

# The Covid Biopolitics in Russia: Putin's Sovereignty versus Regional Governmentality

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**Abstract:** In this article, we discuss the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic as a biopolitical challenge that – along the lines of the contemporary academic debate on biopower – may be approached through the concepts of sovereignty and governmentality. Within this general framework, the authors look at the challenges Russia faces due to the corona crisis from the viewpoint of domestic transformations within the ruling regime, mainly focusing on centre-periphery relations as a core element of the power structure in Russia that demands a stronger emphasis on governmentality. We outline several forms of regions' distancing from the federal centre: digital empowerment, the resistance of the North, and the demand for “people's governors”. Our main conclusion is that the relative administrative autonomy obtained by the regions reflects the ongoing process of decentralization of the Russian political system, which will affect the structural characteristics of Russian federalism in the future.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, centre-region relations, governmentality, sovereignty, Russia.

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This article proposes an interpretation of the Covid-19 crisis as a biopolitical challenge that – along the lines of the contemporary academic debate on biopower – may be discussed through the double prism of sovereignty and governmentality. Within this general framework, we look at the challenges Russia has to face due to the pandemic from the viewpoint of domestic transformations within the regime of governance, and more specifically from the vantage point of centre-periphery relations, which have always been one of the core elements of the power regime in Russia.

The international scholarly debate over the global pandemic is to a large extent grounded in the earlier discussions on the state of exception and the sovereign decision dating back to Carl Schmitt's theorizing. This apparently securitized and militarized approach implies

a shift towards a re-centralized model of policymaking during extraordinary situations, with more bans and restrictions, and a greater concentration of power in the hands of top decision-makers. However, in some countries (Russia included) this trend was – even if temporarily – counterbalanced by an opposite tendency of redistributing power between the central government and non-central authorities. In an unprecedented reversal of the decade-long policy of the “vertical of power” and de-federalization, in April 2020, as a part of the anti-crisis package, President Putin has relegated a bunch of practical powers to sub-national authorities for more effectively tackling the crisis, including the regulation of regional labour markets, provision of social benefits, and administration of some elements of social and health care policies. This sharing of policy competencies between the federal centre and regions was widely discussed from the viewpoint of the ensuing consequences for the entire political system. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that Putin has transferred additional powers to regions against the background of a series of recurrent conflicts that spurred mass-scale protests against the Russian Orthodox Church in Ekaterinburg, environmental actions in Shiyes (Arkhangelsk oblast), the contestation of the results of the recent mayoral election in Buryatia, and the border disputes in the Northern Caucasus (Blok 2020).

To discover discrepancies in the new Russian policies towards regions, we offer new insights into the process of interaction between them and the centre, and discuss the dynamic of the hybrid nature of power in Russia. Based on a number of regional cases, we seek to unpack the perspectives of the decentralizing momentum in Russian politics from the viewpoint of the concept of governmentality, and uncover its importance for the regime’s transformation, taking into account another important factor of change – the constitutional reform initiated by Vladimir Putin in January 2020 and legitimized by the plebiscite held on July 1, 2020. More specifically, we wish to find out how Covid-19 contributed to the regions’ search for more governmental autonomy from the federal centre, how the Kremlin’s policies spurred this process, and how it might develop in the future.

Our empirical material is based on several regional cases that have been identified by the bulk of Russian analysts in multiple comments and reports as the most illustrative of the basic trends that are primordial for the evolution of the Russian political regime. This group of regions includes those where the voting results at the July 1, 2020 plebiscite on constitutional amendments have been the most critical of the Kremlin (mostly in Russia’s North), and those that became known for digital innovations in the sphere of policy management (mainly Tatarstan and Nizhny Novgorod). We used both primary sources (such as published interviews with representatives of authorities, statistical material and official information of federal and regional governments) and secondary sources (such as media analyses), in each specific case focusing on the scope of power resources beyond the Kremlin’s direct reach as well as considering existing regulations that the Kremlin can impose upon subnational authorities. In conclusion, we discuss possible projections of these trends into the future developments in federal relations and relate them to the wider debate on illiberal politics.

First, in the beginning, we outline the frame of the debate on federalism and regional governance and explain how modes of sovereign power and governmentality work in Russia. Second, we point to the inter-relations between the federal centre and particular regions and demonstrate how the eruption of Covid-19 has added new complexities to the already precarious balance of power between Moscow and the regions. By focusing on a variety of local practices of governmentality, we examine four points of the sovereignty-governmentality nexus in greater detail: manoeuvring between the policy frames set by sovereign power and operators of governmentality, attempts of regional elites and the public to distance themselves from the Kremlin, informal and semi-formal arrangements between the centre and regions, and ways of overcoming the legacy of Russia’s domestic colonization of territories. Finally, we discuss how the transfer of responsibilities from

the federal centre to regions as a part of the crisis management contributes to the decentralization of the Russian political system.

### **ILLIBERAL FEDERALISM AND REGIONAL GOVERNANCE: FRAMING THE DEBATE**

From an institutional perspective, Russia is often dubbed a hybrid regime combining both democratic and authoritarian elements when it comes to elections, the mass media, and the organization of the state apparatus (Petrov et al. 2014). In our analysis of the Covid-19 impact on the Russian political scene, our ideas stem from a different understanding of the hybrid nature of power in Russia. On the one hand, the Putin-created system heavily invests in constructing a highly mythologized and close to sacrosanct sphere of Russia's sovereign grandeur that combines discourses of civilizational authenticity and self-sufficiency with an explicitly retrospective memory politics glorifying old military victories. On the other hand, Putin's regime has borrowed a lot from technocratic and largely depoliticized models of governance, which are to a large extent grounded in neoliberal managerial approaches to political and societal change.

