

The Municipal Legislature in Novosibirsk, 1992–95

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Systematic study of local politics in the Russian Federation has just begun. As a result, relatively little attention has been devoted to the legislative/representative bodies elected in many Russian cities during the 1990s.¹ The following study of these institutions in Novosibirsk, an old industrial city in the geographic center of the Russian Federation, is based on the author's direct observation and participation in the sessions of the city soviet in the summer of 1992 and of its successor, the city assembly in the summer of 1995. Although this study deals with a single city, it suggests a pattern that was probably characteristic of many Russian cities in the 1990s.

The Novosibirsk City Soviet

In spring 1990, in keeping with President Gorbachev's efforts to democratize the USSR by restoring "all power to the soviets," 140 deputies were elected to the Novosibirsk soviet. The deputies were initially divided between the supporters of Democratic Russia, on the one hand, and the various factions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), on the other. Democratic Russia sought the extension of civil liberties, the establishment of a multi-party parliamentary system, the transformation of the CPSU into a purely parliamentary party, the introduction of market reforms, and supported the election of Boris Yeltsin as chairman of the RSFSR's Supreme Soviet. The Communist deputies were deeply divided between the Communist Party of the RSFSR (formed in June 1990), which combined orthodox socialist, nationalist, and anti-Yeltsin themes in its program, and more reformist factions in the CPSU.

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In 1990-1991, the new soviet attempted to bring the city's executive committee, which had traditionally been dominated by local CPSU officials, under political control. But before this objective could be achieved, the USSR collapsed, the Russian Federation emerged as an independent state, and its government launched an ambitious effort to dismantle state socialism and create a capitalist economic system. The federal government's policies inadvertently led to a massive surge in inflation, declines in industrial production, and a sharp decrease in many citizens' living standards, forcing the new soviet and its successor to cope with unprecedented financial and economic problems. Their inability to "solve" these problems quickly led many Russian citizens and some foreign observers to conclude that the new democratic institutions were a failure. However, the legislatures' difficulties were not caused by flaws in political institutions but by the insurmountable nature of the financial difficulties caused by the federal government's economic program. The legislatures' only fault was their inability to create a miracle by producing revenue from thin air. The following study, which focuses on their response to the environment created by federal policy, gives particular stress to institutional reform and its impact on the legislative process.

In July 1991, the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR passed a law on self-government that created the institutional framework for the soviet in Novosibirsk and other Russian cities. Most important, in keeping with the leadership's commitment to democratization of political institutions, the law granted the legislature sovereignty over the executive. The legislature was given the right to determine both the size of the budget and its distribution among the city's departments, to raise local taxes, to legislate on virtually any topic within the boundaries of federal law, and to compel testimony from all employees of all enterprises and institutions within the city's limits. The soviet's numerous standing commissions, which corresponded to the executive's major departments, were charged with the development of legislation to be submitted to the soviet as a whole and granted broad powers of oversight vis-à-vis their functional counterparts in the executive. The law provided for the election of a chairman and a *maly soviet* of twenty-five deputies. The chairman was to be elected by majority vote from among the elected deputies and given responsibility for leadership of both the soviet and the *maly soviet* that was to act as the soviet's representative between sessions.

The city's executive (the mayor after 1992) was obliged to report to the soviet on his administration's activities and to submit his nominations for the directors of major departments to the soviet for its approval. The mayor enjoyed broad powers of decree but they were limited to the implementation of the soviet's program. He could object to decisions of the soviet that he regarded as illegal or financially untenable, but his objections could be overturned by a simple majority of the soviet. Moreover, the soviet could adopt a vote of "no confidence" in the mayor by a two-thirds majority.²

The actual implementation of the law on self-government was deeply influenced by the failure of the coup against President Gorbachev in August 1991. Shortly after his return from house arrest, General Secretary Gorbachev suspended the Central Committee of the CPSU and its subordinate apparatus and

thereby destroyed local party officials' authority in the executive branch of local governments. Henceforth, the elected soviet and the mayor confronted each other without the benefit of party officials' "guidance."

