

CHAPTER 2

Center and Regions in Russia

This chapter reviews the historical background to Russia's struggle in the 1990s to reconcile politics and geography. In the following sections the focus moves from the country's territorial structure to its changing constitutional arrangements, and then to the political battles and bargaining that intertwined with the constitutional debate. I describe the rise of conflict between center and regions in 1992–93 and the unexpected easing of tensions in 1994. Finally, I examine the course of events that led to the military intervention in Chechnya later that year.

Changing Maps

During the past century, maps of Russia's internal divisions have been redrawn a number of times. As of the late 1990s, the country was divided into 89 "subjects of the federation." Among these were 21 republics, named after one or more non-Russian ethnicity; 49 *oblasts*, or provinces; and six *krais*, or territories. The two capital cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg also had the status of federation subjects. So did 10 "autonomous *okrugs*" and one "autonomous oblast," located within various oblasts and krais, each of which was, like the republics, named after one or more non-Russian "titular nationality."¹

This structure was the latest in a series of arrangements by which successive Moscow-based regimes had governed the provinces. The administrative architecture of imperial Russia reflected the tension between the court's desire to centralize authority and the practical difficulties of doing so in a vast country with an undeveloped state apparatus. As new territories were brought into the empire, Muscovite and imperial Russian governments often retained the existing local administrative structures, permitting limited self-government in some areas. Under Alexander I, Poland and Finland had constitutions and national diets with the right to legislate on internal matters, Courland and Livonia had their own charters, and the nomads of Central Asia and Siberia, as well as the Jews, enjoyed considerable autonomy. However, as the bureaucracy developed toward the end of the imperial era, most local autonomy was curtailed and replaced by centralized administration (see Pipes 1974, 250–51).

The heartland of imperial Russia was divided into *guberniyas*, each of which was administered by a governor appointed by the tsar. These adminis-

trative divisions were initially retained after the revolution. But in the 1920s and early 1930s Stalin experimented with new administrative units, consolidating some smaller guberniyas into larger “oblasts.” Between the mid-1930s and mid-1940s, however, these were split once again into smaller units—also called “oblasts”—which roughly corresponded in size to the imperial guberniyas.²

Meanwhile, considerable change was occurring in the status of regions with large non-Russian populations. During the early postrevolution years Moscow, now under Bolshevik rule, found itself once again struggling to control distant and restive provinces. Tatar and Bashkir republics were created on the Volga and in the Urals in 1919–20, and the Dagestan and Gorno republics were set up in the North Caucasus in 1921.³ Autonomous oblasts appeared in other areas, named after the Chuvash, Mari, Adygei, and other ethnic groups. During the 1920s and early 1930s, some of these were upgraded to the status of autonomous republics. From the late 1920s, autonomous okrugs began to be set up to host smaller nationalities—the Nentsi, Khanti, Mansi, and others.

Despite their earlier opposition to the principle of federalism, 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. Formal rights were issued to republics and lower-level regions, and supreme legislative authority was entrusted to the soviets at each level. The Russian republic was itself given a nominally federal structure and christened the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Yet these concessions were rendered moot in practice by the personnel power and administrative dominance of the Communist Party, which became increasingly centralized (Pipes 1957, chap. 6).

The administrative architecture crystallized with the enactment of the 1936 constitution, which defined 15 autonomous republics within the RSFSR. After this, changes in national-territorial units occurred only when foreign territories were annexed (Simon 1991, 147). A sixteenth republic was added to the RSFSR when the previously independent Tuva People’s Republic on the border with Mongolia was incorporated, first as an autonomous oblast in 1944 and later as a republic. The same structure of oblasts, krais, and 16 autonomous republics was inherited by Gorbachev at the beginning of perestroika.

The 16 autonomous republics in Russia under the Soviet regime had had their own constitutions, but, unlike the Union republics, not even a formal right of secession (Sakwa 1993, 115). Autonomous oblasts and okrugs had no constitution and few rights of self-government. They were subordinate both to the central authorities and to those of the oblast or krai in which they were located.⁴ The rights of such lower-level units were highly circumscribed even in the legal framework. The 1978 Russian Constitution assigned to the federal leader-

ship responsibilities for the all-inclusive residual category of “other issues of republican significance” (Tolz 1993b).

Reforming the System

This was the order—nominally federal but in practice highly centralized and controlled by the party—that existed when Gorbachev came to power. Four autonomous oblasts—Adygeia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Gorno-Altai, and Khakassia—were elevated to the status of autonomous republics in 1991. The next year, Ingushetia, formerly part of the Chechen-Ingush Republic, was recognized as a separate republic. The status of Chechnya remained uncertain throughout the mid-1990s.

Perestroika weakened party control and led to a decentralization of power in practice, which accelerated a spontaneous devolution of control that had begun under the Brezhnev regime (Bahry 1987a). During the late Soviet years, mafias of party, state, and economic leaders had crystallized at the regional level, linked by mutual protection societies and informal networks.⁵ In a radical departure, Gorbachev attempted from late 1988 to transfer power from the local party committees to the system of legislative bodies (*soviets*) and their executive committees (*ispolkomi*), which had always performed the functional roles of administration, under the ideological tutelage and personnel control of the party. In part to rejuvenate the membership of these soviets, in part to give them greater legitimacy, he introduced the first competitive national elections—first for the Union-level parliament in 1989, then for Union republic and regional legislatures in 1990.

