Federalization in Russia and Spain: The Puzzle of Reversible and Irreversible Outcomes

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ABSTRACT The article aims at contributing to the understanding of the dynamics of federalism in Russia and Spain. It traces the dynamics of decentralization in both states and addresses a puzzle on reversible (Russia) and irreversible (Spain) outcomes of territorial reforms and regime transition. Among other explanatory factors, this article argues that the role of the political parties as mediating actors—proactive or reactive—has been crucial in shaping institutional building in both countries. Concluding remarks envisage some scenarios of further territorial developments in comparative perspective.

KEY WORDS: Federalism, decentralization, democratization, regime transition

Introduction

The comparative analysis of territorial accommodation in Russia and Spain during the last decades aims at contributing to the understanding of the dynamics of federalism. Democratization in Spain and Russia had to face the challenge of transforming centralized unitary non-democratic states into decentralized polities (Russia in the 1990s and Spain from the 1970s up until now). However, while Russian decentralization has become a reversible process with Putin’s coming to power in the 2000s, Spain has consolidated as a highly decentralized democratic state. As political outcomes of the regime transition, Russia can be labelled an autocratic centralized state, while Spain could be regarded as a democratic decentralized state without federation. Among other explanatory factors, this article argues that the role of the political parties as mediating actors—proactive or reactive—has been crucial in shaping institutional building in both countries.

Russia and Spain have experienced democratic political and economic regime transition with similar departure points and subsequent processes: from non-democratic unitary centralized structures to democratic decentralized ones. The formation of the
Russian Federation (RF) as an independent state started from the date of the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. Over the last 20 years, the RF has passed over the triple transformation of democratization, marketization and territorial re-structuring. In contrast, at the time of the death of General Franco in 1975, Spain was rather liberalized economically. The all-party consensus, which made the democratic 1978 Constitution possible, formulated an ‘open model’ for political decentralization of a federalizing nature.

A number of interesting studies has contrasted in comparative analysis both Russia and Spain in the world-wide context, looking primarily at a number of contextual factors (such as ethnicity, linguistic, climatic, geographical and geopolitical issues) and institutional factors (as the fixed and stable institutional design). In contrast, this article suggests that it is the process of regime transition in general and the dynamics of the development of political parties in particular that influenced the eventual critical different outcomes of regime transition across the two states.

The article proceeds in the following way. The next section outlines the reasons for comparative analysis between Russia and Spain, contrasting these states and singling out the similarities between them. Section three focuses on the dynamics of decentralization in the period of regime transition in Russia and Spain. While it would be difficult to compare the presently democratic state, Spain, with a semi-autocratic state, Russia, the comparative analysis of both is more appropriate in terms of regime transition and decentralization in the first years after the collapse of non-democratic regimes in Franco Spain and Soviet Russia. It is the comparison of the dynamics of decentralization of regime transition which adds value to this analysis (not the comparison between actual modern states which are apparently very different in their modern form). Section four singles out one specific aspect of the regime transition which allows providing for one of the explanations of different outcomes of regime transition—democratic and decentralized state as an outcome of regime transition in Spain and a non-democratic centralized one in Russia. The final section concludes.

Background for Comparative Analysis: Russia and Spain—Affinities and Differences

A succinct selection of general background affinities and differences between the two countries is useful in order to trace key explanatory variables for comparisons and interpretations. Both Spain and Russia present interesting similarities as well as differences which provoke a comparative analysis of a de jure federal state (Spain) and de facto centralized state (Russia). Among the similarities of these two case studies are multi-ethnicity, linguistic differences and, above all, similar historical experiences of non-democratic regimes and highly centralized territorial structures (Soviet Russia and Franco’s Spain). Above all, both states have been labelled bridges between East and West: Spain as connecting Islamic Africa with Europe; and Russia connecting Europe and Islamic Asia. Historically, both states experienced invasion of their neighbours and both survived their own period of Reconquista. However, despite numerous historical parallels, it is not the aim of this specific article to look in detail at historical legacies but rather to focus on the recent regime transition, its dynamics and different outcomes.
Both countries can be regarded as multi-ethnic states with a notable degree of plural internal diversity. Taking language as an indicator, the degree of internal diversity in both countries is high. Despite the fact that Russian is the official language spoken by practically the whole population of 145 million, there are also 27 other languages officially recognized and numerous dialects. Likewise, Castilian (or Spanish as it is referred to world-wide) is the official language in the whole of Spain (45 million population), although four regional languages are also co-official in territories comprising more than 40% of Spain’s population. Likewise, half a dozen dialects are spoken locally.

Both Russia and Spain have been described as asymmetric federal countries according to their juridical-institutional arrangements. In Russia such labelling corresponded mainly to the period under Yeltsin’s rule (1993–2000), when several heterogeneous provisions were put into place (see below). In Spain, initial constitutional disparities have been followed by renewed claims, mainly by the Basque Country and Catalonia and Galicia (the so-called ‘historical nationalities’), for further asymmetrical arrangements.