In fall 1991, the Novosibirsk soviet began to operate in this new political context. The full soviet convened on a regular basis, while its standing commissions rushed to draft legislation to deal with the city's problems. But just as the deputies had begun to emerge from the "tutelage" of local party officialdom, they were confronted with a series of massive problems created by the federal government's economic policies. In October 1991, the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR not only approved President Yeltsin's program of liberalization of prices, privatization of state property, and financial reform, but granted him a year of unprecedented decree power to implement this program.

The government's liberalization of most prices produced a startling burst of inflation that had a dramatic impact on both the citizens and the newly elected soviet in Novosibirsk. Those on fixed incomes, which

included pensioners, students, welfare recipients, and municipal employees—such as teachers, policemen, and medical and social service workers—and many industrial workers found it increasingly difficult to maintain their standard of living, and they naturally turned to their new soviet for relief. At the same time, sharp declines in production, particularly in the military-related industries that dominated the local economy, undermined enterprises' capacity to pay wages, to provide welfare and social services (child care, housing, and medical care), or to pay taxes.

The combination of rapid inflation and sharp declines in production had a dramatic impact on the city government's financial situation. The administration (headed by a mayor) found it increasingly difficult to provide a living wage for its many municipal workers, to subsidize the city's excellent cultural institutions, and to finance essential services. (The city government was responsible for education, public health, urban transport, energy, road and building maintenance, construction of housing, etc.)

The immense pressure on the city's limited resources was compounded by the federal government's inability to develop a coherent financial policy for Russian cities. Taxes collected from the city were dispatched to the federal government, which proved to be extremely niggardly in returning funds to meet local needs. Moreover, the federal government channeled funds for the cities through the oblast authorities responsible for a larger geographical area. As a result, the city was constantly obliged to appeal to the oblast for additional funds. While the city authorities were allowed to impose their own taxes, the revenue was limited by the poverty of citizens and local enterprises and avoidance of payments.

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The city's financial distress had a dramatic impact on the activities of the standing commissions, the soviet, and the maly soviet. The standing commissions were influenced in a variety of ways.³ Some were virtually destroyed, some overwhelmed with new responsibilities, and others became entangled in near constant conflict with executive agencies. The commission on ecology was virtually destroyed. In 1990-91, it had vigorously exposed the sources of air and water pollution in the city and had drafted legislation to force enterprises to take corrective action. But the severe inflation made it impossible for industrial enterprises to pay their own workers, let alone devote scarce resources to the purchase of expensive equipment. In this context, the commission turned to the organization of conferences, and its meetings lost their sense of purpose.

If the ecology commission was demoralized, the welfare commission was suddenly overwhelmed. During the first months of 1992, the city administration had established emergency programs to help pensioners, large families, and lower paid city and industrial workers to cope with the surge in prices. The welfare commission worked with great vigor to draft legislation that would make these emergency measures permanent and used its oversight responsibilities to prod the welfare department to implement all programs for the poor. In the process, the welfare commission became a major advocate for all those impoverished by the rapid inflation, and it clashed increasingly with the welfare department, which was unable to finance many needed programs.

The soviet's health commission, composed of deputies who were leading local health professionals, faced analogous problems. The commission drafted legislation to establish a new health insurance program, but it was constantly thwarted in its efforts to find the necessary resources. For example, when the commission called for increased taxation of local enterprises, it was forced to modify its position in the face of staunch opposition by factory directors.

The soviet's commission on trade sought to cope with the consequences of inflation and the rapid privatization of retail outlets. It was particularly critical of any privatization proposal that seemed to threaten workers' rights; it monitored the new retail outlets to prevent gouging of consumers; it drafted the city's first legislation to protect consumers' rights and provided a forum for citizens' complaints.