These elections, held in conditions still biased in favor of local party elites, did not see a radical shift of governing personnel in most regions. The old party leaders were generally elected to the soviets and then chosen by the rank and file to head their *ispolkom*. But the elections created a new system of authority in which legitimacy depended in part on local support as well as central favor. At the same time, the elections opened up a mechanism for rehabilitating locally popular leaders who had fallen out with the central party bosses. Boris Yeltsin’s reviving fortunes symbolized this change. Thrown out of the Politburo by Gorbachev in 1988, he was elected to the Soviet Congress of People’s Deputies in 1989, then to the Russian Congress of People’s Deputies in 1990, and in May 1990 the body elected him its chairman. In June 1991, he was popularly elected Russia’s first president.

In August 1991, after the collapse of the attempted coup, the central party’s control over political events in the regions crumbled. The victorious Russian authorities set about building a new basis for administering the provinces. The Supreme Soviet passed a decree creating the post of “head of administration” (or governor) in the 55 oblasts and krais. These were to replace the *ispolkom*

chairmen and were to be accountable to both the president and regional legislatures. A law passed by the Supreme Soviet in October specified that the heads of administration would be popularly elected by the end of 1991. But Yeltsin asked that the elections be postponed until December 1992, and the Congress of People's Deputies acquiesced. In the meantime, Yeltsin appointed heads of administration by decree, often after consultation with the regional soviet leadership or using a shortlist the soviet leadership provided.⁶ In December 1992, the Supreme Soviet again put off most elections for governors, this time until 1995 (Wishnevsky 1994, 8). In 1995, Yeltsin postponed such elections again, until late 1996.

But in specific cases, elections were permitted. Mayors had been elected in Moscow and St. Petersburg at the same time as the presidential election of June 1991. Some oblasts were allowed to elect their governors in April 1993, around the time of a national referendum on Yeltsin's rule. Such exceptions were made when the oblast soviet demanded such an election, or when it was considered necessary to break a deadlock between the oblast soviet and the appointed governor.

Those regional elections that were held in 1993–94 were generally disappointing for reformers. In April 1993, Yeltsin appointees lost to communists in Orel, Smolensk, Lipetsk, Penza, Chelyabinsk, and Bryansk oblasts (Wishnevsky 1994, 8). Yeltsin seems to have been aware of the leverage that popular election gave unsympathetic regional governors against him. After October 1993, he passed a decree "giving him exclusive authority to appoint and dismiss regional governors" (Paretskaya 1996, 35). In 1996, he passed another decree on increasing discipline in the executive branch, which asserted the president's right to dismiss governors even if they had been elected.⁷

In the ethnic republics, by contrast, elections for president or head of government were the norm from the start. The first such vote took place in Tatarstan, where Mintimer Shaimiev was elected president at the time of the Russian presidential election of June 1991. Soon after this, elections were held in Chechnya, Mari El, Sakha, and Mordovia. By June 1996, 16 of the 21 republics had elected presidents or heads of state, while 22 of the oblasts and kraises had elected governors (see table 2.1).

After the 1991 coup, Yeltsin also created the institution of president's representative in the region, with the mission to report to him and monitor implementation of federal laws and decrees. However, these representatives often came into conflict with local soviets or governors. When Yeltsin increasingly took the governors' side, the institution atrophied.

The other main focus of regional politics was the regional legislatures, or soviets. Before August 1991 these were large and unwieldy bodies. Soviets at different levels contained about 1.4 million members—or about 1 percent of the population (Sakwa 1993, 187). After the coup attempt, regional soviets were in-

TABLE 2.1. Elections of Regional Leaders, January 1991 through June 1996

Region	Election Date ^a	Winner
Moscow City	12.6.91	Popov
St. Petersburg	12.6.91	Sobchak
Tatarstan	12.6.91	Shaimiev
Chechen-Ingush Rep.	27.10.91	Dudaev
Mari El	8-14.12.91	Zotin
Sakha	20.12.91	Nikolaev
Mordovia	22.12.91	Guslyannikov
Kabardino-Balkaria	5.1.92	Kokov
Adygeia	5.1.92	Dzharimov
Tyva	15.3.92	Oorzhak
Ingushetia	28.2.93	Aushev ^b
Kalmykia	11.4.93	Ilyumzhinov
Orlovskaya Obl.	11.4.93	Stroyev
Penzenskaya Obl.	11.4.93	Kovlyagin
Lipetskaya Obl.	11.4.93	Narolin
Amurskaya Obl.	25.4.93	Surat
Bryanskaya Obl.	25.4.93	Lodkin
Krasnoyarsky Krai	25.4.93	Zubov
Chelyabinskaya Obl.	25.4.93	Sumin
Smolenskaya Obl.	25.4.93	Glushenkov
Bashkortostan	12.12.93	Rakhimov
Chuvashia	26.12.93	Fyodorov
North Ossetia	16.1.94	Galazov
Ingushetia	27.2.94	Aushev
Irkutskaya Obl.	27.3.94	Nozhikov
Karelia	17.4.94	Stepanov ^b
Komi	8.5.94	Spiridonov
Buryatia	30.6.94	Potapov
Sverdlovskaya Obl.	20.8.95	Rossel
Kalmykia	15.10.95	Ilyumzhinov ^b
Moskovskaya Obl.	17.12.95	Tyazhlov
Nizhegorodskaya Obl.	17.12.95	Nemtsov
Novgorod Obl.	17.12.95	Prusak
Novosibirskaya Obl.	17.12.95	Mukha
Omskaya Obl.	17.12.95	Polezhaev
Orenburgskaya Obl.	17.12.95	Yelagin
Tomskaya Obl.	17.12.95	Kress
Tverskaya Obl.	17.12.95	Platov
Tambovskaya Obl.	17.12.95	Ryabov
Belgorodskaya Obl.	17.12.95	Savchenko
Yaroslavskaya Obl.	17.12.95	Lisitsyn
Primorsky Krai	17.12.95	Nazdratenko
St. Petersburg	2.6.96	Yakovlev

Source: compiled from McFaul and Petrov (1995) and from press reports.

