Conclusion

One of the difficult aspects of the post-Soviet transition was the establishment of Russia as a truly federal state. Since 1990, and the popular election of regional soviets (legislatures), the question of what kind of a federation Russia is to be has been a pressing concern. The launching of radical economic reform in 1992 made the resolution of the division of authority between the central government in Moscow and Russia’s provinces that much more of a concern as all levels of government endeavoured to gain more economic power.

The purpose of this work was to find out how did regional political developments mould the federal setting in Russia. In other words, is the centre taking measures to settle the demands of autonomy and resolve the emerging separatist movements in different regions of the Russian Federation? Initially, it sought to examine the politics of the Federal treaty and the Constitution, which at large have influenced the whole centre-periphery relations. However, focussing exclusively on regional politics has its own limitation where the constitution is relatively new. The political system of Russia faces new challenges and the institutions are yet to take strong roots in society. Again the system is exposed to socio-economic pressures capable of undermining the delicate institutional foundations. Therefore, this study has also tried to analyse the role of institutions like the President, Duma and other federal institutions. On the economic front, the concern was to capture the Russian economic transition to capitalism and its varied impact on regions. An attempt was also made to explore the possibility of a unique exceptionalism in Russian regional politics. Does such a model also reveal general principles of federalism at work in a specific contextual setting?

In the course of study, the following hypotheses were tested, such as, firstly, the introduction of democratic form of government in Russia, and different treaties and agreements have created new dynamics, and corresponding challenges for the future of regional politics in the Russian federation. Secondly, the multi-ethnic make-up of the Russian federation inevitably demands flexibility in policy and posture. Integral to the
federal process is the requisite skill for political negotiation and accommodation of competing claims to political representation. Thirdly, even in the context of a centralised formal constitution, it is important to note that the levers of power do not reside solely in the President's office but also circulate through the regions and republics of the Russian federation. Fourthly, the source of republican/regional authority emerges from the control over economic and natural resources. However, local elites play a crucial role in mobilising support/opposition. And finally, in Russia, unity could be more effectively assured through devolution within the framework of a genuinely federal separation of powers, and the principle of checks and balances.

The collapse and disintegration of the Soviet state was followed by the declaration that established the Russian Federation. The establishment of the Russian federation necessitated reformulation of the federation, and reopened debates on rights and privileges of the federating units. Political movements relating to the federal structure originated around these debates. The negotiations for forming the Russian federation and drafting a constitution became complicated because of the disputes among the units. The republics insisted on maintaining privileges received during Soviet regime.

To construct Russia as a federation and consolidate the Russian state's new regime, President Boris Yeltsin needed a constitution that would legitimise these processes. The methods and processes of evolving the federation and the constitution were interlinked. The drafting of the Russian constitution was intertwined with the break-up of the Soviet Union and emergence of the Russian Federation. It was linked to the emergence and politics of Boris Yeltsin and his rise as the President of the Russian Republic and then the Russian Federation.

During the long drawn out conflict-driven drafting process of the new Russian constitution, (from June 1991 to November 1993) attention was often focused on the highly visible, disputed separation of powers doctrine. In effect, the fault lines in the post-Soviet political landscape that contributed to the volatility and instability of Russian transitional politics in the first place, existed not only within the national elite over the
relationship between legislative and executive power, but also between the central government and the subjects of the federation over the configuration of centre-periphery relations. In nutshell, it can be argued that the drafting of the Russian constitution clearly brought the division in the Russian society. Furthermore, the initial years of political developments reveal that the different treaties and bilateral agreements created new dynamics, and corresponding challenges for the future of regional politics in the Russia.