We build our analysis upon the general idea of the *"mutual interplay and interpenetration of sovereign power and governmentality as two different power arrangements"* (Braeckman 2019: 667). With all due cognizance of the Foucauldian roots of these concepts, we deem that they can be used as helpful epistemic frames and tools for analyzing countries beyond the Western liberal core, since *"techniques of advanced liberal government that were invented to reduce an excessive and inefficient governmentality are redeployed [...] to strengthen the state (as, for example, in post-Soviet Russia, where neoliberal reforms of social welfare have actually intensified during the period of Putin's rule)"* (Collier 2009: 99).

There are at least four points that make the sovereignty-governmentality nexus applicable to Russian studies. First, both concepts exemplify two complementary forms of power, making political actors *"switch between governmental and sovereign rationalities and politics"* (Vasilache 2019: 699). In other words, domestic political actors (parties, regional elites, business associations, civil society groups) might be seen as manoeuvring between the policy frames set by sovereign power and operators of governmentality, searching for their niches and policy roles at the intersection between the two.

Second, the concept of governmentality rejects *"the idea that power derives from the state as a coherent and centralized actor; that it follows a vertical formal logic of order and obedience"* (Vasilache 2019: 685). In the specific case of Russia this argument makes subnational governmentality part of regions' attempts to refederalize Russia through the weakening of the 'power vertical' and acquiring new policy making resources. What we discuss in this article is different attempts of regional elites and regional publics to distance and even detach themselves from the power vertical constructed by the Kremlin, and diminish their dependence upon Moscow, yet without excessive politicization of these attempts.

Third, governmentality cannot be contained and shaped by purely legal instruments and means of regulation; it constitutes *"an excess to these regulations"* (Braeckman 2019: 2). This point opens up the concept of governmentality to the plethora of informal and semi-formal arrangements between the centre and regions, which is of particular importance for illiberal regimes like Russia, with their traditions of nepotism, grey economy and personal connections largely defining career opportunities.

Fourth, a certain part of the Foucault-sympathetic literature looks at governmentality from a post-colonial perspective (Teo – Wynne-Hughes 2020). This aspect appears to be particularly salient for Russia due to a variety of voices discussing decentralization and refederalization from the viewpoint of overcoming the legacy of Russia's domestic colonization of many territories, particularly in the Far North and the Far East (Inozemtsev 2020).

International scholars who have already made efforts to apply the governmentality framework in Russia studies claimed that this approach is an opposite to seeing “*power as possessed by a body (e.g., Putin) or amassed at a centre (e.g. the Kremlin)*” (Kangas 2015: 483). In this vein, “entrepreneurial governmentality” was coined as a concept explaining the adjustment of the first post-Soviet generation to market capitalism, and demonstrating the hybridity of mechanisms of governance (Yurchak 2002). “Geo-governmentality” was introduced to look at Russia’s energy sector beyond its material or physical background and discuss a palette of practices (spatial, societal and media-related) that unfold on the basis of extractive industries (Tynkkynen 2016). And environmental governmentality might offer a helpful lens for looking at the sphere of ecology from the viewpoint of managing ‘green’ technologies of sustainable development at regional level (Tynkkynen 2010). What is of utmost importance for our study is that the Foucauldian theorizing about governmentality does not necessarily require a pure liberal political milieu: in his vision, governmentality appears to be compatible with police power and pastoral power (Elden 2007: 568), both having an undeniably strong totalitarian potential. In the Russian context all these forms of governmentality imply a certain distance or autonomy from the sway of sovereign power (though this distance is differently calibrated in each case, depending on many factors); rationality of governance, and knowledge of local conditions.

Covid-19 is a particularly illuminating case for governmentality studies since it brings together human and material factors in the sense that epidemics “*are not passive objects. They are, as Bruno Latour reminds us, actants, dynamic forces in social life, constantly surprising those who would harness and control them*” (Li 2007: 4). One of these surprises comes from the dispersal and fragmentation of political competences during the crisis, which exposed the inherently unstable structure of power relations even in autocratic states. The Covid-19 emergency has become one of the situations in which the generalized outlook at power politics was superseded by the growing attention to – and importance of – specific local practices and experiences of risk reduction and crisis management. It is from the governmentality perspective that one may spot new policy niches emerging due to the pandemic, as related to political campaigning and mobilization, organization of voting procedures, or control over people’s mobility under the state of emergency. Most of these policies require new knowledge and expertise, which is an inalienable part of the governmentality paradigm. Thus, “*instead of seeing any single body – such as the state – as responsible for managing the conduct of citizens, this perspective recognizes that a whole variety of authorities govern in different sites, in relation to different objectives*” (Rose et al. 2006: 85). Ultimately, the Foucauldian approach is helpful for arguing that “*any macro-level order is a shifting, provisional constellation; an overcoding of the multiple lines, confrontations and encounters which the microphysics emphasize*” (Walter 2012: 14). It may also offer new insights into the productive capabilities of power: what statuses, types of communication and hierarchies do non-central authorities produce, and how important are they for the prospects of centre-periphery relations in Russia?