^aDate is days.month.year.

^bRan unopposed.

structed to form a “small soviet,” one-fifth the size of the full body, to act as a working legislature. Then, after the crisis of October 1993, Yeltsin ordered the regional soviets completely dissolved. In their place, smaller dumas were created. This remained the basic architecture of regional government as of late 1998.

Constitutional Debate

Throughout the reform period, the constitutional division of powers and responsibilities between regional and central government remained a focus of continual debate. The first Russian Congress of People’s Deputies, which met in June 1990, decided to work on a new constitution to replace the 1978 RSFSR Constitution as well as a federal treaty to define relations between Moscow and the regions (Sheehy 1993, 38). Responsibility for producing a draft fell to the Supreme Soviet’s Constitutional Commission, initially chaired by Yeltsin himself, and later led by its executive secretary, Oleg Rummyantsev. In November, the first version was published (Teague 1994a, 43, 30).

This draft 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 kraia (Teague 1994a, 31). But 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*.

Such territorial units were to go by the name of *zemli*, or “lands.” During his presidential campaign in the spring of 1991, Yeltsin supported even more fundamental consolidation, advocating the division of the country into eight to ten large economic regions (Sakwa 1993, 199). However, after a second draft of the Rummyantsev constitution was published in October 1991, still incorporating the notion of *zemli*, intense opposition emerged among the autonomous republics. Sakha and Tatarstan “threatened to leave the Federation if the proposal was not dropped” (Solnick 1995, 57). The word *zemli*, Rummyantsev said later, had served as “a red flag to the autonomies.”⁸ Such proposals to de-ethnify Russia’s administrative architecture were subsequently abandoned.⁹ But the effort to build consensus on a new draft bogged down.

Amid the confusion left by the Soviet Union’s disappearance, some central actors came to consider it crucial to reach at least a temporary constitutional agreement with the leadership of the republics and other regions. In March 1992, three versions of a “Federation Treaty” were signed—with the leaders respectively of the republics, of the autonomous okrugs and autonomous oblast, and of the oblasts, kraia, and capital cities.

The Federation Treaty gave the republics various attributes of statehood that were not shared by the other units. These included the right to have a con-

stitution, to elect a president, and to have a supreme court. The treaty also expanded republics' rights over natural resources, budgets, and foreign trade (Sakwa 1993, 129). Populations of the republics were assigned property rights in the "land, minerals, water, flora, and fauna" on the republic's territory, but those of oblasts and krajs were not (Teague 1994a, 37). (Nevertheless, the "possession, use, and disposal of land, minerals, water and other natural resources" was to be regulated by both republic and federation laws, which limited such rights in practice.) The treaty also required the consent of republican authorities before Moscow could impose a state of emergency in a republic; no such regional consent was required in oblasts and krajs. Unlike the republics, the other units were not recognized as "sovereign states."

The treaty defined which powers were reserved for the center, which jointly exercised by center and subjects of the federation, and which reserved for the subjects. It stated that disputes over jurisdiction between the center and the subjects were to be settled by the Constitutional Court. (Reports suggested, however, that such conflicts continued to go unresolved and to unfold chaotically; Teague 1994a, 36.) Various issues were, perhaps deliberately, left vague. The distribution of profits from exports, relative tax rates, and levels of federal subsidies to local budgets remained to be determined by negotiation or federal resolutions.

That this treaty was signed at all seems in retrospect quite surprising. Central support for it was less than solid. According to Ramazan Abdulatipov, then the chairman of the Supreme Soviet's Council of Nationalities, President Yeltsin had initially wanted to sign individual agreements with each of the republics in turn and had had to be convinced of the need first to sign an overarching federal treaty with all subjects.¹⁰ Enthusiasm on the part of the republics was also initially muted. Tatarstan and the Chechen-Ingush Republic categorically refused to sign. Bashkortostan bargained for a special appendix giving it greater rights over foreign trade; Kalmykia also insisted on special amendments; and Sakha received additional rights over natural resources (Solnick 1995; Teague 1994a, 35). Karelia obtained special guarantees (Slider 1994, 247). In all, nine of the 18 republics that signed the Federation Treaty attached special conditions (Teague 1994a, 38).

As conflict developed between Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet during 1992, the constitutional process itself became caught up in this struggle. According to the 1978 RSFSR Constitution, the parliament was the only organ that could amend it (Teague 1994a, 44). Yeltsin sought nevertheless to wrest control of the drafting process from Rummyantsev's commission. In the spring of 1992, he encharged his aide Sergei Shakhrai with coming up with a new version.

Then, in the summer of 1993 the president convened an ad hoc "constitutional convention" in the Kremlin, made up of regional leaders, public figures,

lawyers, and various other notables. The participants discussed constitutional drafts, but agreement proved elusive. The most significant bone of contention turned out to be the relative rights of republics, on one hand, and oblasts and krais, on the other. The republics objected to the lack of explicit recognition of their "sovereignty," and in the end the compromise draft approved by the convention on July 12 did declare the republics "sovereign states within the Russian Federation." This was not enough to satisfy the leadership of Tatarstan, whose delegation walked out. And the draft still ran into numerous problems when it was circulated to regional legislatures and executives.

