

Oleg Gorbachev

(Ural Federal University, Ekaterinburg, Russia)

Local Government in the Early Soviet Society: Evolution and Characteristics of Territorial Organization*

*Samorząd lokalny w społeczeństwie wczesnoradzieckim:
Ewolucja i charakterystyka organizacji terytorialnej*

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the factors that determined the structure and competence levels of local governmental bodies in Soviet Russia between 1918 and the early 1930s and the major trends in their evolution. It is demonstrated that the utopian ideas of the Bolshevik leaders gradually lost their relevance and were replaced by more pragmatic, bureaucratic decision-making aimed at solving practical problems.

The government had to address several issues at once – establish political control over the vast territory of the country, ensure economic development of the regions, and realize the principle of national self-determination. Therefore, the process in which the administrative-territorial infrastructure evolved was riddled with contradictions and comprised three main stages. The conclusion is drawn that it was the logic of the country's previous development and the specific nature of the Soviets as bodies of government that led to the authoritarian administrative principle taking precedence over the economic and national paradigms.

Key words: Russian Revolution, territory, local government, Soviets, *sovmarkhoz*, national development

Starting from 1917 and until the early 1930s, one of the key areas of the Bolsheviks' state-building efforts was organization of the administrative infrastructure on the territory of the former Russian Empire. This process was shaped by the ideas of Vladimir Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks about

* This research is supported by the grant of the Russian Science Foundation (project № 16-18-10106 "The Early Soviet Society As a Social Project: Concepts, Mechanisms of Realization, and Results").

the place and role of the state in socialist society (Lenin described these ideas in his seminal work *The State and Revolution* [1917]). Apart from the theoretical considerations, there were also practical issues that required immediate attention of the Bolshevik government. One more factor that determined the process of state building was the vastness and diversity of the geographical territory that this government had to control. In the first decade of the Soviet rule, the utopian ideologemes, such as “dictatorship of the proletariat”, “World Revolution” and “self-determination of nations”, which were widely used to organize local administrative systems, were often combined with and at later stages were completely replaced by more pragmatic considerations, for example, how to ensure economic development of the regions and to establish centralized administrative control over them.

The country’s administrative-territorial framework reflected the changes in the central government’s approaches. The Bolsheviks’ attitude to the administrative bodies inherited from the previous regime changed from complete rejection to varying degrees of acceptance and continuity of structures. Therefore, it is impossible to evaluate the local administrative system by reducing it to the simple official formula “All Power to the Soviets!” or by following the anti-Bolshevik ideas about the pervasive dictatorship of the ruling party.

To describe the local administrative system in this period we need to take into account to what extent these institutions met the ideological expectations of the ruling party; their powers and their limitations; the degree of their autonomy from the centre; the characteristics of the Soviets as representative bodies; and the competing principles of collegiality and undivided authority in the work of different government bodies.

The slogan “All Power to the Soviets!”, which was particularly popular right after the Bolshevikization of the Soviets in September, was used with more caution after the October events, since not all Soviets were dominated by the Bolsheviks. Furthermore, the left SRs, who were allies of the Bolsheviks at that time, were against Sovietization of the local administrative framework and believed that *zemstvos* and town self-government could successfully cope with their functions¹. Unwilling to lose the initiative to their “allies”, the Bolsheviks used military-revolutionary committees and similar organizations in order to establish control over regions. It should be noted here that this policy had started to take shape even before the Bolshevik coup. In the summer of 1917, the Soviets attempted

¹ V.N. Zakharov (ed.), *Territoriya i vlast v novoy i noveyshey istorii Rossiyskogo gosudarstva*, Moskva 2012, p. 143.

to delimit the Western region as a separate administrative and territorial unit by merging areas in the Western front and Minsk *guberniya*². It was evident, however, that the Bolsheviks could count on soldiers' support only to a certain extent, that is, while the war was in progress, and only in the areas that were located close to the frontline.

After their Bolshevization, the Soviets were assigned the priority status. It was assumed that these bodies would not copy the previously existing administrative structures of *guberniyas* and *uezds*. After the left SRs were expelled from the government in July 1918, the Bolsheviks aimed at eliminating *zemstvo*s and town self-government institutions in order to ensure the monopoly of the Soviets in the regions.

The problem that the Bolshevik government faced was that its leaders lacked clear vision of how the Soviets were to function in the period of peace, more specifically, how to balance such priorities as political control, economic organization, and realization of the nations' right for self-determination (in national-territorial units).