Against this polemical background we look at regional experiences of the Covid-19 emergency from the vantage point of a variety of local practices of governmentality. Below we will discuss the above mentioned four points of the sovereignty-governmentality nexus in greater detail. It is important to bear in mind that these points are overlapping with each other and do not exist in pure form but rather in a system of complex and interactive relations.

### **BALANCING BETWEEN SOVEREIGN POWER AND GOVERNMENTALITY**

The presumption of the “*widening gaps between sovereignty itself and the associated bureaucratic apparatuses*” (Naishtat 2012: 54) is not new in the extant literature. In

Russia, as in many post-Soviet countries, there is a profound cleavage between the two, since sovereignty is overwhelmingly understood as a possession of the power to subjugate and repress, while governmentality boils down to the technical administration of the everyday routine. This gap by and large corresponds to the well-articulated conceptual distinction between political and managerial dimensions of power, which keeps the two at a distance from each other as one of the strategies used by different illiberal regimes. The idea behind this separation is to keep off the bearers of sovereignty from the direct responsibility for possible managerial risks and failures, and thus to create a politically sterile space of utmost convenience and safety for sovereignty holders, many of whom are more interested in shaping global politics (Salzborn 2015) than properly governing their societies. Russia seems to illustrate that *“the performance of sovereign power is therefore visible in the discursive formulation [...] of what constitutes an ‘imminent threat’ to the population as well as in the specification of preventive or defensive measures needed to secure it”* (Fournier 2012: 25).

In Russia, with its centuries-long traditions of sacralization and mythologization of sovereign power, the differentiation between its holders and policy operatives was always essential. It is this distinction that explains the Kremlin’s inherently ambiguous relations with the ‘United Russia’ party, the government, the parliament and regional governors: all of them, being – in a wider sense – crucial elements of the so-called ‘party of power’, still in one way or another are distanced from the presidency as an incarnation of political sovereignty. This distance, of course, varies depending on the situation, but it was always a constitutive element of the technology of power. This explains multiple cases of legal prosecution of mayors and governors all across Russia, or the over-saturation of the State Duma with politically marginal figures bereft of political experience – all of them serve as an army of technical nominees (even if formally elected) and – in case of necessity – potential scapegoats for policy failures.

The constitutional reform initiated by the Russian president on January 15, 2020, which started as a sporadic series of amendments disconnected from each other yet ended up with giving a green light to two additional presidential terms for Putin, serves as a perfect illustration of the logic of sovereign power. Its core element is a purely instrumental attitude to all other bodies, whose utility is measured by their ability to sustain the supreme authority. The Duma, the Constitutional Court and regional legislatures have obviously given their formal support to the entire package of amendments that Putin himself has signed into law in March 2020. With the legal part of the process being over in a matter of about two months, the only element that remained pending was the so-called “people’s voting”, an extra-legal procedure that, nevertheless, became a key source for legitimizing Putin’s long-term plans. This ambiguity at the outset puzzled many commentators: why did the Kremlin announce the legally redundant plebiscite that has ultimately turned into a headache for the regime with the outbreak of the pandemic?

One of the possible answers to this question might be found in the very nature of Putin’s vision of sovereignty as reaching far beyond purely technical and even legal procedures. Putin’s sovereign power is a quasi-religious and deeply populist construct that regularly requires symbolic investments imitating the supreme ruler’s connection with the people. The Victory Day parade (rescheduled from the usual May 9 to June 24, 2020) and the people’s approval of the constitutional change were expected to be the two most essential cornerstones of Putin’s power mythology, complemented by the state’s ability to withstand the Covid-19 virus. It is this highly symbolic – and primarily political – dimension of sovereignty that became the most vulnerable, particularly due to the sociologically identified fall of Putin’s popularity among Russian voters and the concomitant decrease in the ability of the regime to legitimize its policies (Zimnii 2020) against the background of a widely spread sense of annoyance and frustration in the society, and the growing perception of a weakening of the presidential power (Petrov 2020). This explains

the unprecedented – even by Russian standards – degree of falsification during the plebiscite, which the Kremlin – for the first time in Russia – extended to one week, which further decreased the technical possibilities for independent monitoring of and control over the procedure.

Remarkably, in the course of the Covid-19 emergency, Putin has voluntarily divested himself of the central position in the biopolitical domain of combatting the pandemic. With his direct blessing, major crisis-management powers were transferred to the government of the prime minister Mikhail Mishustin, to the Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyenin as the head of the crisis management board, and to regional governors. It is the reluctance of the federal centre to take full responsibility for the anti-crisis management that explains the relegation of power from the Kremlin to the governors (Bovt 2020), which also included the option of cancellation of the regional parades dedicated to Victory Day. Russian media reported that many regional leaders have seen Sobyenin as being more effective in tackling Covid-19 than the federal government (Pertsev et al. 2020).

The Covid-19 crisis has made clear that Putin's sovereignty drastically differs from the model envisioned by Carl Schmitt, for whom sovereign rule "*consists in deciding on the state of exception*" (Bradley – Cerella 2016: 210) and manifests itself through a personal decision to suspend normal laws (Hoelzl 2016: 237). Arguably, in Schmittian political theology, the sovereign ruler "*equals a strictly personalistic God, both wilful and powerful, whose persona enjoys absolute freedom from any deterministic limitations*" (Bielik – Robson 2016: 297).