As tension between the president and parliament escalated in Moscow, Yeltsin tried once again to reach agreement with the regional leaders, proposing the creation of a "Federation Council" to serve as the upper house of a new national parliament, made up of the heads of executive and legislature of each of the 89 federation subjects (see Solnick 1994). It was hoped that this Federation Council could give legitimacy to the new draft constitution, bypassing the Supreme Soviet. But regional and republic leaders rejected this plan in mid-September.

The next twist in the constitutional saga came on September 21, when Yeltsin issued a decree dissolving parliament and calling new elections. Simultaneously, a referendum on a new constitution was to be held, substituting popular legitimacy for the old parliament's approval. But members of the parliament refused to dissolve it and leave the building. A standoff developed. After the parliamentary leadership incited armed mobs to attack the Moscow mayoralty building and the Ostankino television center, Yeltsin ordered troops to storm the parliament, under artillery support from tanks which set the White House on fire.

During the buildup of this confrontation, both the parliamentary leadership and the president appealed to the regions for support. Most regional legislature leaders took the side of the national parliament, while most governors stood by Yeltsin. On September 30, parliamentary leaders from 15 Siberian regions met in Novosibirsk at the invitation of the oblast's governor, Vitali Mukha. The assembled leaders threatened to create a Siberian republic, to withhold all taxes from Moscow, and to cut communications along the Trans-Siberian Railway if the president did not rescind his decree (Teague 1994a, 47). Around the same time, the president of Kalmykia, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, along with the chairman of the Constitutional Court, Valeri Zorkin, set up a "Council of Subjects of the Federation," which itself declared the presidential decree void (Payin 1995, 196).

Yeltsin's eventual victory over the parliament permitted him to retake the constitutional initiative. A rapidly assembled draft was presented to the public in a referendum in December at the time of the new parliamentary elections and was officially declared to have received 58.4 percent of the votes. This consti-

tution reduced some of the disparities in status between republics and oblasts and kraiss. It dropped the definition of republics as “sovereign states” and eliminated separate republican citizenship (Tolz 1996, 42–44). Republics were still allowed to have a “constitution” and to elect their own presidents, however, while nonrepublics could only have a “charter.” Throughout the early 1990s, most of the republics had been adopting their own constitutions, which often contradicted the federal one. Many of these asserted the supremacy of republican law over federal legislation. And Tyva’s constitution, for instance, explicitly allowed the republic to secede from Russia (Slider 1994, 248).

The 1993 Constitution is often viewed as less pro-republic than the Federation Treaty. Yet, in fact the Constitution explicitly incorporated the Federation Treaty (Article 11). Another article (Article 1 of Section 2) added, nevertheless, that in the case of any inconsistency between the Constitution on the one hand and the Federation Treaty (or bilateral treaties between the center and regions) on the other, the federal Constitution would prevail. The lingering ambiguity was probably deliberate.

At first glance, the enactment of this constitution might seem like the logical end to Russia’s constitutional process. In fact, activity continued with hardly a break. Almost immediately, Yeltsin began to negotiate and sign bilateral agreements with individual republics (and later oblasts) defining the division of powers more concretely. In part, such agreements were considered necessary because the constitution enumerated many “shared responsibilities,” without explaining how these responsibilities should be shared.

But the agreements also provided specific benefits. The first, signed with Tatarstan in February 1994, gave the republic additional control over natural resources, permitted it to create a national bank, gave greater autonomy in foreign trade, and allowed it to “exempt its young men from military service in the Russian army” (Teague 1996). A treaty with Bashkortostan later that year affirmed the republic’s “independence” and gave it control over its budget, judiciary, and prosecutor (Solnick 1994, 55). After September 1995, Yeltsin began negotiating similar agreements with oblasts and kraiss (Hughes 1996, 41–42). By mid-1996, 24 of these had been signed.

Such a differentiated approach to the regions has proved controversial. Perhaps the most virulent critic has been Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who declared the signing of such treaties to be “just a form of direct capitulation by the center before the autonomies and a violation of the rights of the remaining oblasts of Russia” (1996). The chairman of the Federation Council, Yegor Stroyev, said he found it painful to consider these agreements, which in practice were pulling the country apart (Medvedev 1996, 16–18). They were also criticized by the Russian foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov (Hughes 1996, 43). According to President Yeltsin’s adviser on political geography, Leonid Smirnyagin, the idea for such agreements had originally been proposed by Sergei Shakhrai, who ini-

tially envisioned just three—with Tatarstan, Chechnya, and the enclave of Kaliningrad.¹¹

Those involved in the process tended to view these treaties as temporary expedients, essentially political documents rather than durable additions to the constitutional architecture. According to an adviser to the head of Karelia, such agreements were “political rather than legal acts.”¹² The deputy governor of Tambov Oblast called them a “temporary compromise.”¹³ Smirnyagin pointed out that they were mere agreements on division of powers between the *executive* branches at central and regional levels, but had not been ratified by the legislatures. Still, few regions were ready to give up the contest to extract such temporary benefits.

Political Struggle

For all the tortuous debate they generated, the constitutional negotiations were only one arena—and at times just a sideshow—in a far broader political struggle between central and regional authorities. Officials at the two levels bargained continuously, threatened each other, and probed each other’s strength at several margins. Relative status, powers, and revenues were all contested.