In the last decades, there has been an active presence of radical separatist groups in Chechnya and the Basque Country with important implications for subsequent political developments in both countries. However, while President Putin has used terrorist acts associated with Chechnya as a pretext to his re-centralization reform, the case of Spain shows how political violence and terrorism has not translated into the dismantling of the Estado de las Autonomías (State of Autonomies).

Despite these similarities, Spain and Russia also have a number of substantially different characteristics. First, the size and number of constituent units (83 in Russia, 17 in Spain) are rather dissimilar. However, dissimilarities of this kind are also noticeable either in big federations (e.g. Australia, Canada, India or the US) or smaller ones (Belgium, Switzerland). More relevant is the disparity regarding numerous ethnic groups and indigenous peoples, most of whom live across the territorial borders of constituent units in the Russian Federation with the exception of some of the so-called ethnic regions. Thus, out of the current 83 regions, there are 26 ethnic regions which are meant to be home to relevant ethnic minorities. Spain, in contrast, has a limited number of self-defined ethno-linguistic communities, which are somewhat recognized de facto by the population at large and are concentrated mainly within the territorial borders of constituent units (the so-called ‘historical nationalities’: Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia).

Second, Russia is a presidential system where the president concentrates extensive powers for the de jure ruling of the country. The establishment and consolidation of one dominant political party, labelled as the ‘party of power’, contributed to the consolidation of a non-democratic regime and centralization (see below). In contrast, the parliamentary monarchy in Spain provides a de facto veto point to the main Spain-wide parliamentary parties to block any attempt to centralize power or to change the constitutional order unilaterally.

Third, international contextual factors have crucial importance in the developments of internal domestic affairs. As an inheritance of the Soviet era, the Russian Federation has internalized a vocation for playing a leading role in world affairs. In parallel, its government exercises full ‘sovereign’ prerogatives in the ruling of internal matters.
The impact of the European Union on Russia has not been as decisive as in some central European countries due to the absence of any prospects for EU membership. Spain, in turn, is closely linked to the EU project, which implies a gradual limitation of the traditional powers of the member states, as the case of Economic and Monetary Union illustrates. However, it is important to note that democratization and decentralization in Spain dates back to the late 1970s and the 1980s, a period when the EU was not yet considered as strong a lever for regionalization as it became in the late 1990s and in the 2000s. In contrast, during the democratization process in Russia in the 1990s, the EU often served as a model of successful regional integration and regionalization and contributed to the development of subnational democratization (Obydenkova, 2006; 2008). Despite this, the external impact of the EU on national democratization and decentralization in Russia was considered negligible (Lankina and Getachew, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2010). Also the different international context and the anti-democratic impact of non-democratic neighbouring states (Central Asia, China) on regime transition at the regional level in Russia has proved to be an important factor influencing the failure of democratization (Obydenkova and Libman, 2012).

**The Dynamics of Decentralization in Russia and Spain**

One of the most important common trends of the first years of regime transition in both Russia and Spain was fast territorial decentralization. Remarkably in both cases the decentralization reforms had an asymmetrical nature, favouring some regions over others in terms of constitutional (institutional) and/or fiscal asymmetry. This dynamic presents important parallels across the two case studies.

**Decentralization in Russia’s Regime Transition**

In Russia, the 1990s witnessed both the *de jure* and *de facto* change of the regime with the adoption of important documents shaping the future of Russia, such as the Federation Treaty (1992) and the Constitution of the Russian Federation (1993). The Federation Treaty signed by President Yeltsin and by the regional leaders on 31 March 1992 established the Russian Federation alongside three other treaties: (1) on ethnic republics; (2) on administrative-territorial formations including the establishment of six *krais*, 49 *oblasts* and the cities of federal significance (Moscow and St Petersburg); and (3) on national-territorial formations, such as the Jewish Autonomous *oblast* and ten autonomous *okrugs*. The Federal Treaty of 1992 outlined the special status of the republics and gave them more rights than the non-republican regions, associated with fiscal benefits and increased autonomy in creating their regional institutions and legal provisions (Brown, 2001; Kahn, 2002).

The Federation Treaty of 1992 was followed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993. The constitutional typology of the regions of Russia is very complex and provoked a debate on the symmetrical versus asymmetrical federal structures it promulgated. Thus, on the one hand, it can be argued that the constitution established a symmetrical federation because there are no clearly defined constitutionally embedded differences between the regions. Article 5 of the Constitution states that
regions are “equal subjects of the Russian Federation”. According to the Constitution, all regions were to be equal in terms of their representation in the Upper Chamber of the Federal Parliament (the Council of the Federation). Article 95.2 of the Constitution entitled two representatives to each region to be members of the Upper Chamber of the Russian Parliament. However, on the other hand, the Constitution of the RF is also a highly ambiguous document and includes a number of contradictions regarding federalism (Kahn, 2002). The constitutionally embedded contradictions allow the definition of Russia as an asymmetrical federation. As the Constitution defines the status of the republics in varying manners, there are contradictions such as considering some regions as republics (Article 5.2).

