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Introduction

Centrifugal Forces? Russia's Regional Identities and Initiatives

Edith W. Clowes

Early in 2013 the Moscow talk show *Shkola Praktika* with Mikhail Shvydkoi held a discussion on the assertion that “The Future Belongs to the Provinces.”¹ From the center’s point of view the provinces have garnered new, if not unprecedented, attention. The talk show participants concurred that, although in Moscow one might enjoy higher earnings and greater variety of work, in the provinces one might enjoy a more satisfying sense of community. While historically Russia’s provinces have been dismissed as boring and derivative, now that perception appears to have flipped.² The recently murdered Nizhnii Novgorod politician Boris Nemtsov famously boasted, “I am a provincial,” which was meant to assure his following that he was honest and ethical.³ The point here is that the image of Russia’s provinces and regions—in other words, all areas beyond Russia’s two capital cities—became quite prominent in the national discourse during the years when the Soviet Union was dissolving. And now, in the early 21st century the provinces and regions have continued to play an important role despite federal efforts to coopt resources and power.

Historically regions were outlying areas inhabited by people of other ethnic background but colonized by Russians, typically acting on behalf of the Russian state. Both ethnic Russian and non-Russian residents have at times have organized to present an economic and political threat to the center. In contrast, provinces traditionally are areas in European Russia viewed as gray,

¹ “Budushchee za provintsiei,” 7 February 2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jci1i0nvChg>, accessed 13 February 2016.

² See A. F. Belousov and T. V. Tsiv’ian, *Russkaia provintsia: Mif—tekst—real’nost’* (Moscow: Tema, 2000). In the English-language commentary, Anne Lounsbury gives an excellent literary-historical treatment of the concept in her article, “‘No, This Is Not the Provinces!’ Provincialism, Authenticity, and Russianness in Gogol’s Day,” *Russian Review* 64, no. 2 (2005): 259–80. For a call to move away from state-centered traditions of historiography, see Susan Smith-Peter, “Bringing the Provinces into Focus: Subnational Spaces in the Recent Historiography of Russia,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 4 (2011): 835–48.

³ Lyudmila Parts, “Topography of Post-Soviet Nationalism: The Provinces—the Capital—the West,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (2015): 518.

dull, and uniform, as well as culturally imitative of the center. Since the end of the Soviet state we are encountering a more complex attitude toward areas beyond the capital city, perhaps partly because a majority of Russians (about 60%) live in smaller cities.⁴ Does this shift in attitude mark a genuine grassroots change, a new, much more active vision of life beyond the megalopolis? Or is it an effort on the part of the federal government, having centralized assets in Moscow, to encourage Russian citizens to stay where they are? In this special issue of *Region* an array of experts—sociologists, an anthropologist, a journalist, a cultural historian, and a geographer—all listen to regional voices and, where possible, examine regionally motivated initiatives. They then ask what their findings can tell us in answer to our questions about grassroots changes in Russia despite the center's cooptation of public life.

The late 1980s and 1990s represented a historical moment when Russia's regions lurched toward political and economic decentralization. To start with, old Siberian party bosses and industrial managers lobbied to protect their regional economic interests in the short-lived Siberian Agreement of the early 1990s.⁵ Motivated by many different causes, the wars of secession in Chechnya and actions in other areas, such as the Iamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region, the Urals, or Tatarstan, toward greater political and economic autonomy were all a part of the same picture.⁶ Since Putin's assumption of power in 2000 the new administration has worked consistently to "regather" Russia's lands—to coopt regional initiatives, to manipulate regional discourse, and to continue to centralize wealth in the Moscow region, while also attempting to bring greater consistency to regional governance and business dealings. This special issue of *Region* aims to capture the conceptual significance of regional society, economy, and culture at this moment of strident, national-level Russian "patriotism." It seeks to apprehend voices and viewpoints in a vast array of regions, to find commonalities and differences, and to ask what role regional consciousness plays in, and perhaps even across, those regions. Although the communities we examine are not currently separatist, we titled our forum "Centrifugal Forces?" in order to draw attention to the relatively independent initiatives of the regions under discussion.