Divisions at the center gave regional leaders leverage. Indeed, central politicians, caught up in political battles among themselves, sometimes encouraged subnational leaders to assert greater privileges as a way of weakening their central rivals. In 1990, as the newly elected Russian parliament began discussing sovereignty, Gorbachev tried to raise the status of the autonomous republics within the RSFSR. A Soviet law of April 26, 1990, granted the autonomous republics the status of “subjects of the [Soviet] federation.” All were invited to participate in negotiations over a new Union treaty, along with the Union Republics (Lowenhardt 1995, 85).

Yeltsin, elected chairman of the Russian parliament in late May, at first resisted this enlargement of the powers of Russia’s autonomous republics. But he quickly shifted to a strategy of accommodation, outbidding Gorbachev in his own gambit. The Russian Federation’s Declaration on State Sovereignty of June 12, 1990, affirmed in point 9 the need for a “material broadening” of the rights of autonomous republics and lower level administrative units (Lowenhardt 1995, 84). In August, Yeltsin encouraged the Tatar authorities to “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow,” and he spoke of the need to turn Russia into not a federation but a confederation (Laba 1996). For Yeltsin, regional autonomy came to supplement economic and political reform as foci around which he could build a supporting coalition.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991, the nature of competition at the center changed. Conflict between Yeltsin and Gorbachev was soon replaced by confrontation between the Russian presidency and parliament, un-

der its speaker, Ruslan Khasbulatov. Again, this led to a competitive courting of the regional elites, though with an institutional division of labor: Yeltsin tended to appeal to regional executive leaders, Khasbulatov to the regional soviet chairmen.

This need to find allies for the political contest in Moscow seemed to soften Khasbulatov's initially severe view of center-region relations, just as it had done for Yeltsin earlier. Early on, the Supreme Soviet speaker espoused a tough policy toward separatism in Tatarstan, opposing election of the Tatar president and change in the republic's status. "There will not be any independent states on the territory of the RSFSR," he is quoted as saying (Sakwa 1993, 123). But soon, according to his colleague Abdulatipov, Khasbulatov gravitated to a more flexible position, supporting signing of the Federation Treaty.

Abdulatipov, then head of the Supreme Soviet's upper house, was a strong advocate of accommodating regional demands. In February 1992 he blamed the failure of Gorbachev's efforts to save the USSR on the grudging nature of central policy: "the Union center made only as many concessions as were won by the republics. The Union center was always bringing up the rear." He added that, in some respects, Moscow should perhaps even infringe "on overall federal interests . . . for the sake of preserving the federation. Perhaps it is better to overdo it in the sense of making some concessions to the regions than to go too far in exercising leadership over them."¹⁴

The collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991 initiated a process of internal fragmentation and regional protest that some thought could lead directly to the disintegration of Russia itself (see chap. 1). Even before the Union's demise, one Russian scholar warned that "the Russian SFSR government's struggle with the center is undermining the foundations of its own federal existence" (Tsipko 1991b). In 1992 and 1993, an ever-growing number of the leaders of ethnic republics demanded sovereignty, asserted greater rights, and began to withhold taxes from the center and to challenge Moscow's authority over local branches of the state. Chechnya, under General Dzhokhar Dudaev, declared complete independence, and in Tatarstan a referendum elicited majority support for republic sovereignty.

Ordinary oblasts and krajs soon began to join the republics in pressing Moscow for concessions. Leaders in Primorsky Krai threatened to reestablish a Far Eastern Republic like the one that had existed in the early 1920s before Bolshevik rule had been consolidated (Teague 1994a, 32). Some spoke of a "United States of Northern Asia," stretching from the Urals to the Pacific (Teague 1994a, 32). In July 1993, a series of regions announced they were unilaterally upgrading their status. Vologda Oblast to the north of Moscow declared itself the Vologda Republic, and Sverdlovsk announced it had become the Urals Republic on July 1. A few days later, Primorsky Krai decided to become a "state-territorial formation within the Russian Federation," and

Voronezh's small soviet adopted a resolution equating its rights to those of the republics.

As well as making such declarations, a growing number of regions simply stopped remitting tax revenues in full to the center. Chechnya ended all tax payments. Tatarstan and Bashkortostan asserted control over locally collected tax revenues and said they would make only voluntary transfers to Moscow in the future. In their defense, various regions blamed the center for not providing adequate funds to pay for federal programs, local education, and police. By September 1993, 31 republics and provinces were reportedly withholding tax from Moscow, and the number was rising (Teague 1994a, 42).

This development was particularly alarming because it had been the refusal of a string of Soviet republics to finance central agencies and programs that had ultimately undermined Gorbachev's attempts to keep the Union intact.¹⁵ Various writers began comparing Russia's condition to the situation in the last months of the Soviet Union. According to Elizabeth Teague, Yeltsin found himself "facing the threat that the Russian Federation like the USSR before it, might fall apart" (Teague 1994a, 30).

Were such comparisons overstated? Did Russia face a genuine danger of complete federal collapse? The return to relative calm in center-region relations after 1993 made it easy to underestimate in retrospect how serious earlier tensions had been. From the perspective of the late 1990s, it was not difficult to find reasons why the Soviet disintegration had been inevitable, while Russia's survival was never seriously threatened. However, both outcomes had seemed far more uncertain just a few years earlier. In a book published in 1990, one leading Sovietologist argued that the danger of Soviet disintegration had been greatly exaggerated.

