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RUSSIAN FEDERALISM AND A NEW SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY



EVGENIY M. BUKHVALD

Institute of Economics, Russian Academy of Sciences
Moscow, Russian Federation

e-mail: buchvald@mail.ru

ORCID: 0000-0001-9892-5930; ResearcherID: Q-7131-2017

The adoption of a new Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation (SDS-2024) at the end of 2024 did not justify the hopes that this development would fully compensate for the lack of a national document defining a strategic vision for the prospects of its federal structure. SDS-2024 contains a number of interesting and important initiatives in this area, but they are not specific enough and do not form a system-wide vision of the future of Russian federalism. The article analyzes some current issues related to federal relations in Russia and possible options for improving federal relations in the course of economic, socio-political and institutional reforms. The study is based on a critical analysis of documents of strategic planning at the federal level, institutional and instrumental support for the implementation of the federal spatial development policy. It is justified that the currently formally positioned set of institutions and instruments of spatial development (macro regions, geostrategic territories, promising centers of economic growth, etc.) lacks sufficient internal consistency and comprehensiveness; their place in the economic and legal mechanism of federal relations and regional development management has not been definitively determined, as well as targets and mechanisms for their implementation. In turn, we can realize the potential of key settlements only if we develop adequate forms and mechanisms for their integration into agglomeration processes in Russia's regions, and if there are conditions and sources for ensuring their self-development as economic centers for the adjacent territories. It is shown that achieving a balance of priorities for the leveling and economic growth of Russian regions is possible only on the basis of the development and implementation of a long-term strategy of Russian federalism and its spatial characteristics. Scientific novelty of the research is related not only to the analysis carried out, but also to the priorities developed by the author for the implementation of this strategy, taking into account the challenges facing the country.

Federal relations, spatial development, regulation and its institutions, territorial development, local self-government.

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Federal relations – a key element of spatial regulation and territorial development policy

In the last quarter of the century, despite the significant complication of internal and external factors in the development of Russian statehood, there persists an idea that it is the system of federal relations that remains the leading condition for preserving integrity and maintaining economic and social stability. This position remains dominant even against the background of a noticeable reduction in the number of publications on this topic in the scientific literature (Valentin, 2025; Korolkov, 2025). We can note that at present many issues that had previously actively attracted the attention of Russian and foreign researchers have practically fallen out of sight: the relationship between symmetry and asymmetry of federal relations (the contradiction between formal symmetry and deep economic asymmetry of relations), the special role of national-state and administrative-territorial entities in the federation, the relationship between the constitutional, legislative and contractual foundations of Russian federalism; the relationship between the trends of federalist centralism and decentralization, etc. Indeed, this situation creates the impression that the range of the most pressing problems related to the development of Russian federalism has already been largely exhausted and constructively regulated. Moreover, there is an opinion that much of the interpretation of Russian federalism is now generally inclined toward the purely formal side of the matter, which has no direct projection on current processes in society and the state. This is especially true of the periodic updating of the institutional and legal framework of federal relations (Korotina, 2021; Odintsova, 2022; Institutional Framework..., 2023; Buz, 2025; Kuznetsova, 2025; Uvarov, 2023; Shvetsov, 2024).

But, of course, this is far from being true. Russian federalism still contains many elements of traditional formal legal structures. However, the new conditions of the country's political and socio-economic development

naturally give rise to new challenges, and they should also be in the field of science in terms of understanding their essence and finding ways to solve them. In this case, it is appropriate to recall Vladimir Lenin's remark he made in his article "The importance of gold now and after the complete victory of Socialism": "The best way to celebrate the anniversary of a great revolution is to concentrate attention on its unsolved problems" (Lenin, 1921, p. 221).