In other words, the political developments, especially in post-1992 period created divisions among the components of the federation over financial, political and several other issues. These were some of the developments, which were not desirable for any new federal set up. Especially for those, which were still in the process of consolidation. For instance, though the federal treaty marked a defining moment for the shape of Russian political community during the post-Cold war era. Hitherto tacit differences between the various units in the Russian republic came to the fore, and revealed common aspirations in the role these units envisaged for themselves in the new order. Further, contemporary fissures like the Chechen ethnic problem seriously project the tension inherent in any attempted resolution of the federal issues. Competing claims to rights and privileges constitute much of the backdrop of differences among diverse units. The grant of autonomy to a particular republic is immediately viewed by other republics as a significant concession, which is being denied to them. A part of the problem also relates to the drafting of the treaties like the March 1992 Federal Treaty that reveals ambiguity and provides the basis for continuing discontent. Therefore, the multi-ethnic make up of the Russian federation inevitably demands flexibility in policy and posture. Integral to the federal process is the requisite skill for political negotiation and accommodation of competing claims to political representation.

As far as autonomy of the federating unit is concerned, it needs to be seen in a comparative perspective. In every federal society, autonomy and independence of the units are defined for the smooth functioning of the federal system. In the Russian federal context, it can be seen noticed that the new constitution (1993) neither demarcated nor defined the notion of autonomy and independence of the units, which can be viewed in
different areas, particularly administrative and economic. In the economic field, autonomy of the Russian federation and its units over the federal state property shows the ambiguity of the constitution and leaves room for endless disputes. In sum, the unclear, vague notion of autonomy in Russian federal system has to be defined and demarcated clearly for the fate of the federal structure.

Further, the ambiguities in the division of powers in the federal system led to the growth of multiple centres of power. Regional demands for more sovereignty have been increased and in these circumstances provinces started claiming statehood. The Chechen separatist war for independence was an instance where Moscow had to intervene militarily. The inability to provide institutions, including a constitution, which would assist in the formation of a stable political system, shows up the weaknesses of the constitution. Therefore, to keep up the spirit of ideal federal set up, it is important to note that the levers of power do not reside solely in the President's office but also circulate through the regions and republics of the Russian federation in order to escape from the perceived tension among the units of the federation. Since the constitution did not reflect the demands of all the federation units, and the constitution makers could not arrive at a consensus, discord between the members and the centre continues.

On the basis of above analysis, it can be argued that democracy in Russia is weak and unconsolidated. Pluralist institutions are weak, mass-based interest groups are marginal and institutions like the parliament, the party system and the judiciary lack strength and independence. Putin’s inheritance from the Yeltsin years is a form of governance super-presidential in nature, and democracy for its namesake that warrants mandatory reforms. In an effort to curb the powers of the regional big bosses, Putin in one stroke had curtailed their powers by nominating seven regional governors who, now control the levers of political power in Russia’s far flung regions. He has also successfully pitted the Duma against the regions and by that has deftly and covertly established a sort of central control over the regions. With a small majority and almost from political oblivion, Putin has struck a positive chord in the Duma, resulting in improved relations between President and the legislature.
The federal relations under Yeltsin were characterised by the preponderance of executive federalism in the Federalism Council and the regions, Putin’s reform altered the structure of the second chamber. It consists of two regional representatives, one from the executive and one from the legislative branch that is elected by regional parliaments. The constitution does not prescribe direct representation of regional governors or republican presidents, which in the past formed the Federation Council. Putin’s reform does not amount to a change of the constitution in this respect.

Though Putin’s reforms do not depart from the constitutional principles of federal governance, the absorption of regional powers into the presidential administrative hierarchy amounts to a significant reduction of exclusive regional competencies. The reforms are, first of all, oriented at the unity of legal sphere, but at the expense of the federal idea of division of powers. The broad definition of federal and concurrent powers in the Russian constitution always kept the residual powers of the regions in a shaky position. Putin’s reform exploits the constitutional failure to clearly assign competencies to different levels of government. The institution of the “governor general” is an administrative means to cope with a deeper constitutional problem not yet addressed by Putin’s reforms—a transparent and accountable definition of exclusive federal, shared divided and residual power; the very existence of the intermediary level of “governor general” thus perpetuates the underlying lack of institutional clarity.

