

## ***RUSSIA: The amalgamation of administrative-territorial units as part of the Kremlin's centralisation process***

1 Upon its independence in 1991, the Russian Federation inherited the administrative-territorial structure developed over many decades within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union). This structure totalled 89 units positioned at various hierarchical levels. The hierarchy had for a lengthy period been stable until, in the final chaotic months of the Soviet Union, some units sought aggrandisement for themselves, and confusion arose as to the level at which those units figured.

2 As an initial measure shortly after independence, the March 1992 Federal Treaty gave all these constituent units, defined as *federal'nyye sub'yekty* ("federal subjects") of the Russian Federation, equal rights and responsibilities, thereby beginning a process which to some extent dismantled the rigidly hierarchical structure of the Communist era. In December 1993 the Constitution of the Russian Federation was published, and in its Article 65 it reaffirmed the March 1992 status, again giving all 89 units as equal federal subjects, listing them alphabetically within the following sequence of categories:

21 republics; 6 krais; 49 oblasts; 2 federal cities (Moscow & St Petersburg); 1 autonomous oblast; 10 autonomous okrugs.

3 Notwithstanding this constitutional equality, the reality is that each of the six categories implied by the Constitution is of varying practical significance, with the republics in many ways the first among equals. In Russian texts and broadcasts, the autonomous okrugs and the autonomous oblast have – with the exception of Chukotskiy Avtonomnyy Okrug (AO) – sometimes been portrayed in the years following 1993 as apparently subordinate to the oblast or kray to which they used to belong in the Soviet period, despite the provisions of the 1993 Constitution. Chukotskiy AO alone has quite evidently featured as a wholly separate unit, having formalised its split from its erstwhile parent, Magadanskaya Oblast'. The contradictory status of the other autonomous units is because, although they have been equal in constitutional status, each was considered in territorial terms to have remained located within its former parent administrative unit, as Martin Nicholson has explained:

"These units are both administratively subordinate to the regions within which they are situated, and constitutionally equal to them."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Towards a Russia of the Regions*, Martin Nicholson, Adelphi Paper 330, published by Oxford University Press for The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1999. Note that this 'administrative *versus* constitutional' contradiction has to some extent been resolved by the Putin centralisation process outlined in the following paragraphs of this paper; see in particular paragraph 7.

4 The 1993 Constitution was a manifestation of the Yeltsin presidential philosophy of allowing the republics in particular to “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow”, resulting in the phenomenon known as the “parade of the sovereignties”. But the existence of 89 different units of asymmetrical significance and great variations in size was seen in some circles as too unwieldy for the efficient administration of Russia, and while bilateral treaties were set in place between Moscow and many of the constituent units, particularly the republics, there were few proper measures for a horizontal interface among them. In fact, there were and remain rivalries and even instances of tariff erection between constituent units.

5 The Putin presidency which commenced in 2000 began a process of centralisation within the Federation. The great degree of licence afforded to the republics in particular had allowed them to enact legislation which was perceived to be at variance with legislation in other republics and, more importantly, at variance with federal legislation. The centralisation process involved *inter alia* a revocation of many of Yeltsin’s bilateral arrangements between Moscow and the units, as Putin sought to strengthen central authority into a new “power vertical” (*vertikal vlasti*) arrangement. As part of this effort, Putin embarked in 2003 on a process of active encouragement for neighbouring administrative units to merge. He remarked at the time:

“[T]he constitution says that there are 89 regions. At the same time, one thing is obvious: a number of regions of the country are not economically viable. ... In this sense, it may be that merger with neighbours could be justified and correct. At the same time, I want to stress this, the decision about possible de-merging and merging is given by the Constitution of the Russian Federation to the exclusive competence of Russia’s regions themselves. You know that some regions are now discussing this possibility and, naturally, the process is not a simple one. According to the law the regions will have to take internal decisions. We, on our part, are ready to support the projects that are justified<sup>2</sup>.