Thus, despite the significant complication of internal and external factors in the development of the Russian Federation, there is a firm belief that it is the system of federal relations that remains the leading condition for preserving the integrity of the Russian state and maintaining its economic and social stability. However, today it is clearly premature to talk about an exhaustive solution to these problems of the development of the principles of Russian federalism. Of course, the range of the most pressing issues of Russian federalism does not remain unchanged, and many of them are still unresolved or are being filled with new content over time. The paper attempts to identify problematic aspects of the further evolution of federal relations in Russia, which are still important for the sustainable socio-economic development of the country, its regions and individual territories, primarily through the use of strategic planning and management methods.

Federal relations as an object of regulation

In the Russian context, federal relations are the basis for the formation and functioning of the entire system of institutions of public power, as well as the "vertical" of strategic planning, including spatial strategizing. The problems of federal relations, and in a narrower sense, the spheres of practical actualization of the economic and legal mechanism of federal relations as a whole, naturally find themselves at the center of a wide range of reform processes in the country, determine their sequence and final effectiveness (Valentey, 2025). Many foreign researchers also consider various aspects and problems of the transformation of federal

relations in different countries, including from the point of view of the development of institutional structures (Lockner, 2013; Sosar, 2018; Chauhan, Mohanty, 2024; Demerev et al., 2025), the impact of these transformations on regional and spatial development (Hoffman, 1981; Dudek, Zademach, 2023).

However, we think that by now it has not been possible to form a strategic vision of ways to solve the most significant problems of Russian federalism, and there are many unresolved tasks in this direction. In order to overcome this situation, over the past quarter century, attempts have been made repeatedly to form some kind of long-term concept or strategy of Russian federalism, even within the framework of various international projects. Programs for the development of fiscal federalism have been repeatedly adopted. Currently, there is such a document as the “Fundamentals of the state policy of regional development of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025”¹, which is, of course, outdated and largely coincides with the Spatial Development Strategy of Russia up to 2025 (SDS-2019). Some aspects of spatial development are reflected in Presidential Decree 309 “On national development goals of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030 and for the future up to 2036” dated May 7, 2024 (Decree 309)². Finally, at the end of 2024, a new Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030 with a forecast up to 2036 (SDS-2024)³ was adopted, and a plan for its implementation was approved in August 2025.

However, in the case of SDS-2019, the document that was adopted could hardly be fully considered an “implementation plan”. Rather, it was a plan for the preparation of regulatory, methodological, programmatic and other documents responsible for the implementation of SDS-2019. The specific expected results of this work were not reflected in the plan.

Approximately the same situation is seen today with the plan for the implementation of SDS-2024. It is noteworthy that in both cases, the documents provided for annual monitoring of the execution of both the strategy itself and its implementation plan. Nevertheless, in fact, the exhaustive results of such monitoring, if prepared, were not made public.

These and other documents seem to “paint” a picture of the development of Russian federalism and its prospects from different angles, but they still do not provide a holistic view of the problem, its legal, institutional and economic components. The results are the continued vagueness in the presentation of the fundamental principles and objectives of the state policy of regional development, weak reasoning in defining the main institutions and tools of this policy, as well as their specific tasks. The federal policy of regional development and spatial regulation, the quintessence of the economic and legal mechanism, is still characterized by insufficient institutional and even weak conceptual elaboration and a very clichéd target orientation. This is noticeable even when defining the target function of SDS-2024 itself, namely, “the formation of a balanced territorial organization of the economy.” But what does “territorial organization of the economy” mean? Is this its administrative-territorial structure in terms of subjects of federal statehood? Or something else? Which structure of the economy in this case should be considered “spatially balanced”; how and by what means is it achieved? Is there a direct relationship between the balance of the territorial (spatial) organization of the economy and the evolution of the federal structure of Russian statehood?