From a constitutional perspective, Russia’s federalism is mostly endangered by centralism rather than a confederation. In the long run, Russia’s federalism will be challenged by a presidential regime, which is perceived as existing beyond the federal division of powers. The Russian president’s role as “guarantor” of the constitution, his power to mix executive and legislative powers by rule of decree, and his profession as head of an undivided executive hierarchy amounts to constitutional permission to fuse powers. Putin’s federal reforms reflect a unitarian ethos, prevailing in the Duma too, which identifies a strong government with a uniformity of sub-state regimes and a central vertical model of administrative authority. If Putin’s reforms transgress the legitimate enforcement of federal laws by encroaching on the executive spheres of competencies of
the autonomies, three basic principles of federalism might be sacrificed: non-centralization, division of powers, and the protection of substantial diversity of sub-state identities. Russia’s unchecked super-presidentialism is the main opponent of federalism. The power of the presidency is inversely related to deficits of “societal federalism”—there is still a void of horizontal self-coordination of regions and cities, of federal parties anchored in the regions and of efficient inter-regional branch associations. The race between Putin’s presidentialism and “societal federalism” is uneven, but still open.

Putin has repeatedly claimed that while he seeks to make federal government more effective, and even to increase the power of the state, he does not seek to weaken regional authorities. Regional leaders are indeed a force to be reckoned with, and Putin’s restraint can be explained by a desire to avoid conflict. Regional leaders enjoy the authority and legitimacy that comes from popular election. They have numerous means of exerting pressure on the centre. Also, there may come a time when the President will have to turn to regional leaders for their support. The power of regional leaders therefore means that the executive in Russia is blocked from making major changes to the political and economic status quo. Putin has also been constrained by his desire to operate within the confines of the existing constitution. Many have argued that to make real changes to the existing system, constitutional reform is necessary. Putin has not ruled this out, but at the same time does not see it as urgent.

Putin’s approach to federal reform reveals that he sees centre-regional relations in terms of power struggle. In order to increase presidential power, he has engaged in an attack on regional leaders. There are certainly some justifications for this kind of approach, since the power of regional leaders is one of the main factors impeding the implementation of presidential policy. However, the power of regional leaders has grown to such an extent that this attack will always be half-hearted. The President will be forced to play the dual role of the ‘strong hand’ and the moderate leader willing to compromise. The ‘top-down’ conflictual approach is likely to fail in the absence of genuine ‘bottom-up’ moves for greater integrity and compliance.
In the absence of effective institutional reform, Putin will continue to use the kind of informal, short-term mechanisms employed by Yeltsin, such as doing deals with individual regional leaders or influencing regional elections to promote favourable candidates. Viewed from this perspective, Putin’s reforms may represent only a brief departure from previous practices, only a temporary swing of the pendulum in favour of central power. Nevertheless, they are a departure, and future developments will reveal whether Putin is able to use his advantages to turn uncertain beginnings into a lasting increase in presidential power in Russia.

Recent actions have raised fears of a more authoritarian future for Russia. Continued instability, deadlock, and policy meandering may strengthen those tendencies. The reforms to the federation structure, the attacks on independent media, and the law’s placement of parties under bureaucratic control all point to an increased ability of Kremlin officials to abuse power and rule arbitrarily. Democracy in Russia remains unconsolidated, and the flaws in the country’s central political institutions continue to threaten democracy’s future. It will indeed take a strong hand to break the vicious circle that exists between institutional design and personality politics in Russia. It will take a strong hand dedicated to the development of stable democracy.

Finally, it can be said that any attempt to maintain the unity of the state primarily by administrative means were counterproductive, the more so when outright violence is used, as in Chechnya. Russia could only be kept together by political means, by a constant process of political negotiation and accommodation. Such a policy appeared to work in Tatarastan, and probably is one of the viable approach to Russia’s regions and republics.