Least of all should it have been assumed that the country was about to fly apart. Americans have had little experience with ethnic unrest based on linguistic demands, and they have grossly overreacted to what they have seen in the Soviet Union. . . . From a comparative perspective the Soviet Union looks like one of the more stable multinational countries. (Hough 1990, 206)

This was not an unusual view, at least until 1989. Alexander Motyl argued in 1987, quite reasonably, that the repressive capacity of the KGB along with the successful cooptation of non-Russian political elites made it unlikely that the non-Russian nationalities would rebel (Motyl 1987).

On the other hand, politicians from across the political spectrum seemed to take the prospect of Russian disintegration in the early 1990s seriously, both at the time and in retrospect. Boris Fyodorov was not alone in his concern. As Yeltsin himself put it in 1996: "I would be sinning against truth if I were to claim

that the threat of disintegration of the Russian Federation did not exist. Four years ago it was rather serious.”¹⁶ According to Ramazan Abdulatipov, a definite danger of disintegration existed at two moments—in early 1992, between the Soviet Union’s collapse and the signing of the Federal Treaty, and then in 1993 in the period before Yeltsin’s storming of the White House.¹⁷ Oleg Rummyantsev, executive secretary of the Supreme Soviet’s constitutional commission, warned in March 1992 that unless the deputies adopted a draft constitution he was proposing, Tatarstan and Sakha would try to separate and “the Russian Federation will be destroyed from within” (Teague 1994a, 33). Making allowance for rhetorical excess and political motivation, their alarm does seem to have been genuine and quite widely shared.

Paradoxically, the greatest danger of disintegration did not come from the multiethnic nature of Russia, with its more than 120 nationalities. As discussed in chapter 1, though numerous, these minorities were relatively small, and 81.5 percent of the population was ethnically Russian. Even in the republics, the “titular” nationalities outnumbered Russians in only a minority of cases. Each region was small in relation to the total population.

Rather, what created the danger was the competition between individual regions and republics to assert greater rights. In such situations, disintegration does not necessarily occur because of a genuine desire by all units to secede. It can emerge from a spiral of reactions by individual regions, each of which might prefer the state to survive but which fear to be left paying the entire cost of supporting it. As argued in chapter 1, the dynamic is that of a bank run, in which it becomes increasingly irrational to keep depositing in the bank as the risk of breakdown rises.

While each region is individually small, the logic of contagion is dangerous. Explaining the collapse of the Soviet Union, Roman Laba quotes a Lithuanian poet who in 1988 asked at the first meeting of the Lithuanian national movement Sajudis: “Can a mouse defeat an elephant?” The poet’s answer: “Yes, one only has to wait for the moment when the elephant is balancing itself on its little toe.”¹⁸ Arguably, only a few “mice” within the Soviet order—the Baltic republics and Georgia—actually wanted complete independence before the general disintegration took hold. Yet, as more and more insisted on leaving, support for independence grew even in Ukraine and Belarus. In Russia in mid-1993, according to one analyst, separatist declarations by some of the more rebellious provinces could have “provoked a general stampede and the collapse of the Russian Federation” (Teague 1994a, 51).

At the same time, the troubled early 1990s witnessed the growth of broader regional associations, including both republics and oblasts, which could have posed a far more credible threat of secession. A united Siberian or Far Eastern Republic could have threatened to redirect sales of raw materials to the Pacific region even more than was already occurring because of the breakdown of eco-

conomic relationships. By 1991, 11 regional organizations had been set up to coordinate local economic policy and lobby Moscow on issues of common concern (see chap. 1). Had they lived up to the hopes of their founders, Russia's subsequent history might have been quite different.

Back from the Brink

Whatever the extent of the danger it faced in the early 1990s, Russia has remained—with one important exception—a single state. The scores of local challenges and crises never quite coalesced into a general revolt. In fact, most of 1994 saw a relative cooling of passions in center-region relations and the emergence of a new pragmatism. A “Pact on Civic Accord” was signed by numerous politicians, both central and regional, in April at Yeltsin’s prompting.

Such a stabilization was puzzling given the previous experience. It even took some top officials dealing with regional and ethnic issues by surprise. Sergei Shakhrai in early spring had warned, “The year 1994 will be a year of inter-ethnic and regional frictions and conflicts . . . this process is unfortunately inevitable,” and predicted that “inter-ethnic relations will deteriorate in the future. Local governments will pursue a policy of separatism under the flag of defending national interests” (quoted in Gouré 1994). The previous chapter discussed the main explanations that have been suggested for this apparent stabilization.

This book contends, as outlined in the introduction, that one key force for cohesion was a policy on the center’s part of selective accommodation—in particular, fiscal accommodation—that prevented bandwagons of protest or regional tax revolt from gathering speed. Instead of relying only on intimidation, the center’s strategy was to negotiate a kind of asymmetric federal order comparable to that of Spain. According to one constitutional scholar, “a decision was made to allow the specifics of Russia’s new federation to be determined gradually, by political means, and ad hoc negotiations, and not by a rigid, legal instrument with rules set in stone” (Walker 1995, 60). According to another, it was “precisely the asymmetric nature [of the power-sharing treaty process] that has restrained secessionist tendencies, allowing Moscow to negotiate on the basis of the particular interests of each republic and region” (Hughes 1996, 43). Through this policy, the tottering central “elephant” managed to prevent the regional “mice” from ganging up to topple it.

This strategy of bilateral negotiation and selective accommodation also helps to explain why the regional associations such as Siberian Agreement never developed a significant capacity for collective action against the center. Siberian Agreement was hampered by large differences of economic interests between its member regions and, equally importantly, by the center’s success in exploiting these differences to create internal political divisions.