The situation of uncertainty in this area is inevitably projected onto key institutions and tools of regional development policy. Let us take, for example, such a fundamentally

¹ On approval of the fundamentals of the state policy of regional development of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025: Presidential Decree 13, dated 16.01.2017. Available at: <http://government.ru/docs/all/110051/>

² On national development goals of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030 and for the future up to 2036: Presidential Decree 309, dated 07.05.2024. Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/73986?erid=2SDnjc45hpG>

³ Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030 with a forecast up to 2036 (approved by RF Government Resolution 4146-r, dated 28.12.2024). Available at: <http://static.government.ru/media/files/ttXJCZ4PN7bmTrRgcuPwoIQA8SYR91B.pdf>

important institution as a geostrategic territory – a territory (as defined in the SDS) that is essential for ensuring territorial integrity and national security, the development of which requires additional resources due to specific living conditions and economic activities (Resolution 4146). However, it is very difficult to “capture” and measure the essence of this “essential meaning” in practice. It is fair to ask the question: do we even have territories that do not meet these criteria, i.e. territories that are not essential for ensuring territorial integrity and national security, the development of which does not require additional resources, etc.? In fact, such empty definitions make it extremely difficult to design and implement state policy in the field of federal relations and spatial development.

In this regard, we would like to focus on a number of problems in the system of federal relations that need to be consistently addressed today. First of all, attention is constantly being drawn to the inextricable link between the processes of spatial development and the management system at all levels of public authority with the elaboration of the economic and legal mechanism of federalism, with the possibility and even the need for a new stage of federal reform. At the same time, we are not talking about reform as a series of significant but one-time transformations, but about a system of conceptually meaningful, logically interrelated transformations with well-defined quantitative and qualitative criteria. Only such a reform can provide a reliable foundation for the state policy of spatial development. In fact, this is determined by the fact that federalism and federal relations represent the main institutional and legal “shell” of spatial development and regulation policy. Federalism formalizes the spatial and managerial structure of the state and government, including, of course, the system of local self-government (Bukhvald et al., 2023). Today, in our opinion, this structure seems to be overly complicated and difficult to manage due to the lack of clear certainty about each of the links, in particular in terms of their special place and target function in the economic mechanism of federal relations.

Currently, the spatial structure of the Russian economy is represented by various territorial entities, which in one way or another act as objects of state regulation, namely macro regions, federal districts, geostrategic territories (subjects of the Federation and individual municipalities). There is also a whole palette of “promising centers of economic growth”; there are agglomerations, including about 40 large and largest (Manaeva, Melnikov, 2025). The Government of the Russian Federation has designated about 2 thousand (2,160 units) so-called core settlements; there are 321 single-industry towns; 14 federal science cities; there are approximately 800 small towns. There are 53 federal special economic zones (SEZs), of which 34 are industrial, 7 are technical and innovative, 10 are tourist and recreational, and two are port zones, and there are also several dozen regional SEZs. There are several “free” economic zones (in the new constituent entities of the Russian Federation), one free port (as part of two municipal districts – Vanino and Sovgavan). Almost 100 outstripping socio-economic development territories (OSEDTs) have been created, and about half of them are in single-industry towns.

At the same time, however, it is clearly noticeable that this formally positioned set of institutions of spatial development lacks sufficient internal consistency. Its individual elements do not have the clarity of the objectives and their own special mechanisms for their practical implementation. This makes it necessary to assess the adequacy of the spatial development management system in a federal-type state, the main question of which is whether this system of relations itself is an object of centralized regulation, both from a formal point of view and from an economic point of view. We believe that such regulation is not only possible, but also necessary, and it should be carried out from the perspective of the integrity of these relations, their real symmetry, consistency, transparency, effective governance, balance of centralization and decentralization, in other words, the socio-economic space should be managed based on a clear definition of the relative functional role

of all its members. There is no alternative to their place in the system of federal relations as a whole.

So far, this has not always been possible. Here, for example, is an old problem. Documents on federal relations and regional development policy constantly emphasize (we almost quote) “a differentiated approach to the implementation of state support measures for regions and municipalities, depending on their socio-economic and geographical features.” This is probably the right and even the only possible approach to regional development policy. But it remains unclear how this approach is combined with the constitutionally established norm on the equality of all subjects of the Federation in their relationship with the federal center. What, then, is the fundamental meaning of this equality? Where is the line beyond which this equality becomes a formality?