In the atmosphere of general hopes for the soon-to-come "proletarian revolution" world-wide, there was a lot of uncertainty about the role of the Soviets. The situation was perceived as temporary and it was unclear what form or forms local government should take. Therefore, local administrative bodies enjoyed a certain degree of freedom in their decision-making. Starting from December 1917, when the Supreme Council of National Economy was established, *sovnarkhozes* (regional economic councils) started to be created all over the country. This process coincided with the nationalization of industry. *Sovnarkhozes* were supplemented by committees of the poor, revolutionary committees and VChK (the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage). The Soviets and *sovnarkhozes*, however, remained the principal government bodies.

All these structures relied on "hands-on management" and direct control exercised by SNK (Council of People's Commissars) through its emissaries. The institution of emissaries, who were assigned to specific spheres of government, had lost its significance by the end of 1917, when decision-making was transferred to specialized *narkomats* (People's Commissariats).

In accordance with the principles of Soviet democracy described by Vladimir Lenin in *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government* (March 1918)³, local administrations followed the principle of dual subordination

² *Ibidem*, pp. 143–150.

³ V.I. Lenin, *Ocherednye zadachi Sovetskoy vlasti*, Poln. sobr. soch. Izd. 5, Moskva 1974, pp. 203–206.

and reported both to the local *guberniya* Soviet and to the corresponding central authority.

The real significance of the newly created institutions depended on their strategic goals and on the specific tasks at hand: for example, in the Civil War period, the military and economic governmental bodies prevailed. Interestingly, it was these structures that were most affected by the debates about the balance of “collegiality” (collective decision-making) and undivided authority, denoted by the term *edinonachalie* (“one-man management”). The idea of collegiality contradicted the tasks that needed to be addressed by the command system as well as the general tendency favouring direct control over local governments. Between 1919 and 1921, collegiality was in the centre of active debates. In his speech at the Ninth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, Lenin defended the need for *edinonachalie*, pointing out that collegiality was nothing but the basic type of management and “something rudimentary, necessary to the first stage” of Communist building⁴. On 17 March 1921, SNK issued the Decree “On the Precedence of the Central Planning Principle in the Work of Executive Bodies of People’s Commissariats”⁵, which fully and irrevocably replaced the collegiality principle by centralized planning. Local administrative bodies, which tended to imitate practices of the central government, used this decree as a direct guidance.

On the grounds that war conditions required mobilization of resources and administrative consolidation, significant restrictions were imposed on local administrative initiatives.

In the early years of Soviet rule, it took a long time for the government, torn between utopian ideals and practical concerns, to build a clear administrative vertical structure by the trial and error method.

The task of economic, that is, industrial development of territories was seen as a priority for local administrative institutions (Soviets and *sovnarkhozes*) for ideological as well as for practical reasons. The War Communism experience led the Bolshevik government to abandon their utopian ideas in favour of more pragmatic matters. Until 1920, when the electrification program was adopted, there had been no specific plans for economic development in the regions. It should be noted that this program was adopted after the Treaty of Riga was signed in March 1921, in the period of disillusionment with the prospects of the “World Revolution”. The territory of the RSFSR came to be perceived not as a temporary foothold for

⁴ R.N. Bayguzin (ed.), *Administrativnyye reformy v Rossii: istoria i sovremennost*, Moskva 2006, p. 436.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 437.

the future struggle but as a part of the new proletarian state that needed to survive and develop. Since that time Soviets and *sovnarkhozes* started to be considered as bodies of local economic government working towards the general strategic goal of building a Communist society.

In accordance with the previously defined priorities, the work of regional and local governments covered the three main spheres: administrative (Soviets); economic (*sovnarkhozes*); and national (in national-territorial units).

In February 1920, after the Administrative Commission of VTsIK was set up, it became obvious that in the struggle between bodies of administrative (Soviets) and economic (Council of National Economy) government, the former prevailed and, as a result, the Soviets were charged with economic functions. Zoning itself was dictated by ideological as well as economic motives: "Proletarian centres were planned to be at the core of new regions while the surrounding area had to provide the necessary development for the key sectors of the regional industry"⁶.

The division into economic-administrative units, however, contradicted another key ideological priority – the nations' right for self-determination. On the other hand, as Terry Martin pointed out⁷, the division of the territory according to the national principle would have exacerbated intransigent conflicts. This contradiction sparked off the intense regionalization debate between Narkomnats (The People's Commissariat of Nationalities) and Gosplan (The State Planning Committee) in 1921⁸, which inevitably resulted in demarcation of interests. Starting from June 1923, the public discussion of the national question stopped. The resolutions of the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party proclaimed the newly created Union of Republics to be the greatest achievement in this sphere. It was also stated that the Soviet state would invest maximum effort into those forms of national self-determination that did not contradict state goals⁹, which, according to Martin, meant that the state committed itself to the support of the four national "forms" – territories, languages, elites, and cultures¹⁰.