The five articles in this issue of *Region* comprise part of a larger project focused on gaining a richer understanding of cultural, social, economic, and political action and self-understanding in several Russian regions. Although

⁴ "Shkola Praktika," 7 February 2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jci1i0nvChg>, accessed 13 February 2016.

⁵ James Hughes, "Regionalism in Russia: The Rise and Fall of Siberian Agreement," *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 7 (1994): 1133–61.

⁶ See, for example, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, *The Tenacity of Ethnicity: A Siberian Saga in Global Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), especially 146–72; Alexander Kuznetsov, "The Meltdown of the Russian Federation in the Early 1990s," *Demokratizatsiya* 19, no. 1 (2011): 23–36.

the authors rely on quantitative evidence, our broader goal is qualitative in nature, directed at gaining a nuanced perspective on values and mentalities. Less number-driven and center-driven than most research in Russian area studies, we are committed to articulating subjectivities and self-understanding among various communities, both ordinary people and intellectual and economic elites beyond Russia's two capital cities. The first step in our project was to gather a working group around a conference on the topic held at the University of Virginia in March 2015. This special issue, which focuses particularly on current developments of the early 21st century, is the second step. The third and final step will be a book that examines the historical and cultural roots of contemporary Russian regional consciousness in greater detail.⁷

Another fact motivating this project is the frequent replication in scholarship of dismissive perceptions of the regions espoused in Russia's political center. Our working group agreed that in general the existing research on contemporary Russia's regions is: 1) too limited by disciplinary divisions, and 2) too likely to assume that regions writ large are passive "takers" rather than "makers" of change. Regions are traditionally viewed as historical entities, sites of literary or artistic origins, or as political receivers of central policy, sometimes perceived by economists and politics experts as hardly worth the attention.⁸ Political scholarship often focuses on economic and political institutions and events rather than people and their cultural and political values.⁹ Nonetheless, opinions are changing, and with them research focal points.¹⁰ Recent historical literature, such as Catherine Evtuhov's pathbreaking *Portrait of a Russian Province*, provides invaluable insight into 19th-century provincial self-perception. Evtuhov calls for a "coherent perspective on the Russian provinces—an approach and methodology that would permit the deconstruction of nineteenth-century Russia into smaller provincial units, and a subsequent reconstruction that will provide us with a revised vision of the country as a whole."¹¹ Stefan Stuch's "Regionalismus in Sibirien im frühen 20. Jahrhundert" also moves in the direction of viewing a region as more than just a receiver.

⁷ E. W. Clowes, G. Erbslöh, A. Kokobobo, eds., *Russia's Regional Identities* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁸ Valerie Bunce, "Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Generalizations," *Comparative Political Studies* 33 (2000): 708.

⁹ For example, Richard Sakwa's *Russian Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2008), always center-driven, gives a scant 11 pages to regional thinking and development.

¹⁰ For a welcome departure from the old politics model, see Peter Rutland, "Petronation? Oil, Gas, and National Identity in Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 1 (2015): 66–89. Rutland "explores the curious dialectic of interests and identity with respect to the hydrocarbon foundations of the Russian economy" (66).

¹¹ Catherine Evtuhov, *Portrait of a Russian Province: Economy, Society, and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Nizhnii Novgorod* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 9. See also Smith-Peter, "Bringing the Provinces into Focus."

In his view, a region can usefully be considered as a “space of consciousness” (Bewusstseinsraum).¹² “Centrifugal Forces?” shifts this growing attention to regional subjectivities into the present day in order to highlight and explicate processes of local initiative and organization. What emerges is a multidimensional and, in our view, more compelling picture of Russia.

