

# Will Russia's return to federalism survive the virus?

Blog post by Associate Frederick Michell, May 18 2020

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Since his election in 2000, Russian president, Vladimir Putin, has gradually brought the regions that make up Russia under the centralising authority of the Kremlin. Two decades on and these regions, which were relatively autonomous pre-Putin, have little genuine power beyond what is granted to them, until now.

Covid-19 has prompted Putin to delegate additional authority to regional governors, but this decision means that the delicate balance between federal and local government is being rewritten. Businesses now have to realign their strategies for a new climate where local governors hold more sway over daily lives.

From the start of the pandemic, Putin has been clear that regional governors, and not the federal government, should take charge. Each region is given support, but the responsibility to protect the health, social and economic needs of Russia lies with local leadership. The official reason for this approach is that Russia has to be “flexible” in tackling the pandemic. But it is evident that, by shifting power to local governors, both the government and president can mitigate the inevitable blame for the health and economic repercussions of covid-19. This is especially important right now, as Putin seeks to secure his future authority post-2024 with contentious constitutional reforms.

Many governors have vigorously taken up this new autonomy, moving to lockdown measures even before the government officially recommended a proactive response. Chechen strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov, imposed a mandatory curfew on the local population and allowed police to use batons when enforcing the new rules. Not quite as keenly enforced, but still a proactive approach, Moscow Mayor, Sergey Sobyenin, used his new authority to order a strict self-isolation for all Muscovites, while the national government was still considering its response.

But the decision to grant regions more authority will also have longer-term implications beyond the immediate lockdown. By bringing in extensive measures early and being one of the first to warn of the dire threat of covid-19, Mayor Sobyenin has become a nationwide symbol of the country's efforts to tackle the virus. This image has dimmed recently due to the chaotic implementation of an electronic pass system across Moscow, which raised concerns of both regional competence to handle the crisis and privacy rights, but Sobyenin is still viewed highly for having acted decisively to prevent more deaths. With many other governors also seeing popularity boosts, questions have been raised about whether regional authorities should have their power curtailed, but it will be hard for the Kremlin to justify a withdrawal of local powers whilst covid-19 remains a threat.

One of the main consequences of this restored, albeit perhaps temporary, federalism is that businesses and foreign investors in Russia will now be looking to their regional authorities for guidance, rather than the Kremlin. The government has already stated that regions will be allowed to exit lockdown at their own pace, despite the pandemic being far from over and still on the rise in many areas. Local governors are likely to use this new remit to provide increased support to economic sectors that are important to

their region's economy, for example, oil and gas extraction in Siberia, pharmaceuticals production in the Kaluga and Leningrad regions, car manufacturing in Samara and construction in the city of Moscow and the Moscow region. This support could include less mandatory lockdown time, increased financial aid and better access to government stakeholders, all of which will prove vital for companies as Russia recovers from this pandemic.

Whether Russia returns to its pre-pandemic status quo of power emanating from the centre remains to be seen. The Kremlin will be unwilling to allow regional governors to hold onto their newfound authority for long, fearing a longer-term split from federal oversight, but local authorities will probably retain some control over health and economic measures, whilst their leadership during the crisis, as compared to the government, will remain a palpable memory in the national consciousness.