Here, one might say, is a “fatal” contradiction in the policy of spatial regulation. If the uniformity of regional development is ensured, it means that gaps in their socio-economic development are preserved. If the rates are differentiated, it means that there is a danger that in the future the gaps in the socio-economic development of the regions may both narrow and widen (Voroshilov, 2023; Uskova, 2025).

Another example: SDS-2019 announced a system of so-called “macro regions” and “geostrategic territories” of several types, as well as promising centers of economic growth. However, the specific meaning and functional role of these institutions, their place in the economic and legal mechanism of federal relations and regional development management have not been practically specified. In particular, in SDS-2024, the institute of macro regions turned out to be practically ignored. It simply adds the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation and its new subjects as federal districts and macro regions of the country without any reasoning.

Another example, perhaps not the most striking, but quite telling, is the launch in 2020 of the institute of the so-called “federal territories” (Pichkanin, 2023). When creating

the Sirius Federal Territory, it was declared that this was a very promising undertaking that would be repeated productively in various regions of Russia. However, this did not happen, the federal territory remained the only one, although this institution itself received a constitutional status, which neither federal districts, nor macro regions, nor geostrategic territories have. But most importantly, there is no answer to the simplest question: why all this fuss with the federal territory? In our opinion, under the current conditions, the important tasks assigned to the Sirius territory could well be solved within the framework of existing territorial management structures, in particular on the basis of the model of the special economic zone that has already been tested in Russian realities.

The most recent example of institutional innovations introduced without serious socio-economic motivation can be found in the system of backbone settlements. The positive side of this practice lies in current attempts to restore, taking into account the experience of previous years, the principle of reliance or priority as one of the important regulators of the formation of institutions of spatial development, primarily at the regional and sub-regional levels. In turn, the negative context is seen in the current absence of a detailed study of the conditions and mechanisms for the practical implementation of the principle of support within the framework of certain situations of spatial development, including taking into account the diversity of regions and territories of Russia.

Indeed, the new Strategy places the backbone settlements system among the two most significant priorities for determining long-term guidelines for spatial changes in the Russian economy. However, a number of the statements available here raise some doubts. Thus, modern foreign and Russian experience shows that the key role in spatial development in the modern world is still played by large settlements, agglomerations, megacities, etc., and not by those settlements that in our view can be classified as “backbone” in urban or rural

areas. In this sense, the “advance” issued by the SDS to the backbone settlements institution can be realized only when developing adequate forms and mechanisms for integrating backbone settlements into agglomeration processes in the regions of Russia, including as “pillars” in relation to small settlements. Further, we should note that in the interpretation of the reproductive role of backbone settlements, the SDS clearly places excessive emphasis on solving social problems of settlements. One way or another, this motivation is addressed to 1,548 of the 2,160 total backbone settlements in the framework of the items on the Unified List.