Whatever politicians might say about Siberia's shared destiny, the range of economic profiles of the regions was quite extreme. While some were agricultural, others focused heavily on military industry or on raw materials and energy. At the same time, institutional starting points were quite different: some were republics while others were ordinary oblasts and krais. According to the mayor of Novosibirsk city, Siberian Agreement was "riddled with disagreements over political and economic issues and, in the final analysis, each member attempted to maximize its own parochial interests by using 'its own special door to the centre'" (Hughes 1996, 1148). It helped that officials in Moscow made sure that each of these doors was kept conveniently ajar.

The rich had little interest in sharing their wealth with their poorer Siberian neighbors. When the chairman of Siberian Agreement, Vitali Mukha, suggested consolidating the budgets of the association's members, the chairman of the Krasnoyarsk soviet declined on the grounds that his region was thinking of itself becoming an independent republic (Hughes 1993, 33). The subregional elites appeared to one Western observer "as disconcerted by the idea of control of economic resources by Siberian Agreement . . . and by a more equitable regional redistribution of wealth as they are by Moscow's control and draining of Siberia's resources" (Hughes 1994, 1148). While Tyumen's average wages soared after central economic reforms were enacted—as the prices of oil and gas rose and the region acquired a greater share of profits—there was no spillover to Novosibirsk, where wages were depressed by the collapse of military orders.

These differences made it easy for Moscow to divide the leaders of the Siberian regions through a policy of selective cooptation. By rewarding individual regions for bargaining with the center directly, Moscow created incentives for them not to surrender their leverage to the Siberian Agreement leadership. And many showed little reluctance to be coopted. As the chairman of the Krasnoyarsk Krai soviet, Vyacheslav Novikov, demanded with surprising candor of visiting Russian ministers: "Your bureaucrats live on bribes, so let our bureaucrats live on bribes also" (quoted in Hughes 1993, 30). Yet, the concessions the center made to the Siberian regions favored the raw materials and fuel producers disproportionately. In 1992, Moscow delegated some control over export quotas and licenses to members of Siberian Association. Chernomyrdin, a figurehead of the gas and oil industry, was taken into the government, later to become prime minister, and the Tyumen regional leader Yuri Shafranik was made minister of fuel and energy in Moscow.¹⁹

The distance between the political interests of Siberian regions can be seen particularly sharply in the contrasting histories of Novosibirsk and the oil-producing Khanti-Mansiisky Autonomous Okrug. Novosibirsk, hit hard by economic depression was aided little by central transfers—it received only about 5,000 rubles per inhabitant in 1992 compared to a mean of 14,000 for the Siberian regions. The result was one of the largest drops in per capita real re-

gional government spending in the area. Funding of public services fell about 60 percent that year. This appears to have translated into public discontent—the oblast was the only Siberian region where support for Yeltsin in the April 1993 referendum was actually *lower* than in the June 1991 election. During the September crisis, Mukha, who was not just the chairman of Siberian Agreement but also the governor of Novosibirsk Oblast, emerged as one of Yeltsin's most outspoken regional opponents, not only openly supporting the parliament but threatening that anyone in the province who followed Yeltsin's orders rather than those of the rebel vice president Alexander Rutskoi would be subject to criminal proceedings (Teague 1993, 20).

In the Khanti-Mansiisky Autonomous Okrug, by contrast, soaring oil revenues led to an actual increase in real regional spending of 23 percent in 1992. Support for Yeltsin in April 1993 jumped 15 percentage points from its already high 1991 level. When the regional council of Tyumen Oblast, administratively superior to the okrug's institutions, declared Yeltsin's September 1993 decree to be unconstitutional in Khanti-Mansiisky AO, the leaders of the okrug nevertheless managed to wriggle around the higher command. The members of Siberian Agreement, thus, did not sustain the kind of united position that would have given them bargaining power against the center.

War in Chechnya

The general calming of relations between the center and regional governors in 1994 renders the one major exception all the more anomalous and tragic. On November 28, 1994, the Russian Security Council decided to use force to try to remove the Chechen president, Dzhokhar Dudaev. The Chechen question had become a live issue since the spring, when advocates of a tough line against the republic managed to convince Yeltsin to use the Russian secret services to support centers of anti-Dudaev resistance that had appeared in the Upper Terek and Urus Martan districts of the republic (Eismont 1996). These centers had been involved in armed clashes with the Dudaev forces since the summer and had been joined by the former parliament speaker, Ruslan Khasbulatov, who in the fall set up a headquarters in the village of Tolstoi Yurt.

The Russian government decided, in a secret resolution, to support one of the resistance leaders, Umar Avturkhanov, based in the Upper Terek district, and started supplying him with arms and ammunition, including heavy armored vehicles and artillery. Moscow also began paying wages and pensions to the inhabitants of the Upper Terek and Urus Martan districts, though the allocations were "frozen" by the Dudaev government (Eismont 1996). In preparation for a planned assault on the capital Grozny, tanks were provided by Russia, and crews for them were recruited (reportedly with the participation of the Russian Federal Counterintelligence Service), offered high wages, and equipped with

fake documents. In late November, a convoy of Russian armored vehicles was sent into Chechnya to reinforce the resistance settlements of Tolstoi Yurt and Urus Martan.

Four days later, at dawn, the opposition forces attempted to storm Grozny. Secrecy had been completely neglected by the rebel commanders, and the resistance turned out to have only small and poorly trained infantry units. These forces were routed by Dudaev's defenders, who in a 10-hour battle managed to destroy or seize more than half the opposition's 47 tanks (Eismont 1996).