The 2020 pandemic was not the first case in which "*the electoral-authoritarian system shelter[ed] Putin from controversies*" (Wilson – Lee 2020: 46). For instance, "*despite the economic crisis in 2008–2009, there was no noticeable drop in support for the regime*" (Feldmann – Mazepus 2018: 66), which could be explained by Putin's tactics of remaining in the shadows while the most controversial decisions were being taken. Sam Green's analysis of the unpopular pension reform concluded that: "*at no point does Putin come out with a full-throated endorsement of any of the [least popular] policies. As analysts, we cannot know why Putin stays on the sidelines in these fights; perhaps, he is not sure he will win them and wants to remain untarnished, or perhaps he simply doesn't care. But we can put ourselves in the shoes of ordinary Russian citizens and ask what this silence looks like from their point of view. What structural factor of Russian power might a Russian citizen discern from the fact that the one part of the state that matters – the president – seems not to believe in the state's ability to produce public goods?*" (Greene 2018: 344).

Covid-19 has sharpened this question and reinforced the incongruence between the two spheres of power relations, sovereign symbolism and technocratic governmentality, both constitutive for Putin's regime, which created what might be termed "fragilized sovereignty" (Naishtat 2012: 47), with meaningful repercussions for the centre-regions relations that for years were a matter of scrupulous scholarly analysis (Lynn – Novikov 1997). Under Putin's reign the highly centralized and top-down system of governance did not leave many chances for effective regional management (Gel'man 2020). The Kremlin-constructed "vertical of power" was for years mainly busy with securing the predominance of the ruling party in local bodies through marginalizing and neutralizing the opposition, and masterminding regions' solidarity with the Kremlin in core issues of the 'high' (geo)political agenda. The reluctance of the Kremlin to take under its direct control the tackling of the Covid-19 biopolitics has gradually expanded the space for regions' manoeuvring. Protests in Ingushetia against the lockdown measures, along with a bickering between the prime minister and the head of Chechnya over anti-pandemic policies (Souleimanov – Aliyev 2020), gave rise to some expectations of the growing importance of regions due to the Covid-19 outbreak as a sign of future changes in the whole fabric of Russian federalism, while sociological data attested to the unusually high

level of dissatisfaction and disappointment with the federal centre and its regional envoys in the bulk of the regions (Gruppa Belanovskogo 2020).

Thus, the eruption of Covid-19 has added new complexities to the already precarious balance of power between Moscow and the regions. When it comes to the federal centre, the major issue at stake was that *“while zeroing term limits signaled a further personalization of power, a decentralized response to the pandemic could be interpreted as a sign of weakness and degradation of presidential power”* (Burkhardt 2020). A widely discussed indication of the administrative indecisiveness and ambiguity was Putin’s reluctance to declare a state of emergency, and his preference for a much vaguer language of “extended holidays” and “measures of self-isolation”. However, the situation on the ground was de-facto exceptional, with borders being closed, businesses badly damaged, regular social communication interrupted, and people all across Russia facing detention for violation of the “social distancing” rules. Restricted mobility was another element of the new exceptionality, of which the Kremlin took full advantage by suppressing any form of public protests against the constitutional reform, as well as regarding other political matters. This temporary depoliticization, vindicated by the predominance of the biopolitical agenda of protecting people’s lives at the expense of their freedoms, was extended to measures of dissipating the mass-scale protests in the city of Khabarovsk in the Far East, which erupted in July 2020: without engaging with protestors in a substantive dialogue, the authorities put a strong accent on the inappropriateness of public gatherings of any sort while the epidemiological situation remains shaky.

### **INFORMAL AND SEMI-FORMAL ARRANGEMENTS BETWEEN THE CENTRE AND REGIONS: DOES IT HELP TO COMBAT THE VIRUS?**

One of the key instruments of the federal government has always been and remained the power to appoint and sack the regional cadre. During the pandemic in 11 regions, local health ministers were ousted, which attested to the deficit of qualified crisis managers (RBC 2020). A similar problem exists at the level of regional chief executives, which explains the Kremlin’s frequent preference for filling gubernatorial positions with outsiders, who are dubbed “Varangians” (aliens, or strangers) in the regions. This was the case with the Republic of Komi, where at the outset of the Covid-19 crisis Putin replaced the incumbent governor with a former deputy federal Health Minister named Vladimir Uiba, who in September 2020 won the gubernatorial election largely due to his medical background that allowed him to play the role of a saviour of the region (Polyakov 2020).

The case of the Murmansk region is also emblematic in this respect. Since March 2019 it is run by Andrey Chibis, another “Varangian” with good working connections in Moscow. Since the Murmansk region became one of the first regions in Russia where COVID-19 was detected, its governor had to resort to a direct plea for help from the President. After that a new mobile field hospital was constructed in a record time of less than three months. These crisis management skills were an important factor that explains the majority of votes cast on July 1, 2020 for the constitutional amendments (62,54 percent), though the scale of the opposition (36,33 percent) was also quite impressive (Bi-port 2020).

