

Russia's Failed Federalization Marches and the Simulation of Regional Politics

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Abstract:

Inspired by Russia's insistence on federalization for Ukraine, activists in Novosibirsk attempted to organize a protest march in August 2014 to call for greater regional autonomy in Siberia. Authorities squelched the march almost as soon as the protest threatened to spread. Yet even as organizers were arrested and press reports censored, opposition leaders in Moscow and activists in Ukraine seized upon the news of the planned federalization marches and even invented new ones. The resulting spectacle revealed the Kremlin's ongoing fear of decentralizing power, the weak ties between central and regional opposition, and the boomerang effect of Russia's intervention in Eastern Ukraine.

In August 2014, a new chapter was written in the troubled history of Russian federalism, though in the end it proved to be more farce than tragedy. For all appearances, a perfect storm of nationalist and regionalist sentiment appeared to be taking the form of "federalization" marches in Russia's regions, emboldened by the annexation of Crimea and its admission with the status of a federal republic in Russia's federal system. What transpired was a logical and convincing simulation of a regionalist movement that provided a vivid illustration of the state of regional politics in today's Russia.

For nearly fifteen years, the Kremlin steadily rendered Russian federalism more ritualistic than substantive. Russia's experience with regionalism in the 1990s and the ever-present threat of separatism continue to justify political centralization and the diminishing role of regional politics. For Russia's regions, then, the Kremlin's demands for the federalization in Eastern Ukraine seemed surprising, if not hypocritical. Why should the Donbass benefit from federalism when Russia's regions effectively have been deprived of it for years? For some observers, Russia's tactics in Ukraine were likely to stimulate a revival of regionalism—if not outright secessionism—in Russia. At a minimum, they created an opportunity for the opposition to demand the realization of federalist principles in Russia's constitution.

The very structure of Russia's ethno-federal system had been a source of discontent for opposition nationalists, as well, but for different reasons. While the 1993 constitution recognized 21 "ethnic" republics named for non-Russian peoples, the vast majority of Russia's regions are simply administrative-territorial (read: non-ethnic) provinces. Opposition nationalists point to this difference in federal status as privileging minority ethnic interests and evidencing the "anti-Russian" nature of Russia's ethno-federal system (a claim inherited from Soviet-era nationalists who argued the Soviet system discriminated against Russians). A common nationalist

goal since the early 1990s had been the creation of ethnically Russian republics within Russia's federal system in order to level up the status of Russian regions and to gain recognition of the ethnic Russian people as a core, state-bearing people. Consequently, Crimea's annexation represented the long-awaited creation of Russia's first ethnically Russian republic, setting a precedent for Russia's provinces to challenge Moscow and demand elevated status as republics.

These potentially powerful currents appeared to come together in a movement for the "Federalization of Siberia." On July 24, 2014, a "March for the Federalization of Siberia" in Novosibirsk was announced on the Russian social media website *Vkontakte*, bearing the slogan "Stop feeding Moscow!" (*khvatit kormit' Moskvu!*)—a variation of the common nationalist slogan, "Stop feeding the Caucasus." It also prominently featured a picture of the Siberian Federal District with the slogan, "Let's show Moscow Siberia!" (*Pokazhem Moskvu Sibir!*)¹ The group initially claimed the goal of founding a "Siberian republic" within Russia, though this was later dropped after the city authorities objected. Despite this change, the march's stated goals remained unchanged: (1) to introduce services and income enhancement for those living in harsh environmental conditions; (2) to reserve a share of taxes on resource extraction for regional budgets for a "more just" distribution of local and federal budgets; and (3) to realize constitutional right for relatively autonomous local government and to end the "idiotic situation" in which "all decisions are taken by Moscow without representation of Siberia's interests."

