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Interview – Oleksiy Bondarenko

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Oleksiy Bondarenko is a Teaching Fellow in Politics and Quantitative Methods at the University of Warwick. He joined Politics and International Studies (PAIS) at Warwick in 2022, having previously taught at City, University of London, University College London (UCL) and University of Kent, where he completed his PhD in 2022. His research predominantly focuses on Russian and Ukrainian politics, specifically on the interaction between formal and informal institutions in centre-region relations. He is also affiliated to the Centre for Federal Studies (CFS) at the University of Kent. Oleksiy is currently working on a book provisionally titled *Federal Bargaining in Russia and the Impact of Informal Institutions*, based on his PhD thesis.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I would be probably rather trivial here. Looking retrospectively, I guess first of all the unintentional desire to understand who I am, and my curiosity, prompted me to look for my own answers to many of the questions I had when starting my first degree. Although I have failed so far, and many of the questions are still without an answer, in the process I found interesting people, friends, mentors and insightful readings. I don't have a particular episode or a book that prompted a significant shift in my thinking. For me, it was probably a slow process of transformation, re-definition and re-conceptualization, shaped by a combination of intellectual stimuli, that fuelled my interest and led me to focus on my area of research.

Is it still necessary, as you wrote in 2016, for Russia to develop 'a new set of cultural, political and economic instruments' to maintain their position in Central Asia?

I was younger and probably far more naïve. It is now (as it probably was in 2016) clear that the current Russian regime is unable to develop new tools of foreign policy towards what was commonly perceived as the former soviet space. Obviously, a lot of things have changed since 2016 and the Russian position in Central Asia has been deteriorating since 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and fuelled the war in Donbas. It should be also noted that what we usually call Central Asia, is a very complex region including five republics with very different domestic regimes, available natural resources, and foreign policy objectives and tools.

Although Central Asian states adopted a more independent and, in some cases (e.g., Uzbekistan) multi-vector foreign policy since their independence, 2014 was an important signal for regional leaders. This is true especially in the 'cultural' sphere where the process of 'nation-building', demographic change and a consequent loosening of ties with Russia only accelerated, especially in the diminishing importance of the Russian language as the medium of communication. Russia was able to preserve some of its economic leverage and political ties to regional leaders. However, even in this sphere, the leadership change in some of the Central Asian countries, such as for instance Kazakhstan, meant a partial reconfiguration of previously established relations.

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The Eurasian Economic Union, that came into force in January 2015 after a long journey, did not develop a significant institutional framework and no other regional player beyond Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU, despite pressure from Moscow. Obviously, the growing importance of China as a regional player and security provider with far more significant economic and financial resources, hand in hand with the worsening relations between Russia and the 'West' have been important variables in limiting Russian influence in the region. Despite this, Russia remained an important player and a 'security provider' for regional regimes. In January 2022, a few weeks before the invasion of Ukraine, mass anti-regime protests in Kazakhstan intertwined with intra-regime elite confrontation, they were 'successfully' cracked down on by the intervention of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Russian forces, called in by president Tokayev.

What are the effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Russian influence in Central Asia, from the perspective of Russia's foreign policy and the states of Central Asia?

Although Russian foreign policy is not my main area of research, I would say that the invasion of Ukraine only accelerated the slow deterioration of Russian influence in the region. Hit by an unprecedented degree of sanctions against a large economy, weakened politically and isolated internationally (at least in terms of its relations with the 'West') Russia's influence in Central Asia is today at its lowest level. Although the Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's public complaints against Putin's lack of respect for the countries of Central Asia is nothing more than anecdotal evidence, it is still illustrative of the changing context.

Kazakhstan, the country with the most significant (along with Kyrgyzstan) Russian minority, bordering with Russia and a key member of the EEU, is a clear example. Kazakh authorities not only refused to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine and pushed back publicly against territorial claims made by Russia in Ukraine, but also started to develop new forms of cooperation with the 'West'. Today, even the well-developed economic tools used by the Kremlin to pressure Kazakh (and, more broadly, regional) leadership appears less effective. Since February 2022 Russia cut supplies on the Caspian Pipeline Consortium – the main export route for Kazakh oil to international markets – Kazakhstan has relied increasingly on alternative routes, via Azerbaijan, thus limiting Moscow's leverage. Kazakhstan resisted pressure of further integration within the structure of the Eurasian Economic Union and declared officially that it would abide by US and EU sanctions against Russia, thus limiting any circumvention. Furthermore, even in the cultural sphere some initiatives by the Kazakh authorities sought to limit the broadcast of Russian propaganda channels in the country.