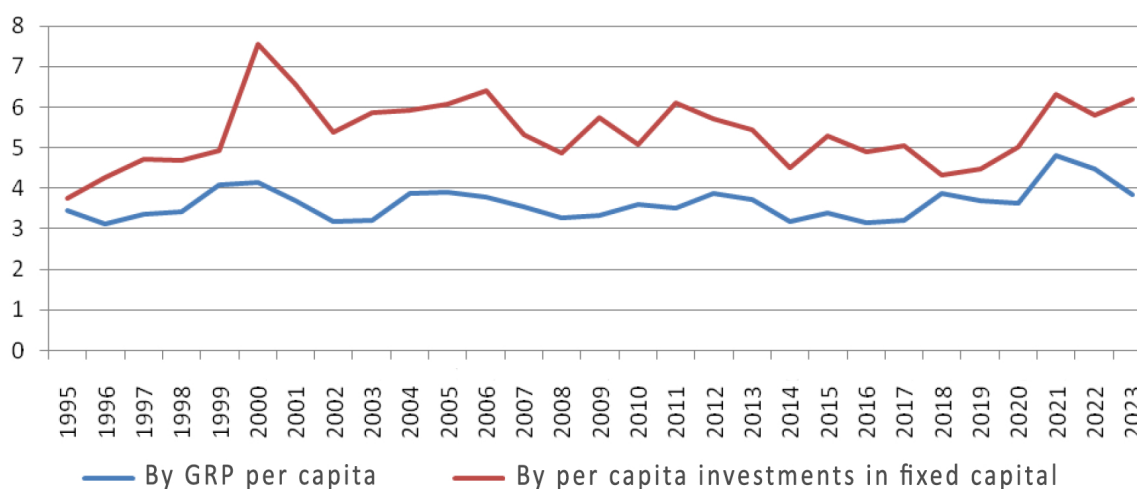
As a result, the priority of achieving the conditions and sources of ensuring the prerequisites for “self-development” of the relevant circle of municipalities is unjustifiably “taken out” of the tasks solved at the backbone settlements level. Outside of active investment and economic work, the function of such settlements as “backbone settlements” acquires a formal character of transferring financial resources to the needs of “patronized” municipalities, including those of a social nature. Today, it is obvious that the solution of the entire set of tasks of spatial economic development is impossible without further clarification of the strategic prospects and objectives of Russian local self-government and the subsequent revision of Federal Law 33-FZ “On the general principles of organizing

local self-government in a unified system of public authority”, dated March 20, 2025.

Federalism and the problem of economic space unity

The measure of the impact that the model of Russian federalism has on the overall spatial development of the country and the productive forces in its regions is extremely important. In our opinion, this measure is determined by both the overall growth rate of the national economy and the trend of interregional economic differentiation. Our research, which we have already written about earlier, shows that there is no trend of a constant strengthening or reduction of interregional differentiation in Russia (*Fig.*).

The data in the Figure indicate that over the past quarter of the century, the indicators of the differentiation under consideration have remained relatively stable: interregional gaps have not decreased, but they have not increased significantly either. At the same time, until about 2018–2019, there was a trend of a wave-like change in this differentiation (an increase in gaps during the period of economic growth; a decrease during the period of stagnation and recession). However, this trend was subsequently significantly distorted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then by sanctions against Russia due to their specific impact on the economy of individual regions of



Decile coefficients of economic differentiation of Russian regions by GRP and investments per capita

Source: calculations by Candidate of Sciences (Economics) A.V. Kolchugina.

the country. But in general, the level of spatial differentiation in the country's economy is still not only high, but also continues to grow.

Thus, according to SDS-2024, the share of the nine regions that are economic leaders in the Russian Federation (including the Moscow and Saint Petersburg urban agglomerations) in the total GRP of Russia increased from 50.2% in 2016 to 53.2% in 2022. Such differentiation remains a barrier to integration processes in the national economy, including its development as a single innovation space. It looks like the differentiation is increasing due to the steady advancement of a limited group of leading regions. And this is undoubtedly a threat to the sustainable economic growth of the country based on high national competitiveness.

Strictly speaking, there is no sufficient evidence that the reduction of interregional differentiation is an obligatory consequence and indicator of the productive work of the economic mechanism of federal relations, although a direct connection with solving the problem of maintaining a single economic space is clearly visible here. A single space is not an exclusive feature of the economy of federal countries, but in these countries, the achievement and maintenance of such a space is associated with a number of additional conditions, both economic and non-economic. We can conclude that achieving the goals of positive economic alignment is one of the most important criteria for the effective functioning of the entire economic and legal mechanism of federal relations, both at the federal and sub-federal levels.