This combustive combination of regionalist and nationalist opposition to the Kremlin quickly gained traction in the online press in Russia. It was not the first time that Siberian regionalism received national

1 "Marsh za federalizatsiiu Sibiri," <<https://vk.com/sibmarsh>>, last accessed September 23, 2014.

attention in recent memory. In 2011, the central press circulated sensationalist reports concerning an activist in Kemerovo, Vladimir Kiselev, who intended to organize a referendum on Siberia's independence. Kiselev claimed that the referendum would be supported by the United States and result in Siberia becoming America's fifty-first state, though he admitted to receiving no help from the Obama administration and confessed that he was, in fact, hoping for a change of administration in Washington.²

Copy-cat marches were hastily organized in Krasnodar and Ekaterinburg to coincide with the march in Novosibirsk. Moscow took notice. On July 30, 2014, the independent news site *Slon.ru* published an interview with Artem Loskutov, the organizer of an annual satirical youth march featuring nonsensical, quasi-militaristic slogans in Novosibirsk known as *Monstratsiia* ("Monstration"). Loskutov discussed the rationale for the march, though he explicitly denied being its organizer or even its "ideologue." The next day, Russia's press watchdog, RosKomNadzor, accused *Slon.ru* of distributing material inciting mass public disturbances and forced it to delete the interview.³ Seventeen other news sites were compelled to delete reports of the story, while the BBC's Russian website edited its report to comply with the state's demand. The march's page on *VKon-takte* was taken down briefly, and the search term for "federalization of Siberia" disappeared from *Google.ru*.⁴

Shortly afterwards, organizers of the march were detained by police on a variety of petty charges and sentenced to two weeks in jail. Four organizers were detained in Novosibirsk, two in Ekaterinburg, and two in Omsk for attempting to organize an apparently related march. The organizer of an attempted march in Krasnodar, Dar'ia Poliudova, was arrested after an unknown male approached her on the street and provoked an argument by accusing her repeatedly of being a nationalist. Following her 14 day sentence, she was not released and instead charged with extremism and threatening Russia's territorial integrity. According to Krasnodar's prosecutor's office, Poliudova is accused of calling for Ukraine's annexation of Krasnodar and the

introduction of Ukrainian troops in the region. If convicted, the charge bears a maximum sentence of five years in a prison colony.⁵

In Moscow, Russia's mainstream opposition politicians, including Boris Nemtsov and Aleksei Naval'nyi, seized upon the news of the planned marches and the Kremlin's censorship to mock the government's hypocritical fear of federalism at home while insisting upon federalization for Ukraine. Their involvement drew international attention and foreign media mistakenly named Loskutov as the march's organizer. In fact, credit for organizing the march was claimed by Aleksei Baranov, coordinator of the "National-Bolshevik Platform"—an opposition group which claims to have split from Eduard Limonov's party over the latter's stance on Ukraine. Baranov characterized the march as a "first attempt to loudly announce our presence" by calling attention to "the Kremlin's hypocritical position on South-Eastern Ukraine." At the same time, he condemned the liberal opposition for spoiling the protest by organizing in support of federalization.⁶ When called for initial questioning by the authorities, Baranov denied any separatist intent and instead stated that he sought the redistribution of wealth and nationalization of enterprises. Baranov reportedly received vague threats to life and limb, followed by the discovery of a severed sheep's head left at his doorstep on August 15. Soon after, he was accused of having incited patrons at a bar (located in a village 500 kilometers from Novosibirsk) to participate in the banned march.⁷ Another organizer from Baranov's party, Mikhail Pulin, was detained in Altai krai, formally on suspicion of stealing a mobile phone.⁸

Adding fuel to the fire, Ukrainian media and online activists seized upon the news of the planned marches. Rumors spread in the Ukrainian media that the organizers of the march sought independence from Russia, "inspired by the experience of the Donbass." However, many of the Ukrainian sites mistakenly associated the protest movement with an older orthodox-nationalist group, the Siberian Sovereign Union (*Sibirskii derzhavnyi soiuz*), whose leader, Aleksandr Budnikov,

2 "Dissident iz Kuzbassa: 'Prisoedinenie Sibiri k SShA neobratimo, kak vrashchenie Zemli vokrug Solntsa!'" *Tayga.info*, June 21, 2011. <<http://tayga.info/details/2011/06/21/-104061>>, last accessed September 20, 2014.