Since the 1970s both the academy and the broader world have opened our eyes to the ways in which institutions of power impose image and consciousness on citizenry and subalterns alike. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) interrogated French and English colonizers’ literary, artistic, and scientific images of their colonial subalterns. In *Imagined Communities* (1983) Benedict Anderson drew attention to print and newspaper culture and its impact on the rise of national consciousness. In the realm of Eastern Europe, since Larry Wolff’s book, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994), numerous studies have taken a similar approach, whether tracing West Europeans’ views of Slavic East-European “others” or, in the Russian sphere, examining Muscovites’ views of the Soviet and post-Soviet peripheries. These studies were among the first to codify a “constructionist” concept of identity with a focus on place and the imagining of place that has since become known as the “spatial turn.”¹³ Gayatri Spivak in her seminal essay on the postcolonial condition, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1983), first heeded perceptions of those outside the metropole, whom she calls “third-world subjects.” Spivak attends to repressed voices and the problem of ordinary natives’ “right” to speak and be heard.¹⁴ New questions arose concerning the position and voice of the “subaltern,” the person on the fringe of society without full access to the status of citizen.

Spivak’s question invites innovative research probing the imperial character of the Soviet Union and the status of its citizenry.¹⁵ Our contribution to Russian regional studies interrogates the interaction of central power and re-

¹² Stefan Stuch, “Regionalismus in Sibirien im frühen 20. Jahrhundert,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 51, no. 4 (2003): 550.

¹³ Leonid Gorizontov, “Anatolii [Viktorovich] Remnev and the Regions of the Russian Empire,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16, no. 4 (2015): 901–16. Here Gorizontov confirms that Russians’ spatial/imperial treatment of Russian history started with the translation of Andreas Kappeler’s book, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Longman, 2001).

¹⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313. Spivak focuses in particular on third-world women and critiques the Indian practice of widow sacrifice.

¹⁵ For discussions devoted to Soviet-area postcolonialism, see E. W. Clowes and J. B. Foster, Jr., eds. “Interrogating Slavic Identities: Inside, Outside, and in Between...” special forum in *Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (2001): 195–299; V. Chernetsky, N. Condee, H. Ram, G. Ch. Spivak, “Are We Postcolonial?” *PMLA* 121, no. 1 (2006): 828–36.

gional consciousness, discourse, and action. Our goal is to hear other registers and other voices, and, in short, other identities.

Because they are moving targets, our two chief concepts—region and identity—require solid, useful definition for our Russian regional project. The question of regional identities and initiatives is best viewed in terms of the geo-spatial turn of the last 30 years. Across the humanities and social sciences human-defined place has become crucial, even as grand historical narratives of progress toward universally held ideals have often stumbled and even failed in their application.¹⁶ Negotiating the idea of region, which is the central theme of this journal, involves defining differences in scale, perceived power, and perceived cultural distinction. Some terms, such as region (*oblast'*; *krai*; *avtonomnyi okrug*; *respublika*) or region (*raion*), designate administrative units of various scales and levels of autonomy. In contrast, other terms, such as periphery (*periferiia*) and province (*provintsiia*), refer to value judgments implying pejorative connotations, such as either a lack of education or the derivative quality of local cultural and social life—something like English-language adoptions of “hinterland” or “sticks.” Cultural and literary historians tend to define “region” capaciously as “the whole of Russia’s space beyond the capital,” differentiating broadly between local and regional perceptions and initiatives and identities articulated in the power center, Moscow.¹⁷ Politics experts pay closer attention to the differences between administrative entities. In terms of self-organization, historically, the concept of region as *oblast'* gave rise to political movements known as *oblastnichestvo*, formed among people of Russian heritage who perceived their area to have been deprived of resources or treated in some way as a colony, the main national purpose of which is to supply raw materials to the center.¹⁸

As a concept, an issue, and the focal point of considerable research, the study of identity has become an entire industry across the humanities and social sciences in the last 30 years.¹⁹ This set of articles understands identity as conscious self-perception and self-understanding with regard to belonging to a particular community in a particular place. Identity, following the work of

¹⁶ See, for example, Robert D. Sack’s short summary, “The Power of Place and Space,” *Geographical Review* 83, no. 3 (1993): 326–29; Robert Sack, *A Geographical Guide to the Real and the Good* (London: Routledge, 2003); Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2003)

¹⁷ Parts, “Topography of Post-Soviet Nationalism,” 509; Evtuhov, *Portrait of a Russian Province*, 6.