These cases show that it is the sphere of governmentality that became primordial for practically tackling Covid-19 at subnational level, which confirms the argument of a conflation between governmentality and biopower (Jose 2010: 693) as two sides of one coin. In a practical sense, the pandemic created a new role niche for governors – not as technical projections of the federal authorities, but rather as care-takers with substantial powers. However, some Russian experts deemed that *“decentralization or devolution in the realm of fighting Covid-19 in Russia is anything but federalization or regional empowerment. This is mostly the part of ‘the blame game’ where costs of painful measures are shifted to the regions and ‘good news’ are [sic] delivered by the president”* (Zavadskaya – Gorbacheva 2020). Arguably, *“already centralized federations are likely to*

*become even more centralized after a significant crisis at the national level*” (Busygina – Filippov 2020); this option might become feasible due to a lack of experience of tackling the pandemic and a shortage of funds for redeveloping medical infrastructure in regional governments. Regional healthcare workers were evidently not ready to fight the coronavirus as they did not have adequate personal protective equipment, sufficient medical expertise and technologies, or pertinent information. Moreover, having received new powers, regional authorities, in the opinion of some Russian commentators, used them for introducing measures far from liberal – such as blocking transportation between regions and boosting the rhetoric of local patriotism (Mukhametshina 2020), which was to a large extent grounded in complaints about Moscow (Novye Izvestia 2020).

### **DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT AS A FORM OF DISTANCING FROM THE “VERTICAL OF POWER”**

The pandemic has boosted the governmental facets of the regime, which took full advantage of what is known in the academic literature as “algorithmic governance”, a type of authority based on “(a)normative or (a)political rationality resting on the automated harvesting, aggregation and analysis of massive quantities of data” (Cooper 2020: 30). Apart from having strong disciplinary components, algorithmic governance allows building policy arguments on the basis of data calculation, for which the fight against Covid-19 created new opportunities. A number of local practices of governmentality that were meant to soften Moscow’s sway over regions and transform the ‘power vertical’ into a more horizontal type of relations between the national capital and non-central territories became more important and visible. The development of regions’ IT resources as a basis for self-support and local empowerment made some regions frontrunners in the sphere of electronic surveillance and e-voting.

The case of Tatarstan is emblematic of the progress regions can achieve in advancing towards what might be dubbed “algocracy”, or “algorithmic governance” (Martynov 2020), which has been widely discussed with the outbreak of the Covid-19 emergency and its biopolitical repercussions (Medvedev 2020). For Tatarstan, with its ethno-religious specificity and long record of trade-offs of financial and administrative resources with the federal centre, its introducing of its own system of e-passes during the pandemic was one of the means for its further regional self-assertion and technological leadership among regions sharing similar challenges. Indicatively, in May 2020, in the middle of the lockdown, the ‘Rating’ Centre has ranked the head of Tatarstan Rustem Minnikhanov as the top regional chief executive in Russia (Natsionalniy Reyting 2020).

The pandemic has created a new demand for digital technologies for controlling people’s mobility within large urban centres, thus making regional authorities choose between adopting the technical solutions offered by the federal government, and relying on local – evidently limited – resources. However, *by mid-May, only five regions had opted for the federal application. The large majority of regions [...] had actively resisted such a federal policy for a range of reasons instead (the pandemic is under control, it is too expensive, or technically too complicated or insecure to implement). The regional policy experimentation points ... to a lack of coordination, apparently driven by a lack of political will, to implement a coherent monitoring of lockdown measures*” (Burkhardt 2020).

Tatarstan seems to nicely exemplify this preference of most of the regions for self-help and self-securing as parts of governmentality measures over technological dependence on Moscow. The experience of Tatarstan during the pandemic is illustrative of the manoeuvring abilities of regions, namely their abilities to plug into the general guidelines of federal policies yet in the meantime maintain their – always relative – autonomy from the centre. Kazan was one of the first cities in Russia to introduce a system of electronic permissions for mobility, as it did so on April 1, 2020, and was the first to cancel e-passes,

doing so on May 12, 2020, after which all personal data gathered during this period was destroyed in the presence of high-level public servants and non-governmental observers. In multiple comments this experience was largely assessed as positively setting high standards of good practices of emergency governmentality.

From a technical perspective, the specificity of Tatarstan boiled down to the locally designed SMS-based form of e-registration connected to ABCloud developed by the AkBars Bank in 2019, which differs from the system of QR-codes used in Moscow and advertised by its mayor and the head of the national crisis management board Sergey Sobyenin. The preference for this option – allegedly a “more conservative” one – was articulated in implicitly biopolitical categories of governmentality as being for the benefit of those local residents who don’t have smartphones (Sobytiya 2020). The Tatarstani media were replete with interviews with local public servants and providers of digital services who argued that *“in the region the system is well established, while all federal solutions need some adjustment and fine-tuning”* (Sokolova 2020). By the same token, Tatarstan’s authorities claimed that many other Russian regions were interested in learning from them and replicating this experience of digitalization in public service.

However, the Yandex self-isolation index has placed Kazan at the very bottom of the group of cities with a population over 1 million, which basically meant that in this case, e-passes, designed as an instrument to restrain people’s mobility, did not help much in this regard (Pljushhev 2020). Besides, the very idea of e-passes was heavily criticized by lawyers (Nilov 2020) and local activists as potentially being able to encroach upon people’s rights (InKazan 2020) and thus charting a perspective of enhanced control and regulations over citizens’ mobility justified by security reasons or public safety in times of pandemics.