3 "Slon snial material po trebovaniu Genprokuratury," *Slon.ru*, August 1, 2014. <<http://slon.ru/fast/russia/slon-snyal-material-po-trebovaniyu-genprokuratury-1137502.xhtml>>, last accessed September 20, 2014.

4 "Moscow Freaks Out About Federalization Rally... In Siberia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 5, 2014. <<http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-separatism-rally-siberia/26515418.html>>, last accessed August 5, 2014.

5 "Pervoe delo po 'separatistkoi' stat'e," *Russkaia planeta*, September 4, 2014. <<http://rusplt.ru/society/pervoe-delo-po-separatist-skoy-state-12559.html>>, last accessed September 21, 2014.

6 "Strasti po marshu 'za federalizatsiiu Sibiri,'" *Natsional-Bol'shevistskaia Platforma*, August 20, 2014. <<http://www.sibinfo.su/news/nsk/1/51195.html>>, last accessed September 21, 2014.

7 "Organizatorami 'marsha za federalizatsiiu Sibiri' zainteresovalas' politsiia," *tvrain.ru*, August 17, 2014. <<http://www.sibinfo.su/news/nsk/1/51195.html>>, last accessed September 23, 2014.

8 "V Sibiri zaderzhivaiut zaiavitelei marsha 'za federalizatsiiu,'" *Radio Svoboda*, August 17, 2014. <<http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26534757.html>>, last accessed September 23, 2014.

denied any role in the marches. Budnikov argued that the movement was artificial and that Loskutov would likely be co-opted by the Kremlin, while agreeing with the movement's principles and condemning Putin's regime as corrupt.⁹ Undaunted, Ukrainian bloggers and activists recirculated Russian and international press reports, created new "federalization march" pages on *Vkontakte*, and conjured the threat of a growing, coordinated regionalist movement within Russia by including the hash tags of a dozen or more large Russian cities. One of Russia's opposition figures, Ksenia Sobchak, may have been duped by this strategy, taking to *Facebook* to announce a gathering in Kaliningrad for a "Kaliningrad People's Republic" on August 17—a call which was widely circulated but does not appear to have had any substance, and which featured a graphic that originated with one of the federalization sites started by Ukrainian activists on *Vkontakte*. Perhaps predictably, countervailing rumors on Russian social media linked the proposed federalization marches (real or imagined) to the infiltration of provocateurs from Maidan who allegedly disguised themselves as Ukrainian refugees and sought to organize mass disturbances.¹⁰

In all three cities, city authorities denied permission for marches and rejected the slogan "Stop feeding Moscow!" as extremist. Organizers retreated to organizing "gatherings" (*skhod*) that did not require permission from the city, and adopted safer slogans. In Novosibirsk, for instance, the march was re-named to "March for the inviolability of the constitutional structure of RF" with a new slogan "for observance of the principles of federalism!" The gathering in Novosibirsk proved the largest of the three with just two dozen participants. In Ekaterinburg, about 15–20 people showed up for the gathering, including at least one person with a placard displaying the symbol of the Urals Republic that existed briefly in 1993. Police arrested one protestor wearing a t-shirt with the slogan "Stop feeding Moscow!" as well as one apparent provocateur. No meeting occurred in Krasnodar, where patriotic-nationalist groups arrived first on the scene, distributing St. George's ribbons and preparing to drive away any protesters. In the absence of any actual federalization protestors, they instead attacked Viacheslav Martynov, characterized as an "anarchist" in the press, who wore blue and gold ribbons (Ukraine's

national colors) on his wrist. Police intervened and detained Martynov and his attackers, eventually releasing the latter while Martynov was sentenced to 15 days in prison.¹¹ Ironically, demonstrations held in support of Siberian federalization in Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kharkiv attracted more participants than the actual gatherings in Russia.