¹⁸ Stephen Watrous, “The Regionalist Conception of Siberia, 1860–1920,” in *Between Heaven and Hell: The Myth of Siberia in Russian Culture*, ed. G. Diment and Yu. Slezkine (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993), 113–32; Hughes, “Regionalism in Russia”; J. Paul Goode, *The Decline of Regionalism in Putin’s Russia: Boundary Issues* (London: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁹ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 1–47.

Brubaker and Cooper and, in our context, of Anisimova and Echevskaia, often takes shape and gains articulation when people in the community in question experience a negative change in status. Identity, in their view, can be formed with the goal of well-aimed social, cultural, or political action.²⁰

In formulating this project and defining both commonalities and differences among regional identities, we asked our authors to address five groups of questions in order to assure some level of uniformity among the contributions in this issue of *Region*:

1. How do you define your regional group or organization? What is the historical relationship of your regional group to the center of political power, the capital? Is that history still vital and vibrant today? If so, how and why?
2. How would you define your group's current identity and its relationship to the power center? How has it changed in the post-Soviet period?
3. How does your regional group's identity answer traditional tendencies to view provinces and regions hierarchically as inferior to the power center? What is different, innovative, and interesting in this relationship at the present moment?
4. What has been the impact of the post-Soviet wave of regional activity of the 1990s? Does your group express a perspective for the future?
5. What major, defining initiatives or activities has your group undertaken? What are its goals? Is it striving for some measure of autonomy, self-determination, or local or regional self-differentiation?

In seeking answers to these questions "Centrifugal Forces?" deploys an array of methodologies for understanding regional identities and initiatives in the early 21st century—taken notably from anthropology, sociology, human geography, literary studies, and spatial historiography.²¹ All these articles combine source research with field research—personal interviews and surveys—designed to bring distant voices to the forefront, as well as see patterns of identity as articulated in the regions involved. These five articles range in focus from the strongly theoretical (Anisimova and Echevskaia) to reports on fieldwork with little conceptual scaffolding (Erbslöh). Both theoretical framing

²⁰ Alla Anisimova and Ol'ga Echevskaia, *Sibirskaiia identichnost': Predposylki formirovaniia, konteksty aktualizatsii* (Novosibirsk: Novosibirskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 2012), 11.

²¹ The term "spatial history" comes from Mark Bassin, Christopher Ely, and Melissa K. Stockdale, *Space, Place, and Power in Modern Russia: Essays in the New Spatial History* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 7.

and data development and interpretation have high value for understanding contemporary regional Russia—the theoretical work because it suggests new frameworks for interpreting data, while the descriptive work gives us reliable data about almost inaccessible communities in Russia. Data in all articles are derived in part from field surveys. Most articles (Anisimova and Echevskaia, Erbslöh, Graber) use long interviews to apprehend patterns of identity formation and articulation in social and cultural initiative. Two of them (Charron, Clowes) introduce a newer technique for addressing personal viewpoint—so-called “mental maps” drawn by respondents that show respondents’ concept of “home” and of belonging to a particular place. In addition, narrative theory is introduced as an important component in the sociological research on subjectivity with a focus on narrated life stories and reflection on historical event, place, and self (Anisimova and Echevskaia). In narrative fiction a protagonist gains personality and self-understanding through some sort of “event,” which by definition changes conditions and is typically life-altering for that character. So, too, members of a social group sometimes create identity after some form of painful social or economic change, a loss of status, or some value perceived to be missing for the people involved.

Among the wonderful opportunities open to non-Russian researchers since 1991 has been the chance to work, live, and travel virtually anywhere in Russia. The articles in “Centrifugal Forces?” make good use of that openness. Findings are based on work conducted in Buriatiia, Siberian cities (Tiumen’, Omsk, Novosibirsk, and Irkutsk), the North Caucasus, and the contested region of Crimea. Each article focuses on a somewhat different aspect of the question of regional subjectivities, building a complex and more accurate picture of contemporary Russia. All five articles embed present activity in historical, cultural, and political contexts, while also addressing the interaction of centripetal and centrifugal forces.

