“What Happened to Russian Federalism?:
Federal Reform under Putin and Medvedev”*

Chang, Duckjoon**

1. Introduction

The Constitution of the Russian Federation unequivocally identifies itself with a federal state declaring as follows: ‘The Russian Federation – Russia shall be a democratic, federative, law-based state with a republican form of government’(Article 1). Indeed, in terms of constitutional arrangements, there is no denying that Russia is a federative system. However, in the minds of many scholars and commentators both inside and outside Russia a simple but important question may arise: At the moment, is Russia a federal state?

For instance, in the aftermath of introduction of the law on the appointment of governors of 2004, some protestors in Russia appealed to the Constitutional Court, arguing that the law violated their “constitutional right to live in a federal state.”1) Also, a commentator maintains that after experiencing political chaos due to the fragmentation of state power during the 1990s, Russia came to introduce a leviathan, a strong political entity, to overcome such a state of nature. However, such a new leviathan, unlike the Thomas Hobbes’ idea, has not been created from below through individuals’ consents

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** Professor, School of International & Area Studies, Kookmin University.
and social contract, but from above through contrivances by a handful of political elites in the center.  

Russia for now is mostly believed to be almost a unitary state.

On the other hand, there exists a slightly different interpretation of the nature of Russian federalism. That is, from a legal view point, some commentators maintain that Russia remains federal since its legal processes preserve the federal character of the state and the federal Constitution remained virtually unchanged since its adoption in 1993.

This paper delineates changes in Russian federalism under Putin and Medvedev. Given that federalism is territorial, spatial distribution of state power, this paper focuses on the balance of power between the different levels of governments and its dynamics during the Putin and Medvedev period. And also, this study looks into the similarities and differences between Putin’s federal policies and those of Medvedev.

Taking the general principles of federalism and the spirit of the Russian Constitution into consideration, this paper raises the question of how we can evaluate reforms on federalism and policies on the center-periphery relationship. Based on the above research question, this paper is designed to analyze the federal reform (or centralization campaign) by Putin’s and Medvedev’s positions and policies regarding federalism and center-regional relations. In particular, in search of the possibilities for changes in the center-periphery relations in the foreseeable future in Russia, this paper addresses Medvedev’s policy on federalism in the context of his ambitious plan for establishing a new ‘power vertical’ through implementation of modernization project. And thus, the prospects for Russian federalism in connection with the changes in the political leadership and political landscape in Russia will be touched on briefly in conclusion.