Militarily, with the war in Ukraine draining personnel and equipment, Russia's relative capacity for playing the role of security provider also diminished over the last year. Whilst still preserving military bases in both countries, with new relevant clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan along their shared border in 2022, Russia was not able to play any significant role in the resolution of the dispute. Even though both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the economically most dependent Central Asian countries on Russia.

The war in Ukraine, paradoxically, represents an opportunity for Central Asia. Although its countries can't and don't want to cut all the ties with Russia, the weakening of Russia's economy and its international isolation translate into more leeway in bargaining favourable economic and political conditions, especially now that energy sanctions force the Kremlin to look for alternative export markets. Some analysts, for instance, called the Russian invasion of Ukraine the beginning of the new era for Central Asia, an era in which the main regional actors would be able to play a more independent role in the absence of the so-called regional hegemon.

How does authoritarianism in Russia work alongside its federal structure?

It's a very complicated story. On the one hand, one could argue that authoritarian tendencies at the subnational level in the 90s affected the trajectory of the development of the Russian regime. On the other hand, it's undeniable that the process of centralization started in the early 2000s, which was pursued through formal and informal means, deeply affected subnational governance and the federal structure of the country. In other words, it is a bi-directional relationship that consolidated a de jure federal but a de facto unitary framework, making Russia a "federation without federalism". Through the consolidation of a party of power, co-optation of subnational elites, manipulation of the

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electoral process and the complex system of hierarchical integration of several levels of governance, the Kremlin successfully de-politicized gubernatorial elections weakening Russian governors, who became, in practice, representatives of the centre in the regions rather than independent regional actors. This obviously undermines 'good governance' at all levels.

However, this system is far from stable, as demonstrated by the progressive change of informal criteria for the selection of regional head executives and several waves and patterns of cadre rotation. The appointment of an increasing number of outsiders (governors without any connection with the region they are appointed to) and the shortening timespan for regional governors have two contradictory outcomes. On the one hand this consolidated Moscow's control over the provinces. On the other it accelerated competition and conflict for power and resources at the regional level. The overreliance on informal rules and personal interaction between central and local authorities, elite networks and within the regional polity, paradoxically, affected the capacity of the centre to effectively exercise control over the regions.

As I argue in my dissertation, the paradox of Russia's centralized federal system is associated with the inherent weaknesses of regional governors that makes them unable to function as an effective transmission belt between regional and federal interests. This leaves space for the operation of a plethora of different interest groups and networks within the regional polity, tempering vertical integration and control. In the progressively de-institutionalized and authoritarian system control by the centre is mainly exercised through manual interventionism and short-term risk aversion tactics. That renders federal relations more susceptible to the pressure of endogenous and exogenous shocks. The prolonged period of economic stagnation and a series of unpopular reforms initiated in 2018 (and, from 2020, exacerbated by the impact of the global pandemic) provided fertile ground for the re-emergence of the tension characterizing centre-region relations. Not surprisingly, on the eve of the 2018 pension reform that underlined the increasing popular dissatisfaction with the economic status quo, the inefficiency of the managerial model adopted by the Kremlin in dealing with the subnational level of governance emerged in full swing, further confirmed by the increasing regional autonomy granted by Moscow in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thus, it appears plausible to expect that with shrinking economic resources, endogenous and exogenous shocks and the unpredictability of the war in Ukraine, in the long-run the level of intra and inter-elite competition will only increase, contributing to the further destabilization of the federal process, political dynamics within the regions and the overall position of Russian governors within the system. While in the short-term, stability and control might be ensured with increasing coercion and ad hoc interventionism, in the long run any relaxation of the federal centre might trigger unpredictable scenarios at the subnational level.

What are you currently working on?

I'm currently working on the informal aspects of centre-regions interaction in Russia and Ukraine. In other words, the role of patronage and elite networks and its impact on the relationship between the centre and the regions and on the regional autonomy. Specifically, in Ukraine the process of administrative decentralization initiated in 2015 slowly reshaped the pattern of interaction empowering local elites and elected mayors. I'm currently looking at the link between decentralization, consolidation of local networks and the resilience that the local elite showed when facing the Russian invasion started a year ago.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

I don't have much advice and I would probably need some myself. What helps me to navigate the obstacles and challenges, whether it is working on research projects or facing multiple rejections on the job market, is having friends that remind me to keep a sense of perspective. I think being able to remember that there is life outside of your teaching, research and administrative duties is a very important skill, especially for an early career scholar. It also helps to preserve enthusiasm and gives you the willpower to keep asking questions and keep learning from mentors, students and colleagues.