In the 1990s, out of 89 regions (now 83 regions), there were 21 republics, ten autonomous districts and one autonomous province constitutionally defined as ethnic regions. Ethnic regions are territorial constituent units which were meant to be territorial homes for ethnic groups (also called ‘titular nationalities’). Within this group of ethnically defined regions, regions with republican status were in a special position or category. Among other factors, autonomous provinces and districts were legally incorporated into territories and provinces, while republics were not. Furthermore, the legal difference between the constitutions of the republics and statutes as the basic laws of all other regions, as well as the attributions between the republican presidents and the regional executives (also called governors) were not clearly stipulated in the 1993 Russian Constitution. Thus, it has been argued that there is no actual difference between ethnic regions and non-ethnic ones, and between republics and the rest of the regions (Golosov, 2004).

Asymmetries included in the 1993 Constitution also established the status of ten regions incorporated territorially into bigger regions, but with legal equality in status and rights. This problem has often been described as matrioshka (Russian doll). The Constitution did not define the relationship between the administrations of the regions with the status of autonomous okrug and those territories in which they were located. These regions were to be constitutionally equal to their geographically “parent regions” (Ross, 2002; Butler, 2003). Article 66 ambiguously states that

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\text{... the relations between an autonomous district within a territory or province may be regulated by federal law or a treaty between the bodies of state authority of the autonomous districts and, accordingly, the bodies of state authority of the territories or province} \] (Golosov, 2004: 59).

Other than the constitutional asymmetries described above, a so-called contractual asymmetry was also developed. In the period of 1994–98, 47 bilateral treaties and several hundred supplementary agreements between regions and the federal centre were signed (Kahn, 2002; Ross, 2002). The bilateral treaties between regions and the central government became the hallmark of Russian asymmetrical federalism in the 1990s. These bilateral treaties became a convenient and acceptable way for all the regions regardless of their status to achieve higher autonomy within the Federation in the 1990s (Kempton, 1996; Obydenkova, 2011; 2012).

Thus, the outcome of the devolution reforms was the establishment of both constitutional and contractual asymmetries. During the period of decentralization under...
Yeltsin’s government, both ethnic and economic diversities across the regions played an important role in establishing constitutional and contractual asymmetries (Hughes and Sasse, 2001; Obydenkova, 2008). During the 1990s, this double federal asymmetry contributed to the accommodation of centre–regional disputes. However, a side-product of these reforms was an increased contradiction between the provisions included in regional and national legal documents. Some regions implemented their own legislation, charters and statutes which often contradicted federal legislation and violated principles included in the 1993 Constitution (Smith, 2002; Stoner-Weiss, 2006). For instance, legislation approved in Ingushetia, Stavropol krai, the Moscow region, Moscow city, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, North-Ossetia, and Volgograd region included provisions violating citizens’ right to travel freely (Smith, 2002).

Russia’s Recentralization

The ambiguity of certain constitutional provisions provided Putin’s governments with legal grounds to embark on their recentralization programme and to rebuild a highly centralized state. Article 78 of the Constitution, for instance, enabled the central government with the opportunity to establish unspecified “territorial organs” and to appoint “appropriate officials”. Likewise, Article 77 underlined the importance of a “unified system of executive power” in the Federation (emphasis is ours).

From the very beginning of Putin’s presidency, new federal reforms were implemented following the “the establishment of a dictatorship of law”. The purpose of the new reforms was to bring regional laws in line with federal legislation. From May to September 2000 major reforms in centre–periphery relations were put into practice, such as: (a) the establishment of seven Federal Districts; (b) the enhancement of the power of the federal authorities over federal spending in the regions; (c) the reform of the Federation Council; (d) the granting to the president of the Russian Federation the right to dismiss regional executives if they were to enact laws contradicting federal legislation; (e) changes in local legislation allowing regional governors to dismiss local governments enacting measures in violation of federal and regional laws; or (f) a juridical harmonization aimed at bringing the regional laws and constitutions into line with federal law and the Constitution (Kahn, 2002; Ross, 2002; 2009; Smith, 2002; Obydenkova 2011).

One of the radical reforms carried out by Putin was the reform of the Federation Council. This reform implied that the governors of the regional executives would not have a seat in the Federation Council (the Upper Chamber of the Russian Parliament). Under Putin’s rule, sub-state executives lost their capacity to act as institutional veto players (Söderlund, 2005). The representatives of the regions should be appointed by regional governors for the period of their term of office. As regional governors were appointed directly by the federal president, the division between legislative branch (Parliament) and executive branch (federal president) became subtle. Formally, the appointment of a candidate to seat in Federation Council should be confirmed by the legislative branch of a region.6

Overall, Putin’s reforms were carried out with the de jure goal of ‘synchronizing’ legislation and the de facto aim of establishing an ‘executive vertical of rule of law’
and bringing power structures under central control. Accordingly, the ministries of
defence, justice, interior and emergency, and the Federal Service of Security secured
their representations in each of seven federal districts in order to monitor the activities
of their regional subordinates. Unofficially, the regional governors needed to co-ordi-
nate their activities with the presidential representative in their federal districts. This
reform was aimed at putting regions under the rigid control of central government
with the help of presidential representatives as unofficial ‘heads’ of federal districts.
As an illustration of these changes, regional paradiplomacy, which was used profusely
throughout the 1990s on matters concerning foreign policy on trade, cultural and other
issues, was not prohibited legally but became ‘unwelcomed’ by the presidential repre-
sentatives and now has a very low political profile (Obydenkova, 2012).