As for e-voting, given the mobility restrictions during the Covid-19 “state of exception”, the Russian Central Electoral Committee has introduced a possibility of online voting, which was experimentally applied only in two regions – the cities of Moscow and the Nizhny Novgorod oblast. In the latter case this was optimistically perceived as a sign of acknowledgement of this region’s progress in digital technologies of e-governance (Nizhegorodskie Novosti 2020). E-voting was widely referred to not only as a convenient technical solution for people with limited mobility (Argumenty i Fakty 2020), but also as a step forward towards the future, an investment into a new experience that will be increasingly in demand all across the country in the years to come, particularly in large cities (Orlov 2020).

Initially, the head of the Communist Party Gennady Ziuganov, on behalf of the so-called “systemic opposition” (parties represented in the parliament and largely loyal to the Kremlin), called upon President Putin to reject the idea of e-voting as, in his view, it was more susceptible to fraud and less secure (Krasnaya liniya 2020). Some experts have wrongly predicted that e-voting might lead to a higher percentage of pro-Kremlin votes (Politanalitika 2020), but Nizhny Novgorod has shown an opposite pattern: in the regular poll stations the correlation of forces was 79.31 percent (yes-vote) to 20.16 percent (no-vote), while among e-voters, only 59.69 percent supported the constitutional amendments, while 40.31 percent rejected them (Yushkov 2020), which was widely commented on as one of the strongest anti-Kremlin votes in the entire country. The Russian political commentator Gleb Pavlovsky claimed that these numbers demonstrate the real balance of forces within the Russian society, and make Putin face a new reality, namely that about half of the active electorate are ready to contest his policies and challenge his personalistic rule (RTVI 2020). Indeed, in Russia, online voting was predominantly a space for mid-career urban professionals unhappy with Putin’s regime of sovereign power and protesting against it, which in the future might lead to some restructuring of the political landscape in the country, particularly should these dissenting voices consistently look for a better political representation (Teplouhov 2020). However, despite all the risks and criticism of the e-voting, the Central Electoral Committee pledged to extend the scope of

the regions that will be able to vote online in the next parliamentary election, which is to take place in 2021 (VSE42.RU 2020).

### **OVERCOMING THE LEGACY OF INTERNAL COLONIALISM: THE NORTHERN RESISTANCE**

In this section we look at different forms of resistance to the top-down management of regional issues from a post-colonial perspective, which in the academic literature is often integrated into the governmentality paradigm (Dutton 2010).

The “people’s vote” on the constitutional reform has formally ended up with 77.92 percent of the votes being in support of Putin’s amendments. However, if looked at through the regional prism, the picture on the ground was quite complex and diverse. The Russian political analyst Ekaterina Shulman has referred to certain regions as generators of much less pro-Kremlin attitudes than the national average (Shulman 2020) – among them are the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Yakutia, Kamchatka, and the regions of Omsk, Khabarovsk, Murmansk, Irkutsk, Tomsk, and the Republic of Komi (Kemenova 2020), forming an arc of provinces stretching from the European North to the Far East. In this large group, we focus on a regional cluster that can be labelled the “Russian North”. Many of the Northern regions were known for their protest activity before the pandemic; Covid-19 has widened the gap between the federal centre and the Northern regions that for years were insisting on their capability of conducting their policies by relying more on their own resources than on Moscow’s guidance. These expectations were reinforced after they received signs that due to the pandemic Moscow is willing to delegate more power to the regional level.

The best example of this trend is the Nenets Autonomous Okrug (NAO), the only region where the majority (58.28 percent) voted against the amendments. NAO is a region with strong ethnic specifics, as well as one of the most prosperous regions in Russia due to its oil and gas extraction industry (Galimova et al. 2020). The negative voting was directly related to local protests against Moscow-supported plans to merge NAO with the neighbouring Arkhangelsk region (Galimova et al. 2020), which the bulk of the local residents rejected as an encroachment upon their local competences and autonomy.

One more example of protest voting came from the Murmansk region, where four out of five “closed administrative territories” (ZATO), or territorial units under the jurisdiction of the Defence Ministry, voted against the amendments (Balyuk 2020). Another municipality in the Murmansk region, the Pechenga district, has also rejected the constitutional reform. This district, due to its location on the border with Norway with a special visa-free zone between the two countries, was particularly affected by the border closure since March 12, 2020, when the majority of local residents found themselves isolated and disconnected from Murmansk as well as from the neighbouring Kirkenes, an important hub for trade and shopping (Staalesen 2020).

One more Northern region – the Republic of Komi – well demonstrates a high level of protest voting as well. Formally, the results of this region’s vote on the amendments to the Constitution were favourable to the Kremlin, yet commentators and observers were perplexed with what many considered as electoral manipulation: the processing of the initial 5 percent of the protocols showed 68 percent of votes cast against the amendments; nevertheless, the final results gave a dramatically different picture, with 65.08 percent being supportive votes.

Yakutia, where 40.65 percent of the voters obstructed the constitutional reform, represents another Northern region with a high level of discontent. This outcome may be interpreted as a protest of a significant part of the local population against the operation of Russia’s largest companies in which they extract the mineral resources located in Yakutia, with “*all the money going to the federal centre*” (Pronko 2020). Apart from that, the high number of critical votes is an effect of Yakutia’s disagreements with Moscow’s

heavy emphasis on the idea of a single and unified all-Russian nation that is locally perceived as a disregard for the ethnic and linguistic plurality of minorities and their needs (News.Ykt 2020).