But at the same time, there is an obvious contradiction for the state policy of spatial development. Thus, with the focus of state regional policy on the uniform development of the subjects of the Federation and, consequently, with the inevitable "shrinkage" of the relevant incentives for their "self-development", a consistent reduction of interregional gaps is impossible. If this development is going on unevenly, then the interregional gaps can either decrease or increase. This means that in designing a state policy for regional development, it is necessary

to rely on the principle of balancing its main objectives – betting on the further outstripping development of the leading regions and special measures aimed at "pulling up" regions that are steadily lagging behind in terms of socio-economic development (Katonin, 2024). So far, there is clearly a "draw" in this strategic party, since there has been no trend of a constant strengthening or reduction of interregional economic differentiation in Russia over the past two decades.

The complexity of this problem lies in the fact that the origins of such differentiation are objective, and the possibilities of overcoming (leveling) it obviously have economically meaningful boundaries. As noted by one of the researchers, interregional economic differentiation exists in all countries of both the federal and unitary types. And the question is not how to eliminate it completely, because it seems impossible and wrong, but in what framework and by what means this differentiation is regulated.

Achieving a balance of priorities for regional alignment and economic growth is possible only through the development and implementation of a long-term strategy for Russian federalism and its spatial characteristics. Earlier, we and many our colleagues expressed the idea that this role could be fulfilled by a system of supplements to the SDS. But now we have to admit that this position is erroneous. An independent targeted strategy for the development of the economic, legal and institutional foundations of Russian federalism is urgently needed. Along with strategic documents on local self-government, this will form the institutional and legal basis for Russia's spatial development policy, allow for a clearer structuring of public authorities and determine the most appropriate framework for socio-economic alignment at the interregional and intraregional levels. We believe that these documents should focus on the following key issues, systematically reflecting all aspects of modern public administration practice in modern Russia.

1. Clarifying the institutional and legal structure of Russian statehood, specifying the

functions of each of the institutions operating in this system based on the practice of institutional strategizing. All districts, special territories and other institutions should be “inscribed” into the structure of the Russian federal statehood, and not listed somewhere “sideways” from it.

2. Clarifying the status and role of sub-federal institutions of territorial organization and governance.

3. Clarifying the framework and procedures for state regulation of the local government system with a clearer and more detailed description of the regulatory powers of the federation and its subjects.

4. A new model of Russian fiscal federalism with an emphasis on the independence of regions and self-sufficiency of municipalities.

5. Including the main components of federal relations in the range of objects of strategic planning practice (institutional strategizing). Substantiating federal relations and their components simultaneously as an object and a tool of strategic planning.

6. Identification and continuous maintenance of the prerequisites for the effective functioning of the “vertical” of strategic planning based on the coordination of development strategies of all territories included in the region.

7. Special attention should be paid to territorial entities that, to one degree or another,

act as subjects of centralized regulation in the field of housing and communal services, social services, etc.

Conclusion

One can hope that currently the attention of economics to the sphere of federal relations is being restored, including in the context of spatial development issues. The result of such work should be a document or, more precisely, a system of documents reflecting the long-term goals of this area of public policy and the means to achieve them. Formally, such a block of documents is still present today (SDS; Fundamentals of the state policy of regional development). However, at the moment, its components are not agreed upon meaningfully, even with regard to concepts such as spatial development and regulation; they do not have a single goal-setting methodology, a single tool base.

We believe that the required system of strategic planning documents at the level of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation should contain such blocks as strategies for the socio-economic and spatial development of the region, including the main directions for the development of local self-government, as well as the role of sub-federal institutions of territorial organization and management in this territory; the strategy of regional security (including its spatial aspect).

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evgeniy M. Bukhvald – Doctor of Sciences (Economics), Professor, Institute of Economics, Russian Academy of Sciences (32, Nakhimovsky Avenue, Moscow, 117218, Russian Federation; e-mail: buchvald@mail.ru)