Since 2008, Medvedev’s presidency can be regarded as a consolidation of the cen-
tralized territorial structures established under Putin. However, there are some differ-
ences concerning the proclaimed Medvedev’s priority for ‘radical’ administrative
reform in the regions. Such an approach was set to combat corruption in regional polit-
ics and to allow the “lowering of the barriers to small businesses that are impeding
Russian economic development” (Slider, 2008: 4). Another difference is that Medve-
dev has become more assertive in exercising presidential powers to ‘discipline’ incum-
bent regional leaders, as the removal on 28 September 2010 of the governor of
Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, clearly indicated.

In sum, Putin’s and Medvedev’s governments launched a programme of institutio-
nalizing a civic nation by means of substituting earlier de facto ethnic-integrative
attempts deployed during Yeltsin’s era by a de jure functional form of intergovernmen-
tal relations (De Silva Migara et al., 2009; Busygina and Heinemann-Grüder, 2010).

Spain’s Decentralization

Interestingly, the first decades of Spanish regime transition provide for a number of
similar parallels to that of Russia. A general cross-party political and social consensus
reached after the demise of General Franco’s dictatorship made possible the establish-
ment of the federalizing Estado de las Autonomías (State of Autonomies). It implied
the creation and accommodation of 17 regions and nationalities by means of an
extensive decentralization of powers and responsibilities in a process of home-
rule-all-round. Recognition of regional self-rule and cultural diversity were constitu-
tionally enshrined. The existence of different languages, political traditions, distinct
civil-law traditions, peculiar systems of financing governments in some regions, and
the insular conditions of others was recognized in the 1978 Constitution (Moreno
and Colino, 2010).

The democratic 1978 Constitution did not include the word ‘federal’ in any of its
provisions, nor did it appear in any subsequent legislation. However, since the begin-
nning of the 1980s the dynamics of the Estado de las Autonomías have been character-
ized by democratic federalization (Moreno, 2001). The main features of the Spanish
covenantal process concord with the federative criterion that legitimacy of each
autonomous layer of government is constitutionally guaranteed (Watts, 1999; 2010).
Furthermore, the Estado de las Autonomías combines both federal principles of self-
rule and shared rule, and the regional layer is not a surrogate of the central government.
Likewise, all 17 Comunidades Autónomas (Autonomous Communities) have their own constitutional laws (Estatutos de Autonomía), and the Constitutional Court is the supreme arbitrator in the distribution of powers and the conflicts between the central, regional and local layers of government. The Senate, or Upper House of the bicameral Parliament, is constitutionally defined as the “chamber of territorial representations” (Article 69, Constitution of 1978). However, the Senate is not the guarantor of the shared-rule federal principle. In fact, it mainly performs duplicating functions with regard to the fully-fledged Chamber of Deputies, or Lower House.

Article 2 of the 1978 Constitution acknowledges the existence of sub-sate “nationalities and regions” with a right to autonomy and self-rule within the “insoluble unity of the Spanish nation”, but the Constitution does not derive institutional consequences from this distinction in the territorial organization of Spain. Some asymmetries were constitutionally preserved, such as the recognition of co-official languages, the maintenance of traditional civil-law systems, and the preservation of special economic and fiscal arrangements (with the Basque Country and Navarre having a system of de facto fiscal independence and with special provisions on the VAT for the Canary Islands). These asymmetries have periodically fuelled demands for the recognition of a “differential status”, particularly in the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia.

In general terms, the home-rule-all-round process in Spain during the 1980s and 1990s succeeded in meeting the political aspirations put forward by all sub-state nationalities and regions. Note that such aspirations were articulated around common cultural, historical, linguistic, and political facts that any person in those territories could assume and become identified with, regardless of his/her origin, family homeland, or ancestors’ background. Some minorities of citizens identify exclusively along ethnoterritorial lines (e.g. “I consider myself only Basque, Catalan or Galician”). They generally claim political independence for their territory—among them, those who support the Basque terrorist ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, ‘Basque Homeland and Freedom’). However two-thirds of all Spaniards share a ‘dual identity’ or ‘compound nationality’. This dual identity incorporates both regional and Spain-wide identities in various degrees and without apparent contradiction between them (Moreno, 2006).

Since the transition to democracy in the late 1970s, the process of decentralization of powers and home-rule-all-round achieved not only a high degree of popular support, largely transcending past patterns of internal confrontation, but it stimulated also regional aspirations to claim more political powers and competences for the exercise of autonomy. The first successful experience of liberal democracy since the times of the Second Republic (1931–39) has also been the result of the recognition and promotion of autonomy at sub-state level (Del Pino and Colino, 2010). Democratization and decentralization can be regarded as the two intertwined sides of the transition after the death of General Franco.

