

Chapter 15

“Imperialism” and “Federalism”: The Ambiguity of State and City in Russia

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ABSTRACT

The chapter takes as its starting point Kropotkin’s idea that in the design of governance systems there are two fundamentally opposed principles - Imperialism (concentrated, vertical power) and federalism (distributed, horizontal power). The paper shows how this idea was derived from Russian conditions but may be seen in the development of state and city relations more widely. The paper then addresses the case of local government reform in Russia from 1990, and how the principle of concentration of power took precedence over the federalist principle, due to ambiguity in state-city relations and fear of loosening ‘imperial’ control. The conclusion is that in large and diverse states, the imperative of control to prevent fragmentation may over-ride the development of decentralised governance or municipal autonomy.

INTRODUCTION: RUSSIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

There are three main reasons why the evolution of local government in Russian should be of interest to a wider audience.

Firstly, local government reforms in Russia have encountered similar or analogous difficulties to those encountered in local government reforms elsewhere, for example assigning functions to levels of sub-national government, the balance between the economies of scale of large local government units and the proximity to the citizenry afforded by small local government units, the tension between executive efficiency through concentration of power and the pluralism and diversity of larger decision-making. The fact that Russia has undergone several major reforms of its local government system (the laws of 1991, 1995, 2003 and current draft revisions to that of 2003) since the end of the Soviet Union, of which Russia had constituted the major part, in which these issues were addressed in different ways, make the Russian system an instructive case study.

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Secondly, beyond these generic dilemmas, the evolution of Russian is perhaps the most clear-cut case in Europe of the tension between the principles of (top-down) state and (bottom-up) society as foundational principles for local government. Over the course of the last 150 years Russian local government has been subject to a recurring process whereby the assertion of local government autonomy is then followed by closer integration of local government with state administration.

Thirdly, the Russian case, with its preoccupation with state-society bifurcation, offers a basis for comparative local government studies both within and outside Europe. One of the difficulties facing the study of local government in Eastern Europe since 1989 has been that the most influential framework for comparison, that of Page and Goldsmith (1987), tends to reflect the North/South, Protestant/Catholic, Bonaparte/Non-Bonaparte axis which does not fully account for differences the diversity of Central and Eastern Europe.

Ertman (1997) classifies the formation of European states in terms of two axes - constitutional/absolutist and bureaucratic/patrimonial). Applied to the Russian case, the Ertman framework enables a useful distinction between, on the one hand, the modernization of absolutism – from patrimonial to bureaucratic (the process begun by Peter the Great) and, on the other hand, the development of what Ertman terms constitutionalism, the process whereby pluralism is enacted through localization and elected assemblies. While bureaucratization has been successful in many respects (see Heusala, 2005), attempts to move towards parliamentarism or decentralization to local elected bodies have either been unsuccessful or have been fairly rapidly revised to concentrate power in the executive or the state system.

Russian perceptions of European political systems reflect this tendency. Whereas Page and Goldsmith saw Europe in terms of North and South, from a Russian perspective, it is more common to see Europe through a modified perspective of East and West, that is, in terms of Continental and Anglo-Saxon traditions. The latter is taken to involve a strong and autonomous role for the council or representative power, while the continental system is seen as involving a stronger role for the state in sub-national government, whether via the prefectoral system in France or through the dual state/local administrative system in Germany and Austria. One interpretation of the development of local government in Russia since 1990 is that it follows a logical progression from an attempt (during the 1990s) to introduce Anglo-Saxon models (whether of the council-led or strong mayor type) of autonomous local government, followed by an attempt (in the early 2000s) to introduce a German-style dual state/local system (so that local authorities are accountable locally for their own functions and accountable upwards for carrying out delegated state functions, with the 2015-6 reforms emphasizing the role of the (regional) state still further, while reducing the political role of cities and districts through introducing indirect, rather than direct, elections.

BACKGROUND: SUMMARY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS IN RUSSIA AFTER 1990

There have been three major reforms of local government in Russia since the end of the Soviet era in 1990/91. The elections of 1990 had, for the first time since 1918, involved multi-party candidates and therefore enabled the politicization of local government. The local government law of 1991 attempted to clarify how the existing local administrative system should work in the absence of party control. This law, a democratized version of Soviet practice, is perhaps the most comprehensible to an Anglo-Saxon reader, with its clear division of functions, two-tier system, corporate administration and strong policy

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