- 6 The following mergers took place under the Putin presidency, which ended in May 2008:
- Permskaya Oblast’ and Komi-Permyatskiy Avtonomnyy Okrug (AO) merged on **December 1<sup>st</sup> 2005**, forming a single **Permskiy Kray**<sup>3</sup>. The former AO lives on within the new *kray*, having been re-designated as Komi-Permyatskiy Okrug.
  - A merger of Krasnoyarskiy Kray, Taymyrskiy (Dolgano-Nenetskiy) AO and Evenkiyskiy AO took place on **January 1<sup>st</sup> 2007**. The enlarged territory is known simply as **Krasnoyarskiy Kray**. The former AOs live on within the enlarged *kray* and have retained their AO designations.
  - A merger of Kamchatskaya Oblast’ and Koryakskiy AO into a single **Kamchatskiy Kray** took place on **July 1<sup>st</sup> 2007**. The former AO lives on within the new *kray*, having been re-designated as Koryakskiy Okrug.
  - On **January 1<sup>st</sup> 2008** the merger between Irkutskaya Oblast’ and Ust’-Ordynskiy Buryatskiy AO took effect, forming a single enlarged **Irkutskaya Oblast’**<sup>4</sup>. The former AO lives on within the new *kray*, having been re-designated as Ust’-Ordynskiy Buryatskiy Okrug.
  - On **March 1<sup>st</sup> 2008** the merger of Chitinskaya Oblast’ and Aginskiy Buryatskiy AO into a new **Zabaykal’skiy Kray**, took place. It is believed that the former AO lives on within the new *kray*, having been re-designated as Aginskiy Buryatskiy Okrug (see footnote 5, second sentence).

7 The status of the former AOs merits analysis. Each former AO has now been designated as an *administrativno-territorial’naya yedinita s osobym statusom* (= administrative-territorial unit of special status) and each lives on within its former parent unit under that new status. As can be seen in paragraph 6, the word “autonomous” has been dropped from four of these units, but remains in the titles of the two AOs of Krasnoyarskiy Kray. This special status enjoyed by all the subsumed units seems to be a halfway house between first- and second-order levels in the

<sup>2</sup> BBC Monitoring: Putin news conference, RTR Russia TV, 20 June 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The administrative structure of the new *kray* can be seen at the website <http://www.perm.ru/region/gorrai>.

<sup>4</sup> A previous suggestion had been to name this larger entity Pribaykal’skiy Kray.

overall hierarchy of administrative-territorial units of the Russian Federation. Although deprived of their first-order constitutional status as defined in Article 65 of the 1993 Constitution, the units of this special status continue to contain within themselves the rayons – which are assuredly second-order level units – that they contained under the former administrative-territorial arrangements<sup>5</sup>. It would seem safe to infer that these units are not standard second-order units, but are nevertheless now constitutionally as well as administratively subordinate to the parent unit, resolving the ‘administrative *versus* constitutional’ contradictions noted in paragraph 3.

8 The mergers noted in paragraph 6, reducing the total number of constituent units in the Federation from 89 to 83, completed the cycle of amalgamations planned for the period of the Putin presidency. From the Kremlin’s perspective, such mergers have been deemed desirable because they decrease the number of local administrative power bases and render centralised government of the Federation more effective. Putin has remarked that mergers should be seen as a means of positively strengthening the Federation and of concentrating the allocation of state resources, not as an end in themselves:

“..constituent parts [should] merge not for the sake of merging, but for optimizing governance”<sup>6</sup>.

9 The process of merger can be expected to reduce the number of administrative units progressively downwards from its present 83. The Moscow newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* has reported that the intended total might be as low as 30-40 component entities<sup>7</sup>. The following list summarises the mergers currently mooted as possibilities either by the federal authorities or by other pro-Moscow factions within the Federation:

- That the newly enlarged Irkutskaya Oblast’ and the newly created Zabaykal’skiy Kray should themselves merge with Respublika Buryatiya, creating a “Baykal’skiy Kray”;
- That Tyumenskaya Oblast’ should absorb Khanty-Mansiyskiy AO–Yugra and Yamalo-Nenetskiy AO, though the two large and wealthy AOs are opposed;
- That Sverdlovskaya Oblast’ should merge with Chelyabinskaya Oblast’ and Kurganskaya Oblast’ to produce a Urals power-house centred on Yekaterinburg;
- That Orlovskaya Oblast’ and Bryanskaya Oblast’ should merge;
- That Yevreyskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast’ should be absorbed into Khabarovskiy Kray;
- That Krasnodarskiy Kray should absorb Respublika Adygeya, creating a “Kubanskiy Kray” (indeed Adygeya has removed reference to “sovereignty” in its own constitution);
- That Respublika Altay should merge into Altayskiy Kray;
- That Respublika Khakasiya should merge into the newly enlarged Krasnoyarskiy Kray;
- The mayor of Moscow, Yuriy Luzhkov, has apparently come over to the idea that his city (Gorod Moskva) might usefully amalgamate with the surrounding Moskovskaya Oblast’;
- Pro-Russian elements in Dagestan suggest that Russia’s interests might best be served by an expansion of their republic at the expense of Respublika Kalmykiya and Astrakhanskaya Oblast’, creating a large new “Kaspiyskiy Kray” and resettling 150,000 Dagestanis into the subsumed lands, with the enforced repatriation to Kazakhstan of the similar number of Kazakhs currently living there.

10 Yet although the above mergers have been mooted, there are no definitively scheduled proposals in the pipeline, and it remains to be seen how assiduously President Medvedev will continue with this particular element of the centralisation process. He and his

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<sup>5</sup> The information in paragraphs 6-7 is confirmed for the mergers up to and including 1 January 2008 by the publication *Chislennost’ Naseleniya Rossiyskoy Federatsii po gorodam, poselkam gorodskogo tipa i rayonam na 1 yanvarya 2008 goda* (Rosstat, Moskva, 2008). Regarding the single merger since that date (that of Chitinskaya Oblast’ and Aginskiy Buryatskiy AO) see:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administrative\\_divisions\\_of\\_Zabaykalsky\\_Krai](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administrative_divisions_of_Zabaykalsky_Krai).

<sup>6</sup> BBC Monitoring: Putin news conference, RTR Russia TV, 25 April 2005.

<sup>7</sup> BBC Monitoring: *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 12 April 2006.

advisers will be aware that while the amalgamation process may be beneficial to efficient centralisation it is also having the effect of reviving partly-buried border issues, notably those between:

- Respublika Ingushetiya and Respublika Severnaya Osetiya-Alaniya, with the former demanding the return of Prigorodnyy Rayon from the latter;
- Krasnoyarskiy Kray and Respublika Khakasiya;
- Respublika Kalmykiya and Dagestan
- Respublika Kalmykiya and Astrakhanskaya Oblast'.

- 11 One infrequently mentioned but highly significant aspect of the mergers relates to nationality and ethnicity. It was a tenet of Leninism and the Soviet era that in order to produce over time the desired goal of a single and ethnically undifferentiated *homo sovieticus*, it was necessary first of all to formalise the existence of those ethnicities which did exist within the territory of the Soviet Union, in order that these should be gradually eliminated. This helps to explain not just the existence of the republics, which are based on peoples arguably sufficient in number to have had their own administrative-territorial units under any political system, but also the existence of the AOs, which were largely created with less numerous peoples in mind. It is very noticeable that all six of the units to have disappeared so far under the Putin centralisation process have been precisely these AOs; ethnically-based entities which now find themselves subsumed into enlarged Russian territories somewhat to the chagrin of their non-Russian peoples. It is equally noticeable that the actual or planned unit titles earmarked for these units all have avowedly Russian terminology, *eg* Zabaykal'skiy Kray; Kubanskiy Kray; Kaspiyskiy Kray. There is therefore a Russian nationalist aspect to the centralisation process, one which has not surprisingly caused ethnic resentment and indeed in some instances a backlash. For instance, faced with the proposal to subsume Adygeya into Krasnodarskiy Kray, Adygey/Cherkess groups in that republic have instead called for the establishment of an ethnically Cherkess (Circassian) Republic, eventually incorporating lands outside Adygeya as well. Similarly, the ethnic Nogay of Karachay-Cherkesiya have begun to demand their own autonomy, not merely within that republic but also eventually over parts of Stavropol'skiy Kray and Dagestan too. It is clear that the amalgamation process will not be without its costs and drawbacks.

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