Spain’s Centrifugalization

In the mid-2000s, some 25 years after the beginning of the home-rule-all-round process, initiatives were taken by regional parliaments to reform their own constitutional laws (Estatutos de Autonomía) in order to gain more autonomy (Catalonia, 2006; Andalusia, 2006; Valencia, 2006; Aragon, 2007; Balearic Islands, 2007, Castille
and Leon, 2007, Extremadura, 2011). Already on 27 September 2002, the Lehendakari (President) of the Basque government made a statement before the Basque Parliament proposing a new Pact for Cohabitation (Pacto para la Convivencia) to be based on the free association and co-sovereignty between the Basque Country and Spain. According to Juan José Ibarretxe, the citizens of the Basque Country were entitled to self-determination. On 11 September 2008, the Constitutional Court rejected the possibility of holding a “sovereignty-association” referendum along the lines of Ibarretxe’s proposals.

From the viewpoint of the powerful Basque, Catalan and Galician nationalisms, Spain ought to be constitutionally composed according to linguistic lines, including the ‘historical nationalities’ plus the rest of Castillian-speaking Spain. Such sub-state nationalisms are more inclined to the establishment of confederal options for the territorial accommodation of Spain—or outright independence of their territories—rather than working out federal arrangements tout court. They are suspicious of versions of ‘one-nation’ federalism, as found in Australia, Germany or the USA (Forsyth, 1981).

In parallel, actions by Jacobin centralists encroached in sections of the public administration and the main Spanish parliamentary parties have favoured bilateral and ad hoc centre–periphery relationships to the detriment of making effective the shared rule federal principle. Influential sections of the media have also encouraged centralists—whether in right-wing or left-wing formations—to go back to a hierarchical top-down model of decentralization where the central government claimed to be the source of political power. This course of action has given impetus to a certain political centrifugalization which is particularly felt in Catalonia and the Basque Country.

In fact, there are different conceptions of Spain within the country. As Juan Linz (1973: 99) put it some years ago, “Spain … is a state for all Spaniards, a nation-state for a large part of the population, and only a state but not a nation for important minorities.” Accordingly, different formulations present different configurations of the relationship between nation and state. While the Constitution of 1978 implicitly defines Spain as a nation of nationalities and regions, many politicians and intellectuals have defined Spain as a “nation of nations” (Moreno, 2001; Máiz, 2005; Domínguez, 2006) or, more recently, as a post-national state (Núñez-Seixas, 2003; Balfour and Quiroga, 2007; Keating, 2008). Many minority (regional, sub-state or peripheral) nationalists hold the view that there is no such thing as a Spanish nation. For them, Spain is merely a state composed of several nations.

Recent developments in the 2000s have revolved around several issues or demands relating to identity and symbols, the articulation of new competences, and the establishment of regional revenue sources, including new criteria for financing the Comunidades Autónomas and regulating regional tax autonomy and fiscal responsibilities. Other matters regard the autonomy of local units, the establishment of regional tax-administration agencies, the reinforcement of the authority of regional supreme courts of justice, new bilateral (central and regional) commissions for policy and financial issues, and provisions for the participation of regional officials in central government and European Union bodies (Colino, 2008; 2009).

Certainly the 2010 ruling of the Constitutional Court on the reform of Catalonia’s 2006 constitutional law, or Estatuto de Autonomía, has had a great impact on the
frustrated expectations of a majority of Catalans who had endorsed the new Statute in a public referendum claiming more self-rule. A centralistic view has prevailed in the Court’s decision, which is composed by a majority of members de facto appointed by Spain’s two main parties. Renewed criticism in Catalonia on the political bias expressed by the Court’s sentence has strengthened notably the political support for independence and has increased disaffection towards central state institutions (although it is to be seen whether such a shift of mood is merely transitory or has a long-lasting impact).

The widespread perception in Catalonia has been one of witnessing the re-issuing of old impositions by the centre on the periphery. The uses of the trágala, by which someone has to accept something which one detests, was profusely put into practice by weak central elites and parties during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The situation is now rather different but the Court’s decision will probably spur centrifugal attitudes in Spain’s process of federalization.

**Summary**

To sum up, both Spain and Russia exhibited radical decentralization in the first years of regime transition. Both states were marked by constitutional and regional asymmetry and in the legislature of both states were lots of ambiguity regarding the status of the regions. In both states’ official documents, regions were claimed to be equal on the one hand, while privileges for some of the regions were outlined, on the other hand. What is most striking, however, is that in the case of Spain the decentralization reforms increased year after year. In contrast, in Russia, with Putin’s coming to power, recentralization was among the first reforms implemented by Putin’s government. The next section will look into one of the explanatory variables in an attempt to address the puzzle of different outcomes across two states—a consolidated decentralized state in Spain and reversible decentralization resulting in a centralized territorial structure in Russia.

**The Role of Political Parties**

Among the various factors which have so far conditioned the different outcomes in the processes of federalization in Russia and Spain, we focus in more detail on the competition of political parties—or the lack thereof—as the one producing the most enduring effects either in a proactive or reactive manner. Their role has been quite divergent as far as their input into both the Russian and Spanish regime transitions. On the relationship between parties and state territorial structure, our analyses take into account not only the very existence, or otherwise of non-state-wide parties but also look at the internal organization of state-wide parties and the conditions of party competition at central and regional levels (Hopkins, 2003; Van Houten, 2007; Hopkins and Van Houten, 2009; Sorens, 2009; Swenden and Maddens, 2009).