In the way similar to the disillusionment with the "World Revolution" ideologue, "national self-determination" from a practical issue turned

⁶ K.D. Egorov, *Rayonirovanie SSSR. Sbornik materialov po raionirovaniyu s 1917 po 1925 gody*, Moskva–Leningrad 1926, p. 20.

⁷ T. Martin, "Imperia polozhitelnoy deyatelnosti". *Natsii i natsionalizm v SSSR 1923–1939*, Moskva 2011, p. 48.

⁸ F. Hirsch, *State and Evolution: Ethnographic Knowledge, Economic Expediency, and the Making of the USSR, 1917–1924*, in: J. Burbank, M. von Hagen, A. Remnev (eds.), *Russian Empire Space, People, Power, 1700–1930*, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2007, p. 146.

⁹ *Dvenadtsaty syezd RKP(b). 17–25 aprelya 1923 goda. Stenografichesky otchet.*, Moskva 1968, pp. 695–696.

¹⁰ T. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

into one of the propagandist clichés, when it became clear that it was impossible to realize the proclaimed ideological goals. In the 1920s, the question of national self-determination was already used as a lever for direct administrative regulation to justify different, sometimes even contradictory decisions of the central government¹¹. Once the national question was “off the table”, the economic aspect of the local administrative-territorial division came to the fore.

For the Bolsheviks, it was a matter of principle to offer their own alternative to the former administrative division of territories into *guberniyas* and *uezds*. It should be noted, however, that although the Soviets copied old structures, the Bolshevik government sought to fill them with new meanings. The new terminology (“administrative-economic zoning”) reflected this trend: as Konstantin Egorov observed in 1925, “the term «administrative division» is archaic, it is outdated and can be applied only to the pre-revolutionary period, when the state was divided into administrative units to facilitate fiscal governance and policing of the territory”¹². Under the Soviet rule, governance had to be economic rather than administrative: “all administrative questions have deep economic foundations”¹³. In this respect, theoretical Marxist ideas fitted well with the priorities of Gosplan specialists.

“Rationality” of the economic approach had an obvious ideological implication: the disappearance of small towns (former centres of *uezds*) was interpreted as “a natural process of deterioration [...] of old nests of the gentry, aristocracy, public officials, and townfolk; on the other hand, centres of proletarian production are going to prosper”¹⁴.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, zoning was based on the competing economic and administrative principles of organization¹⁵. The economic paradigm clearly prevailed in the early Soviet period, when geographical space was mostly seen in the light of industrial production. The Bolshevik government sought to abolish the old administrative division, because they believed that it led to confusion and management mishaps.

¹¹ F. Hirsch, *Toward an Empire of Nations: Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities*, “The Russian Review” 2000, 59, pp. 210–212.

¹² K.D. Egorov, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 14–15.

¹⁵ N. Tagirova, *Mapping the Empire's Economic Regions from the Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century*, in: J. Burbank, M. von Hagen, A. Remnev (eds.), *Russian Empire Space, People, Power, 1700–1930*, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2007, p. 136.

Territorially, SNKh (Council of National Economy – O.G.) does not coincide with the *uezd* (and, therefore, the *uezd* Soviet), which means that for *uezd* departments it is easier to slip out of control of the SNKh and that of the local Soviets. Moreover, SNKh itself divides territories differently... For example, if a peasant's cow is stolen, he will go to one town but if his land has been ploughed up by mistake, he will have to go to yet another town. This anarchic division at times gets so muddled up that a peasant cannot figure it out¹⁶.

In their reasoning, the government followed the premise that the former administrative-territorial division was likely to persist: "The old four-part administrative division remains: *guberniya*, *uezd*, *volost*, rural community". The new principles of zoning were planned to be introduced only in peripheral, scarcely populated areas¹⁷. In fact, as early as in the 1920s, the Soviets as new administrative bodies replaced economic organs in the regions, which signified the dominance of the administrative principle. It should be noted that those local Soviets that were economically based eventually proved to be more viable than those that were nationally or ethnically based since the former contributed to strengthening the central power.