Against this backdrop, one may claim that local identity remains an important marker of differences between the centre and the Northern regions, but also all across Russia. The regions' annoyance with the politics of the federal centre became especially visible during the public acts of protest, during which regional flags and symbols were used to visualize the symbolic distance between the regions and the Moscow officialdom. Thus, in the Arkhangelsk region, the ethnonym *Pomory*, which was historically applicable to the White Sea maritime dwellers, was regaining popularity. In its turn, Murmansk is branding itself as a "capital of the Arctic", which – with all the loyalty of the local governor to the Kremlin – evoked some concerns in the pro-Kremlin media, which claimed that robust regional identities might eventually undermine the "vertical of power" (Stanulevich 2020). In the Republic of Komi, the local environmental activists have publicly displayed an alternative Komi flag to visualize their disagreements with the federal authorities. The design of the unofficial Komi flag resembles Finno-Ugric and Scandinavian symbols of free people that historically have always rejected serfdom or slavery (Finugor 2015).

The case of the "Northern resistance", which was reinvigorated by the pandemic, is illustrative of the growing importance of grass-roots agendas of governmentality related to nature protection, indigenous environmental activism, or the state of local health care systems, rather than the enthusiastic support for such symbolic attributes of the sovereign power as strong national unity, a uniform identity, and militarization of foreign policy. Many of the regions we have referred to as belonging to the Northern cluster are deeply divided polities struggling to legitimize their own needs, interests, and demands. In this respect, Russia's Northern regions might be juxtaposed with their European counterparts, the Nordic margins, which for centuries were ascertaining their right to an alternative vision of the world. As Parker (2019: 483), an authoritative voice in margins theory, suggested, "*elevating oneself to the core leads to a blindness to difference, if not anger and brute force in the face of the awkward fact of difference between oneself and others*". Actors on the margin, in their turn, may pursue two strategies – "*emulating, trying to become, or claiming you are already like the centre; or challenging the centre as something alien, or even threatening*" (Parker 2019: 482). This distinction seems to be applicable to Russia, which shows different options of marginal regions' self-positioning vis-a-vis the central power, and unveils a crucial distinction between the mostly inward-oriented local agendas formulated in categories of governmentality, and the much more geopolitically explicit attitude to the idea of the North in Moscow (Khaldei 2020).

The Kremlin's policies also faced strong opposition in Russia's Far East, namely in the city of Khabarovsk, where by the decision of the federal centre the 'old' governor was removed and then replaced by an unpopular MP representing the Liberal Democratic Party. With the growing sensitivity of the regional public (urban activists, opinion makers, and independent civil society groups) towards relations with Moscow, the so-called "Varangians" are increasingly perceived as external managers lacking in due connections with – and knowledge about – the regions they were mandated to govern.

Thus, the management of the Covid-19 crisis in Russia has amplified all the multiple challenges that the federal government has been facing for years when dealing with subnational regions. The strongest among them is the deeply rooted and widely spread perception of Moscow as a colonizing power that transports its waste materials to remote areas (Shiyes), or as a source of hyper-centralization that allows the Kremlin to decide on arbitrarily opening legal cases against elected governors whose popularity – and therefore legitimacy – is quite strong among local residents (Khabarovsk). The anti-Moscow feelings have always existed in many regions unhappy with their maltreatment

by the central authorities, and the pandemic has accelerated the attempts at distancing from the centre, thus multiplying the extant distinctions and disagreements between the national capital and the provinces. Several regions faced serious local outbursts of Covid-19, with the following lockdown of cities and areas. The consequences of these anti-pandemic actions are not fully displayed yet, but the malfunction of the local medical health care system, problems with online education and unequal access to the Internet and technical devices, the uneven application of quarantine rules and the misuse of them for political purposes all became evident in a short period of time and strengthened the already existing dissatisfaction in the regions.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE TRENDS

The governmentality approach that we have applied in this study appeared to be instrumental for reaching beyond the figures reflecting economic consequences of the lockdown or public opinion polls; it is also helpful for finding an alternative to the dichotomic characterization of the Covid-19-related power sharing between federal and regional authorities as a ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ development, or dividing the society into ‘virus-fearful’ and ‘economy-supportive’ groups. Governmentality offers a different pattern of looking at the political scene: what is colloquially known as a ‘vertical of power’ turns out to be an archipelago of different practices and experiences of governance when it is placed under scrutiny from the position of governmentality.

The pro-Putin social contract between Moscow and the regions included “*the belief that ‘delegating’ all power into the hands of the President is the best way to discipline and mould state and society*” (Blackburn 2020: 52). Under these strained conditions, regions typically built their policies towards Moscow “*not to oppose federal policies and programmes, but to mould them to local conditions, and thus to assert a level of autonomy within the federation. [...] Such an approach allows both the centre and the regions to retain their reputations as powerful agents among their populace*” (Fondal et al. 2019: 61). However, the balance of relations between the federal centre and subnational units has been becoming dislocated due to a number of factors. Two of them are of particular importance for our analysis. One is the growing Moscow-sceptic attitudes in many regions which had always existed in a latent form: in the periphery, Moscow is often associated with undue affluence and arrogance, and is seen as a source of unfair distribution of the national wealth (Kalinina 2020). These sensitivities were drastically accelerated by the mass-scale protests against the construction of a landfill facility in Shiyes, a remote locality at the border of Arkhangelsk oblast and the Republic of Komi. The construction works for storing and reprocessing huge amounts of waste coming from Moscow took by surprise local activists, who quickly managed to mobilize ecological groups and the general public in what they saw as a battle against Moscow’s nefarious plans to turn the North into a destination point for a garbage dump. During the pandemic, as observers noted, these anti-Moscow sentiments were transformed into the widely spread demands to ban Muscovites – who were largely perceived as the bearers of the virus – from visiting “our” cities and spreading the disease among the locals; some regional authorities went as far as prohibiting “guests from Moscow” from renting apartments, or even preventing them from checking into hotels in their respective regions (Alpaut 2020).