**Russia**

The 1990s witnessed a growing number of political parties across Russia and its regions. However, according to some studies, they had little influence in regional and federal politics (Golosov, 2004), or played a minor role in regional-level elections.
over the 1990s. Party politics and regional elections have been also described as a net of “local connections, patronage and elite links” (Hutcheson, 2003: 139–140).

In the beginning of the 2000s, Russian parties continued to penetrate provincial politics “... only weakly and thus do not help to integrate the state and enhance its abilities to govern in the periphery by extension” (Stoner-Weiss, 2002: 125). Indeed, very few governors and members of regional executives would identify themselves with any specific political party and they would seek to stay ‘above’ party politics at the regional level. In contrast to this view, it has been also argued that a transition to a party-based system was actually underway during the 1990s (Panov, 2009). However, due to the absence of a multi-party system in the Soviet Union and because of the very short period of democratic transition, the establishment of the party system was slow and uncertain.

According to extensive opinion polls, Russians are most trustful with members of the executives, whether regional governors, republican presidents, or federal presidents. Legislation, judicial representatives and political parties are considered ‘faceless’ by a majority of the population. This can be explained as the result of a historical legacy dating back from the Tsarist times and strengthened over the Soviet period and shows in a widespread cult of personality. In the post-Soviet period such a legacy has certainly had an impact on democratization and re-federalization.

Following the legislation of Putin implemented at the beginning of the 2000s, the role of political parties became even less important (Gel’man, 2008). According to the new law, political parties could only be all-Russian and should have no less than 10 000 members and branches of 100 or more members in at least half of the 83 regions (Ross, 2009). Inter-regional and regional movements were no longer allowed. As a consequence of this reform, the number of political parties was drastically reduced to only 15. All regional parties were abolished.

Another consequence of Putin’s legislation was the growing influence of national parties and, in particular, the so-called ‘party-of-power’, United Russia, which penetrated regional and local politics (Gel’man and Lankina, 2008). In contrast to developments in the 1990s, the 2000s witnessed the formation of strong political parties as major actors in the electoral and parliamentary arenas, both at the national and subnational levels. However, there has hardly been any competition, as almost all of them “... became effectively controlled by the Kremlin and incorporated into the formal and informal hierarchy of Russia’s government” (Gel’man, 2008: 913). The influence of the ‘party-of- power’ was stretched across the regions of Russia as it took control over regional legislatures. In the context of other reforms, such as substituting regional elections to governors by direct presidential appointments with the approval of regional legislatures, the role of the governmental party has increased. Certainly, United Russia played a key role in the recentralization programme implemented by Putin (Konitzer and Wegren, 2006). With the increasing number of members of United Russia in regional legislatures, central decisions for the composition of regional executives are a formality at the level of the regions in Russia.

Overall, the functioning of Russia’s party system has been rather ambivalent: from high competition between numerous and weak political parties during the 1990s to low competition among a few strong political parties with the dominance of the ‘party-of-power’. Apparently the failure to consolidate a stable party system
in the 1990s helped to create a favourable context for recentralization under Putin’s rule. A crucial reason for such a failure was the lack of democratic accountability by the regional institutions.

**Spain**

Unlike in Russia, in Spain there have been strong regionalist and nationalist parties at the sub-state level since the times of the transition to democracy in the mid-1970s. This has particularly been so in the cases of the Basque Country, Catalonia and, to a lesser degree, Galicia and the Canary Islands. In all these regions, sub-state nationalist parties have often had a prominent role in running both regional and local governments, as do regionalist parties in Aragon, the Balearic Islands, Cantabria and Navarre. This tendency had been increasing and strengthening since the end of 1970 throughout the 1980s. Still it was not linear. Thus, in the 2008 Spanish general elections, 89% of the electorate cast their votes for Spain-wide parties, which captured 93% of the parliamentary seats. Sub-state nationalist and regionalist parties received 7% of the total vote in the country (7% of the seats). Sub-state nationalist and regionalist parties are fairly represented by the electoral system in Spain’s central parliament because they have their vote concentrated in a few constituencies (Moreno and Colino, 2010). However, what is important is that through the first decade of post-Franco’s regime transition, the regional parties were important actors in lobbying for the increased autonomy of the regions and, thus, contributed to the decentralization in Spain and eventually made it irreversible.

Since the end of the 1970s, the internal structuring of Spain-wide parties has been regionalized or federalized. This feature is in line with the plurality of the country and serves to channel regional interests to the political centre, thus playing an integrating role that somehow mitigates centrifugal tendencies in the overall system. Not surprisingly, voting patterns are often incongruent between general elections and regional elections. Both in the Basque Country and Catalonia, a sizeable portion of votes goes for Spain-wide parties in the general elections and for nationalist regional parties in the regional elections. Despite the small number of parliamentary seats these nationalist parties collect in general elections in comparison with the two Spain-wide parties (social-democratic PSOE and conservative PP), their political input in Spanish politics is very important. In fact, the process of federalization in Spain is dependent on contingent electoral factors as the support needed by Spain-wide parties from regional parties. Such support often provides stable parliamentary majorities in the central Spanish Parliament.