Similar to the way that People's Commissars were "assigned" to certain ministries in the beginning of the Bolsheviks' rule, local Soviets relied on the former administrative-territorial structure that consisted of *guberniyas*, *uezds* and *volosts*. In *guberniyas*, chairmen of local Soviets enjoyed considerably less power than the former governors since many organizations in the area controlled by the local Soviet reported not to the Soviet but to the corresponding *narkomat* (People's Commissariat). Starting from 1925, after the *nomenclatura* system of appointments was introduced, local Soviets became fully subordinate to the Party¹⁸, which formed a rigid, vertical power structure.

As Francine Hirsch observed, by the end of 1924, the administrative principle, along with the national and economic principles, had become a crucial factor for internal delimitation¹⁹. In the 1930s, under Stalin's autocratic rule, the practice of direct administrative regulation started to predominate while the role of the theoretical reasoning of the earlier periods was eventually reduced to merely providing an ideological "cover-up" for centralized decision-making.

Thus, the ideal model of economic zoning failed to provide a feasible alternative to the old scheme of imperial government, which led to the heated "regionalization debate" between Gosplan and Narkomnats and to the struggle between economic and administrative Soviet bodies in the

¹⁶ K.D. Egorov, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 20–21.

¹⁸ R.N. Bayguzin (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 582.

¹⁹ F. Hirsch, *Toward an Empire of Nations...*, p. 211.

regions. Each of the two approaches to zoning – economic and national – was well grounded ideologically but in the end the third, administrative approach took precedence, although it was not so much socialist as imperialist in its nature.

This process comprised three stages: at the **first** stage (1918–1920s), local Soviets and *sovnarkhozes* competed for economic control over regions. At the **second** stage (1921–1923), which coincided with the emergence of the USSR, the competition between the economic and national principles of organization came to the fore. The **third** stage, starting from the mid-1920s, was characterized by intensified competition between the economic and administrative principles, which had begun earlier. This process finished in 1932 with the liquidation of VSNTKh (Supreme Council of National Economy) and *sovnarkhozes*, which signified the triumph of the administrative approach.

The period between 1918 and the early 1930s saw the transition from tactical to strategic principles as the government was establishing control over the land of the former Russian Empire. In a way, this process involved ideological disillusionment, in which old idealized schemes were either deemed practically inapplicable or were adjusted to reality.

In the way similar to the transition from the War Communism to the New Economic Policy in 1921, all ideological doctrines related to land exploration and development (including “self-determination of nations” and economically-based zoning) had been revised and practically readjusted by the mid-1920s.

Apart from the ideological revision, the system of local Soviets was embedded into the vertical power structure, which actually meant that they were deprived of their independence and that the principle of collegiality was replaced by the principle of undivided authority (*edinonachalie*). The nature of the Soviets, which combined legislative and executive functions, was an objective factor that contributed to this transformation.

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STRESZCZENIE

W artykule omówiono czynniki determinujące strukturę i poziom kompetencji organów samorządowych oraz główne kierunki w ich rozwoju w Rosji Radzieckiej między rokiem 1918 a początkiem lat trzydziestych. Utopijne idee bolszewickich przywódców stopniowo odsuwały się na drugi plan, ustępując bardziej pragmatycznym i biurokratycznym procedurom decyzyjnym, ukierunkowanym na rozwiązanie kwestii praktycznych. Rząd musiał realizować kilka zadań jednocześnie: rozciągnąć kontrolę polityczną nad ogromnym terytorium kraju, zapewnić rozwój gospodarczy regionów oraz zrealizować zasadę samostanowienia narodu. Proces ewolucji infrastruktury administracyjnej w terenie był więc pełen sprzeczności i przebiegał w trzech etapach. W artykule stwierdzono, że logika wcześniejszego kierunku rozwoju państwa oraz specyficzny charakter Rad (Sowietów) jako organów zarządzania spowodowały, iż autorytarny system administracji terenowej uzyskał prymat nad paradygmatem ekonomicznym czy narodowym.

Słowa kluczowe: rewolucja rosyjska, terytorium, samorząd lokalny, Rady, Sowiety, sownarchoz, rozwój narodowy

NOTA O AUTORZE

Oleg Vitalevich Gorbachev – doktor nauk historycznych, profesor. Pracownik naukowo-dydaktyczny Katedry Zarządzania Dokumentacją, Archiwoznawstwa i Historii Zarządu Państwowego Uralskiego Uniwersytetu Federalnego im. Pierwszego Prezydenta Rosji B.N. Jelcyna. W kręgu jego zainteresowań badawczych znajdują się: problemy urbanizacji w Rosji w XX w., procesy migracyjne w XX w. i historyczne źródła audiowizualne. Autor przeszło stu prac naukowych. E-mail: og_06@mail.ru