Another disintegrative factor is the ethnic, linguistic and cultural specificities of many Russian territories that local public activists consider as being historically colonized by Muscovy. Illustrative in this sense is the fact that most of the ethnically non-Russian regions in one way or another developed policies fostering their distancing from Moscow during the pandemic. Some analysts refer to the increased popularity of Moscow-wary attitudes in many provinces, which are often articulated in anti-colonial and anti-imperial terms. Not incidentally, ideas of a new wave of federalism have resurfaced in the midst

of the pandemic (Tushin 2020). Russia's North and the Far East are particularly referred to as territories colonized by Russia and nowadays looking for more autonomy and self-governance (Inozemtsev 2020).

Regions perceive their soft detachment from the Moscow-constructed 'vertical of power' as non- or extra-ideological and, in a broader sense, de-politicized. However, the conflictual potential of the growing tensions between the federal centre and regions seems to override other existent cleavages, such as that between the dominant 'United Russia' and the systemic opposition, or that between the Kremlin and the radical opposition, which – partly due to the introduced restrictions on public gatherings – failed to effectively campaign against the constitutional amendments. In the long run, the Covid-19 crisis might contribute to a process of dissipation of Putin's model of the hyper-centralized regime of governance. Thus, presidential representatives in federal districts – aggregated regions created by Putin's decree during his first presidential term – did not play any significant role in the crisis management at all. Their de-facto exclusion from the decision making process and disappearance from public politics might signal the ultimate failure of the very idea of "large regions". The regions' boycott of the Kremlin's plans for merging some neighbouring regional units also points to this possibility. This might mean that Putin's whole vision of centre-region relations is increasingly under stress, which might lead to a new configuration of Russian domestic regionalism, with relations of horizontal solidarity being formed not on a purely territorial principle, but rather on cultural and historical connections or common agendas in such spheres pertaining to governmentality as environmental protection, fair distribution of revenues, health care, and public medicine.

Due to the growing legitimacy of regional leaders and the expanding space for protest actions some subjects of the federation are likely to receive new trump cards in bargaining and negotiating with Moscow. The biopolitics of Covid-19 has augmented the demand for a new model of "people's governors", as opposed to the Kremlin's technical nominees, which might imply a widened gap between the sovereign power, mostly concerned with issues of 'high politics' in general and geopolitics in particular, and the local practices of governmentality, with care-taking and fostering citizens' responsibilities at their core. It is indicative that the recently appointed acting governors of the two regions affected by the Shiyes protests, the Republic of Komi and the Arkhangelsk oblast, have ultimately spoken out against the Moscow-patronized project of the landfill construction, thus preferring to remain closer to people's demands than to business projects propelled by the capital.

Looking at our analysis through the prism of the unprecedented public protests that erupted in Khabarovsk in mid-July 2020 after the arrest of the local governor, we may easily find in this event a confirmation of our thesis of regions' growing potential for public actions meant to dissociate them, in one form or another, from the centre's patronage, and safeguard a degree of their local autonomy. This political vector can positively contribute to meaningful transformations in centre-periphery relations in Russia. However, we also see that most of the regional protests are bent on ostensibly localized agendas and can't reach beyond narrow and region-specific demands for Moscow's non-interference into "our affairs". These demands clearly show a growing gap between the locally embedded agendas and the sovereign power, which is concerned more about force projection and neo-imperial ambitions than about issues of governmentality. Yet in the meantime, regional protests represent instinctive, impulsive and reactive acts of local self-respect and autonomy, and politically remain, as the Russian philosopher Mikhail Berg assumed, parochial analogies of the French *Jacquerie* (Newsader 2020). Importantly, none of the forms of localism we have identified in our study questioned the constitutive elements of the sovereign reassertion as understood by the Kremlin, including the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, the confrontation with the West, the Soviet

nostalgia, and the creeping rehabilitation of Stalinism. In this sense, one may expect that sovereignty and governmentality are bound to co-exist as two forms of power that are different from each other but not necessarily confrontational.

This leads us to the last point in our analysis: the transfer of a significant amount of governmentality functions from the Kremlin to regions, being a major element of the crisis management framework, became an important contribution to the gradual decentralization of the Russian political system, and created a stronger demand for self-rule in many of the peripheral regions. However, these small steps so far did not affect the structural characteristics of Russian federalism, which remains illiberal in the sense of leaving much space for the discretionary power of the centre over subnational regions. The structural changes towards a more profound federalization of Russia require a much greater emphasis on decolonization of both Russian sovereign power and practices of governmentality. It is only through developing a Russia-specific decolonial politics that the force projection towards Russia's post-Soviet neighbours and the blatant disregard of environmental sensitivities in the Northern margins might be regarded not as two separate matters, but as two sides of the same coin. In this respect, the movement towards a more liberal (and less hierarchical) model of federalism coincides in Russia with a debunking of both the Kremlin's neo-imperial exposures and the century-long internal colonization of the country.

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