Nationalist parties in the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia do aim at maintaining a political differential in the degree of autonomy *vis-à-vis* the rest of the Spanish regions. But other regional parties or federated branches of Spain-wide parties seek not to lose ground and pace with the ‘historical nationalities’. Accordingly, they are ready to claim the same amount of policies and responsibilities and to denounce any ‘privileges’ that the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia would be granted by the central government or central state institutions. The circularity of this political behaviour is mutually reinforcing and effectively prevents any attempt for recentralization (Moreno, 2010).
To sum up, contrasting the role of both national and regional parties across Spain and Russia provides some further conclusions with regard to reversible and irreversible decentralization in these two states. In the first decade of the regime transition in Russia, there had been numerous small weak regional and national political parties without any consolidated electorate. In contrast, in Spain, the regional parties were much stronger and played an important role in consolidating decentralized territorial structure. Another important conclusion drawn from that comparison concerns the role of nation-wide parties. In the Russia of the 1990s, nation-wide parties were multiple and the electorate could not identify and differentiate between them. Eventually, that made it easier for Putin’s government to eliminate potential competitors and to strengthen only one political party of power—United Russia. Since that time, United Russia has seized control over both the parliament and executive branch at the national level (that eventually facilitated consolidation of centralized territorial system). In contrast, in Spain, at the national level there had traditionally been two strong political parties—PSOE and PP—which allowed for a regular turnover of the executive and balanced composition of legislative branches. In its turn, the democratic principle of checks and balances is well implemented and provides for mutually reinforcing decentralization in combination with democratic principles of the states. The question remains as to which scenarios the two states might follow in the future. The next concluding section will attempt to provide some answers to this.

Conclusion

In this final section we envisage future scenarios building on the knowledge of the ‘possible’ and the ‘probable’ from which we deduct a normative vision of the ‘desirable’ (Masini, 1993). This exercise aims at providing interpretations for further research and analyses in the years to come.

Possible

The centralization and the present-day situation in Russia, with a prevalence of the unitary structure, may be regarded as temporary. Not long ago, the highly centralized post-Soviet Russia was radically decentralized. In the early 2000s, Putin’s reforms of the party system were interpreted as a strategy of both creating managed democracy and re-establishing centralized control in post-Soviet Russia (Hutcheson, 2003; Braun, 2011). The second decade after the transition has corroborated the process of centralization of power along with the establishment of Russia-wide parties.

The future of multi-ethnic federalism in Russia would be dependent not only on the policies of (re-) or (de-) centralization pursued by the federal government, but also on those strategies put into action by regional and sub-regional authorities and ethnic groups. How far distinct ethnic minority identities could be protected from primary sub-state nationalities and how far primary non-Russian sub-state nationalities—such as the Muslim republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan and the poorer but culturally distinct republics of Buriatya and Tuva—can reconcile their autonomy drives with the limits set by the federal constitution remains uncertain (Burgess, 2009).
In Spain, renewed claims put forward by Catalan and Basque nationalists have openly put forward the possibility of independence and separation. Secession, however, seems very unlikely in a united Europe, where multi-level governance should aim at satisfying the expressed wishes for more regional home rule according to the European principles of territorial subsidiarity and proximity in political decision making.

The process of federalization in Spain may well witness an intensification of the centrifugal intergovernmental relations, with sub-state nationalisms pressing ahead with a confederal agenda. The main question confronting such an institutional scenario would concern the feasibility that all mono-lingual Castillian-speaking regions in Spain could group together into one political community congruent with their ethno-lingual commonality in order to proceed to a confederation of four ethno-linguistic constituent units (Basque Country, Catalonia, Galicia and the rest of Spain). Such a scenario is possible but rather unlikely, precisely because the effects produced by federalization in the last decades have fortified the institutional and political specificities of each and every one of the 17 Comunidades Autónomas. The capacity of the regional elites and the meso-governments for institution-building and for the production and reproduction of regional identities in Spain has been very important (Martínez-Herrera, 2002).

Probable

Russian decentralization in the 1990s became possible and was accepted by the regional elites as a programme of ‘pork-barrel’ politics and political careerism (Dinino and Orttung, 2005; Stoner-Weiss, 2006). By being co-opted by the ‘party-of-power’, United Russia, leaders in Russia’s regions were instrumental in ‘taming’ the previously recalcitrant regional executives (Konitzer and Wegren, 2006).

The financial crisis unleashed in 2008 could well have an impact on the future development of federal Russia (De Silva Migara et al., 2009). The resulting scenario could persuade the central government to transfer fiscal, economic and political autonomy to regional governments. Decentralization of political control and decentralization of policy responsibilities, as well as the re-establishment of regional elections, could well be a blame-avoidance strategy by the central government in times of economic turbulence. Let us remind ourselves that while regional governors are accountable to the federal president, they are not actually accountable to their regional electors. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the federal president to be accountable for the ‘prosperity’ of the regions. Given the geographical size of the country and the numerous problems and differences among the regions, such a federal responsibility could develop into a heavy burden for a highly centralized Russian presidency. This could decentralize to the regions the powers to deal with those difficult issues requiring decisions.