This humiliation, along with the impossibility of keeping the participation of the Russian security forces secret, seems to have convinced Yeltsin to raise the stakes of the gamble. Two days later, on November 28, an emergency meeting of the Russian Security Council adopted a secret decision to draw up a plan for a military operation in Chechnya, and Russian planes destroyed Dudaev's aircraft and bombed the runways of two airfields near Grozny. On December 11, 1994, two tank units containing several hundred armored vehicles crossed into Chechnya, beginning the full-scale war (see also Thomas 1995a).

Whatever the arguments used to justify this action, it seems to have been chosen as a consequence of incremental decisions, based on overconfidence and poor information.²⁰ Unexpected failures and humiliations led to attempts to regain the initiative. The minute size of Chechnya made it almost inconceivable that the Dudaev forces could hold out for long. And yet, the war proved once again the advantages that guerrilla fighters enjoy in mountain terrain even against heavily armed opponents.

The puzzle remains: why was Chechnya different? Why did Dudaev push harder than his counterparts in Tatarstan or Tyva? In part, his vehemence can be explained as an extreme reaction to factors that also led to activism in other places. Leaders of Muslim republics tended to be more separatist than those with predominantly Christian or Buddhist populations (see Treisman 1997). However, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, for instance, were Muslim republics, yet were more willing to compromise with Moscow on independence. What may have been more significant were some particularities of Dudaev's position.

He was both the leader of a nationalist organization and a virtually complete outsider—both among the republic's political elite and among its nationalist opposition. An airforce officer resident in Estonia, Dudaev had not lived in Chechnya for 20 years before he came to be its president (de Waal 1995). Indeed, according to the analysts Emil Payin and Arkady Popov, Dudaev owed his nomination as leader of the nationalist organization in large part to his non-native status and long absence from the republic. The leaders of the Chechen political clans had not been able to agree on the division of power, and so they had compromised on Dudaev, who belonged to a small clan with little influence, "a person without contacts, unrooted, who would be easy to push aside when the time came" (Payin and Popov 1995).²¹

Lacking a secure base of either elite or popular support, Dudaev was domestically vulnerable. In order to outmaneuver rivals in the nationalist movement, he may have been forced to adopt an intransigent stance. His widow, Alla Dudaeva, has claimed that “Dzhokhar, especially in the first years, often became a hostage of his surroundings” (Dudaeva 1996). President Shaimiev of Tatarstan expressed a similar view: “Dudaev ended up a hostage of the policy of complete independence, and of the head of the security services [*Komitet Bezopasnosti*] there. He ended up a double hostage.” Either he had to achieve the independence he had promised or “he would have been overthrown by his own people.”²² Abdulatipov, who visited Chechnya at various points during the evolving crisis, says that Dudaev complained that there was no single, authorized figure on the Moscow side with whom he could negotiate. Abdulatipov also blames Dudaev’s miscalculations. “Once he started accumulating weapons, Dudaev’s position hardened. He thought he would bring Russia to its knees, and invited me to join him. He believed that with such a lot of arms and a warlike people, he could defend the republic.”²³

Equally puzzling is why the Russian leadership chose to take such a risk in late 1994. This marked a complete reversal for Yeltsin, who as late as August 1994 had announced that “forcible intervention in Chechnya is impermissible. . . . we in Russia have succeeded in avoiding interethnic clashes only because we have refrained from forcible pressure. If we violate this principle with regard to Chechnya, the Caucasus will rise up. There will be so much turmoil and blood that afterwards, no one will forgive us.”²⁴

Some explanations have focused on the economic costs of uncertainty over the oil pipeline running through the republic or of the organized crime located there. Yet, the costs of a military operation and occupation could have been expected to be enormous. Chechnya’s domestic oil production was minute—3.6 million tons of crude oil in 1992 out of the Russian output of 354 million tons—and the Grozny oil refinery was bombed by the Russians soon after the operation started (Khazanov 1995, 219). Some have seen the military operation as an attempt to deter other regions from seceding. But, as previously argued, the danger of this had already largely passed—and the central authorities had not chosen to invade at earlier moments when the risk of separatism spreading was much higher. On the contrary, by late 1994 a greater danger seemed to be that a *failure* of Russian force could “restart the stalled engines of disintegration” (Shoumikhin 1996, 4).²⁵ Another theory views the action as an attempt to rekindle popular support for Yeltsin; yet a poll published a few weeks before the military operation found only 20 percent supported the use of force.²⁶ If this was the motivation, it was irrationally pursued.²⁷

In the event, opposition to the war from the presidents of Muslim Tatarstan and Bashkortostan was astonishingly muted. Both were critical, but offered to mediate and later supported Yeltsin in his reelection campaign. Immediately

after the invasion, Moscow launched a charm offensive to shore up its support among regions that might be inclined to side with the Chechens. Heads of the North Caucasus regions were invited to meet with Prime Minister Chernomyrdin in January 1995. According to Ingushetia's President Aushev, "economic and financial problems of members of the Federation in connection with the events in Chechnya" were discussed, and Chernomyrdin offered the leaders "priority in financing their needs" in exchange for loyalty on the issue of Chechnya. Leaders of Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, and other regions were invited to submit to the government lists of expenditures that "they have incurred and expect to incur" in connection with the Chechnya operation.²⁸ No stampede of regions to secede followed. Shortly after the 1996 election, with the intervention of General Aleksandr Lebed, a truce was signed between Moscow and the Chechen rebel forces under which the question of the republic's independence was put off for five years and Russian troops withdrew from the republic.