In perhaps the final episode of this strange series of mostly non-existent federalization protests, fliers supporting federalization appeared in Surgut in early September as Khanty-Mansiiskii Autonomous Okrug (KhMAO) prepared for municipal elections. The fliers demanded that KhMAO become a republic, featuring the slogan "Stop feeding Moscow!" as well as "The north will be white! The north will be Russia!" They prominently displayed the logo of the nationalist youth organization *Sovest'* ("Conscience") and called for citizens to boycott the gubernatorial election and to vote for any party in municipal elections other than United Russia. Members of *Sovest'* only recently were charged with hooliganism for their role in city-wide melees with migrants from the Caucasus on June 30, 2014.¹² The organization was further implicated in threats made to a journalist and a variety of other attacks carried out in the course of the election campaign in early September. The organization actively participated in the municipal election and its leadership denied any role in making the fliers on social media, declaring them to be nothing more than "black PR."¹³ Local observers suggested the fliers were intended to weaken the regional authorities in advance of municipal elections by raising the sensitive issue of separatism.¹⁴ Regional prosecutors continue to seek to have the fliers declared "extremist" without having identified its author(s).

In the final tally, the federalization marches demonstrated the impoverished state of regional politics in Russia. Organizers initially showed proficiency with the use of social media to raise awareness, but their own parties disavowed them as quickly as they were arrested by the police. National opposition leaders' ideo-

9 "Marsh 'za federalizatsiiu Sibiri.' Kakovy tseli i kto stoit za nim?" *Sibirskii derzhavnyi soiu*, August 13, 2014. <<http://sibpower.com/publikaci/marsh-za-federalizaciyu-sibiri-kakovy-celi-i-kto-stoit-za-nim.html>>, last accessed September 21, 2014.

10 "Marsh za federalizatsiiu' v Novosibirsk narekli 'maidanom' s priezhim boevikami iz Kiev," *Sibinfo.su*, August 4, 2014. <<http://www.sibinfo.su/news/nsk/1/51195.html>>, last accessed September 21, 2014.

11 "Anarkhist, izbityi v khode 'Marsha za federalizatsiiu Kubani', poluchil 15 sutok aresta," *Yuga.ru*, August 18, 2014. <<http://www.yuga.ru/news/341617/>>, last accessed September 21, 2014.

12 "V Surgute razbiraiutsia v prichinakh massovoi draki. 'Sovest' i diaspori dali svoi kommentarii," *Ugra-news.ru*, June 30, 2014. <<http://ugra-news.ru/article/845>>, last accessed September 23, 2014.

13 "V Surgute khotiat priznat' ekstremistkoi listovku s prizyvom k federalizatsii," *Sova-center.ru*, September 19, 2014. <<http://www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2014/09/d30246/>>, last accessed September 23, 2014.

14 "V 'Tiumenskoi matreshke' potrebovali federalizatsii," *Znak.com*, September 2, 2014. <<http://znak.com/hmao/articles/02-09-19-18/102862.html>>, last accessed September 21, 2014.

logically inappropriate and factually inaccurate bandwagoning betrayed their opportunism, as well as the weakness of ties between national and regional opposition movements. The entanglement of the federalization marches with the Ukrainian question doubtless mobilized patriotic-nationalist groups who perceive the specter of Maidan in any nonconformist act or organized political opposition—though in this case, their perceptions were reinforced by the active and visible roles played by Ukrainian social media activists and press. The central government demonstrated that it considers even poorly coordinated, under-funded, and under-

attended demonstrations in support of Russia's formal constitutional principles to be threatening and impermissible. The coda in Surgut illustrated that this central intolerance for regionalism may even serve as a resource for combatants in municipal elections, particularly when votes are no longer decisive in local politics. Indeed, in drawing far more attention and generating more intrigue than the election campaigns unfolding simultaneously across a third of the country, the failed federalization marches provide a powerful indictment of the state of public politics in Russia's regions.

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