The enhancement of intergovernmental relations in Spain may go hand in hand with the challenge of making the EU’s multi-level governance an operative reality. A return to a more centralized version of the federalizing Estado de las Autonomías is out of the question. Deficiencies and contentious issues cannot hide the political feeling that the existence of democracy and freedom in Spain is inexorably linked to the legitimacy of power in a federalized form and to the autonomy of the Comunidades Autónomas.
Desirable

In the case of Russia, as well as in Spain, the erosion of federalism could be the result of a lack of democratic legitimacy or of dysfunctions of democratic accountability in all levels of governance (central, regional, local) (Requejo, 2003; Del Pino and Colino, 2010). In any desirable scenario for Russia’s federalization, historical legacy is an essential element to be taken into account (Bermeo, 2002). The highly centralized Soviet Russia and pre-Soviet Tsarist regime combined lasted for centuries. Such a background is bound to have an impact on the likely outcome of Russia’s future federalization.

In all desirable scenarios, federalism in Russia is to be accomplished as an outcome of democracy also at regional or local levels. Along these assumptions, decentralization could be re-started preferably in a bottom-up process. It should be revitalized by regional electorates, non-governmental organizations and by key social mobilizers, such as regional and local mass media.9

Spain’s further federalization could be shaped by various factors, such as the strength of sub-state nationalisms (Basque Country and Catalonia), the vitality of Spanish as a common lingua franca (castellano), or the impact of modern media and all kinds of economic and cultural exchanges among the Spanish regions themselves. The societal inputs of a shared history and other generally accepted symbols, such as the manifestations of Spain’s ‘banal’ nationalism (e.g. mass sports), would also contribute to maintaining a common and plural Spanish identity for the years to come. Much alike future developments in Russia, plural Spain will face a variety of challenges on how to integrate—rather than to assimilate—existing collective identities forged at the various levels of political legitimacy.

Notes

1For some interesting comparative studies of both states in a larger world-wide context, see Requejo (2005), Gel’man (2008), Burgess (2009), Moreno and Colino (2010), Agranoff (1999), Filippov and Schvetsova (1999) and Filippov et al. (2004).
2The key terrorist act officially motivating the re-centralization reforms of Putin was a three-day hostage of a school with about 1100 people in Beslan (September 2004). As a result, 380 people were killed. Beslan is a city in the autonomous Russian Republic of North Ossetia.
3Wyoming is a state of the Union with a population of little more than half a million inhabitants, which compares with California (36.5 million or 12% of the US population, respectively). In India, Uttar Pradesh has a population of 166 million, contrasting with the constituent unit of Sikkim (400,000 inhabitants). The population of Switzerland is around 7.5 million and the federation is composed of 26 cantons.
4According to Census 2002, there are about 160 ethnic indigenous groups in Russia. With the exception of the constitutionally recognized 32 ethnic regions, the rest of the regions are not ethnic (after 2003 six ethnic-based autonomous districts were merged with non-ethnic regions so the number of ethnic federal units is 26). Most of the ethnic groups (also called indigenous people) do not have their own territorial regions as constituent units and live across the borders of the constituent units. Note, as well, an ethnic region may have a very small percentage of the corresponding ethnic group (e.g. in 1989, the Jewish autonomous oblast had only 2% of the Jewish regional population).
5These ten regions are the following: Nenets autonomous okrug (AO) was incorporated into Arkhangelsk oblast; Ust-Orda Buryat into Irkutsk oblast; Koryak AO is situated within Kamchatka oblast; Komi-Permiak within Perm oblast; Chukotka is geographically incorporated within Magadan oblast; the
Agin-Buryat AO is within Chita oblast; both Yevenk and Taimyr are placed within Krasnoyarsk Krai; and Khanty-Mansiisk and Yamala-Nenets were integrated within Tyumen oblast.

6The State Council is a consultative body and meets at least once every three months and is meant to act as an alternative information source for the President of the Russian Federation. The main function of the State Council is to monitor the implementation of federal law, to evaluate legislative bills on presidential request, and to discuss the federal budget and its implementation. The Council has a seven-member presidium comprising leaders from each of the federal districts with rotation of membership every six months (Herd and Aldis, 2002). On other related Putin’s reforms, see also Goode (2004).

7Up to the end of 2000, 74 elections of regional heads of administration had taken place: “… out of 744 candidates, only 7.6 percent identified with a political party” (Busygina and Heinemann-Grüder, 2010: 271).

8Comprehensive data on these attitudes can be consulted at the Levada Centre (http://www.levada.ru/eng/).

9While main television networks are firmly controlled by central authorities, other federal, regional and local media still enjoy great independence and keep on challenging the appointed regional governors, showing a high degree of criticism of the ‘party-of-power’ regime and the current centralization.

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