Two articles deal with Russian oblasts and three with republics. Different aspects of Siberian identity and activity receive attention in two of the articles. The analysis by sociologists Alla Anisimova and Olga Echevskaia of post-Soviet identity in three Siberian cities focuses on the liminal generation of 70-somethings who stood to lose the most after the end of the Soviet Union. Their findings suggest a split between those whose sense of self-worth rested on a successful career supported by the Soviet state and those whose identity is founded on family relationships. This article helps explain the relative political conservatism and lack of initiative on the part of Siberians directly following the demise of the Soviet Union. My article on cultural initiatives in Tiumen’ examines image- and identity-forming processes of official branding and grassroots cultural initiatives. It tests the impact of both kinds of initiative on the identity of a group of Tiumen’ University students, all of whom were born after the end of the Soviet Union.

The final three contributions treat identities and initiatives in republics on the southern peripheries of Russia—moving from the most peaceable to

the most contested. Anthropologist Kathryn Graber deals with post-Soviet Buriat-language journalism and the efforts of editors to cross boundaries of geographical areas, and even states, in order to foster a strong sense of heritage and cultural cohesion. In her field report radio journalist Gisela Erbslöh treats Chechen intellectuals and their legal journalistic activities focusing on civil rights and the historical record. These efforts, while under threat from current authorities, enjoy a considerable following. In his examination of surveys completed in Crimea in 2011, before Crimea became a disputed territory, geographer Austin Charron highlights the significance of regional identities over national identity among the chief ethnic groups comprising the Crimean populace. Graber's and Charron's articles raise a major complication in contemporary politics and cultural studies across all areas of the world, and no less important in Russia—the issue of cross-border regional identities. Although each of the world's cross-border regions has its own dynamic, the case studies of Buriatia and Crimea add nuance and depth to our thinking about these crucial areas.

Our hope is that the outcome of this and other research on Russia's regions will be a more penetrating consideration of the varieties of consciousness in contemporary Russia as a whole. We address the claim that some scholars make about regions as typically being "takers" rather than "makers," reacting to initiative from the center rather than taking considered, self-motivated action.²² Remembering the comment made on the Moscow TV talk show—"The Future Belongs to the Provinces"—we return to the questions at the center of "Centrifugal Forces?": What change is indeed taking place in Russia's regions? And who is initiating those changes? It is easy to see the hand of the newly reinvigorated central government in all the places and communities encountered in this issue. Nonetheless, each article engages regional voices, opinions, and actions that promote a vision of their region that to one degree or another partners with or avoids the center. These identities and initiatives merit sustained attention.

We conclude with a broad conceptual question about center-periphery relations that is also relevant in our study of Russia's regions. Iurii Lotman, the Russian theorist of sign systems and their meanings, argues in his book, *The Universe of the Mind*, that in any language system—whether cultural, social, or political—the center of power settles, codifies, and canonizes systems of value, rules, and laws. In contrast, innovative forces impose themselves on the center through thinking, active people and different ideas coming from various

²² Evtuhov's book offers an extended historical counterexample to this stereotypical thinking. For another historical counterexample relevant to the republics, see Michael Khodarkovsky, *Bitter Choices: Loyalty and Betrayal in the Russian Conquest of the North Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

edges and peripheries, whether geographical, social, or psychological.²³ It is possible in the 21st century that, to the degree that it suppresses innovation and opposition, the current Russian government has stymied opportunities to remain vital. As we deepen our study of Russia's regions, it helps to keep in mind this question about innovation: where will new thinking and new initiatives come from? Newness, as we argue here, happens through the interaction of these two forces—the centripetal and the centrifugal.

²³ Iurii Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, trans. A. Shukman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), ch. 11–12.