scale for the consolidation of power within Russia, it has only nominally addressed the consequences and implications of this new scalar fix. By way of concluding remarks, I offer two short loosely related discussions that examine the Federal Districts in a broader context.

In the first, I suggest how, beyond simply serving as a site for the consolidation of political power from other levels, the Federal Districts also act as a device for the transforming that power into presidential authority. In the second, I consider the true staying power of the Federal Districts, in light of their characteristics and the ongoing challenges that face the Russian state.

The Federal Districts: an instrument of authoritarianism

Up to this point, this thesis has primarily concerned itself with evaluating the theoretical significance and political efficacy of the Federal Districts without offering much insight into whether this scalar transformation, however powerful it may have been, ultimately served the Russian state well. I submit that the rescaling of power which transpired in response to the creation of the Federal Districts extinguished the last of Russia’s democratic aspirations and helped bring about the increasingly authoritarian regime which Putin has been fashioning over the past fourteen years. The Federal Districts are responsible for this in two ways. First, the FDs served as a sort of “power converter,” which transformed or subordinated the power that came to rest with them into authority that favored the president’s agenda above all others’. And, second, the FDs, as a powerful, extralegal body within the Russian state undermine, by their very existence, the constitution upon which Russia is built.

To elaborate on the first point above, rather than representing a legitimate political scale, the Federal Districts were—and remain—an instrument of the Presidential Administration. Furthermore, Putin made additional adjustments to ensure that his authority trumped all others’ within the FD scale. For instance, when the federal government tried to establish its own “legations” (offices) in the FDs in the early years of the reforms, rather than being given equal
status with the FD administrations, they were subordinated to the envoys, instead. In addition, the power ministries (security, police, etc.), which report directly to the president, gained more favorable standing within the FD hierarchy than other parts of the administration, which put them in a position to “supervise and oversee the social and economic ministries directly subordinate to the prime minister.”

At the same time that they bolster presidential authority, the Federal Districts weaken constitutional power simply by existing. And, these megaregions are indicative of a broader strategy that Putin initiated—one of undermining or replacing legitimate state institutions, whose powers are constitutionally delineated, with “substitutes structures” whose powers can be quickly altered or manipulated without governmental approval.

By creating the Federal Districts, Putin simultaneously strengthened his own authority and undermined the power of the Russian constitution, a document he would come to disregard and subvert with increasing frequency over the course of his rule.

**The future of the Federal Districts**

Although throughout this thesis I have stressed the remarkable degree to which the Federal Districts have established themselves as a fixture within Russia’s political landscape—and, indeed, for the time being they have—there is nonetheless ample reason to believe that, more likely than not, it will not be long before this scalar configuration, too, gives way to something new. The evidence in favor of this hypothesis can be found in a variety of sources: in Russia’s past; in the nature of the FDs themselves; and, indeed, in the theory of rescaling itself.

As Chapter 2 of this thesis illustrates, Russia has a long history of using boundary reconfigurations to assert the will and power of the central government over its territory. Furthermore, the Putin administration has demonstrated, time and again, that when it comes to Russia’s spatial anxieties, the more things change, the more they stay the same. We need look no further than the on-going standoff between Russia and the Ukraine for proof that, just as it had in the past, Russia continues to put its resources toward expanding its borders, instead of focusing on existing domestic concerns.

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238 Petrov, “How Have the Presidential Envoys Changed the Administrative-Political Balance of Putin’s Regime?,” 47.
239 Ibid., 34.
240 Ibid., 56.
In addition, even since the creation of the Federal Districts, several borders have already been redrawn several times. For instance, in 2010, Russia added a new Federal District—the North Caucasian—by splitting another of the FDs (the Southern) into two pieces. Then, just a month ago, Russia declared its newest asset, Crimea, to be a separate, ninth FD. Further, over the past eight years, approximately a half a dozen pairs of contiguous regions (out of the of eighty-nine that existed in 2000) have merged with one another to form larger entities. While none of these instances presents a direct threat to the Federal Districts, all of the examples serve as a clear indication that the internal borders of the Russian Federation remain very much in flux.

The nature of the Federal Districts themselves is also such that their potential dissolution is never far off. Since the boundaries of the Federal Districts align with those of the regions that comprise them, and since the regions were created with little regard for economic logic or cultural significance (as discussed in Chapter 2), there is limited attachment on the part of Russia’s citizens to the borders of the regions and FDs they occupy. O’Loughlin and Talbot argue that Russia as a whole lacks a coherent identity, because “Russia is state trying to build a nation, rather than a nation trying to build a state.”\(^2\) It is not hard to imagine how a similar logic may hold true for the Federal Districts and even the regions themselves. They are artificial constructs without any underlying identity to insure their continued existence. As a result, it is easy to imagine that at some future point, a massive territorial restructuring (to promote, for instance, economic productivity) could easily occur without much opposition from the Russian citizenry. Given the precarious state of the Russian economy and the growing problem of wealth inequality within the Russia (particularly along the urban/rural divide)\(^2\) such a move may not be far off.

The notion of rescaling itself also points to the fact that no architecture of power and capital is forever. While the Federal Districts may be the dominant scalar construction today, eventually, it will be replaced with a new and different organizing logic. Indeed, as the wealth divide between the Central Federal District (where Moscow is located) and the rest of the nation grows, it might be said that a new privileged scale, one that favors Moscow and promotes immensely uneven development with the broader state, is already emerging.\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Bradshaw, “The Geography of Russia’s New Political Economy,” 199.
\(^2\) For an excellent discussion on this, see Ibid., 198.
Thus, while, as this thesis illustrates, there is much to be learned from the creation and existence of the Federal Districts, perhaps it will be even more instructive to observe and study the transformation or dissolution of these units to a new scalar fix—which is almost certainly not far off.
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