The soviet's budget commission was faced with extraordinary difficulties in dealing with the executive's financial proposals. The surge of inflation had undermined normal budgetary procedures at all levels of the Russian Federation. The federal government's confusion and uncertainty about future costs and revenues made it impossible to work out an annual budget and led it to provide the crudest estimates of revenue and expense on a quarterly basis. In this context, since the city was deeply dependent on federal sources of support, its own budget information was incomplete and inadequate, and funds were often spent before any publication of quarterly budget figures. This produced near constant conflict between the budget commission and the administration over various budget proposals.

These and other conflicts were referred to the soviet's commission on self-government for resolution. The commission sponsored periodic meetings between the representatives of both branches to prevent the disruption of local

authority, with very mixed results. The commission devoted most of its time to writing a new city charter, designed to limit the conflicts between the soviet and the mayor by defining their relationship with greater clarity.

As the standing commissions worked furiously to prepare legislation to cope with the city's mounting problems, it became increasingly obvious that the soviet itself was ill-equipped to respond quickly and effectively to these proposals. First of all, the deputies had the right to determine their own legislative agenda at each session, and this process consumed immense amounts of time as individual deputies clashed over the proper order of competing proposals. Moreover, the lack of party discipline made it extremely difficult to forge the necessary simple majority. None of the three factions in the soviet—Democratic Russia, which included approximately one-third of the house; the "Novosibirsk group," composed of more orthodox Communists, which included approximately 40 percent of the deputies; and the Movement for Democratic Reform, a grouping of reformist Communists—proved unwilling or unable to impose coherent discipline on its members. In addition, deputies were free to amend legislation from the floor, which often led to considerable modification of the legislation's intent. Finally, it often proved difficult to maintain the quorum essential for legislative activity. The deputies were not full-time, paid representatives but received a rather meager per diem for their participation in the soviet. In this context, many deputies simply left to attend to their own work when they considered the debate prolonged or fruitless.

These problems led many deputies to conclude that the maly soviet should provide direction for its parent body. In the first months of its existence, the maly soviet had simply seemed to follow the lead provided by oblast and federal authorities,⁴ but as the soviet floundered, the maly soviet began to act in an increasingly assertive fashion. Acting on recommendations of the soviet's commission on trade, it opposed a privatization scheme that seemed to threaten workers' security of employment. It urged the welfare commission to extend its oversight over the city's welfare department and to draft legislation that would increase appropriations for welfare and provide tax relief for those enterprises that donated goods and services to the needy.⁵ Shortly afterward, it urged the health commission to supervise changes in the ownership of local clinics, and it created a special commission to supervise the privatization of municipal housing.⁶

Most significant, the maly soviet played a central role in the election of a new chairman for its parent body. In early 1992, a deadlock had developed over the election of a new chairman because the three factions in the soviet had refused to support any candidates other than their own. The maly soviet formed a working group composed of representatives of the three factions and agreed on a compromise candidate, a young engineer named Yuri Bernadsky, who was elected as chairman by the full soviet.⁷

As chairman of the soviet, Bernadsky automatically became chairman of the maly soviet as well. Under his vigorous leadership, the maly soviet not only emerged as the leader of the legislative process in the soviet but also sought to bring the city administration under more direct control. While the maly soviet and the mayor sometimes cooperated in efforts to extract more resources from the

federal government,⁸ conflict between the two flared up over the thorny question of taxation policy.

In March 1992, the mayor, V. A. Indinok, reported to the soviet on the city's social and economic situation. He complained that sharp declines in industrial and agricultural production had undermined the city's revenues and that neither the federal government nor oblast authorities had provided funds to finance the city's essential services. The mayor reported that his administration would seek to increase revenue by the privatization of municipal property (much of the state's local property had been transferred to municipal ownership), by cutting administration costs, by possibly floating municipal bonds, and by the introduction of new taxes (including levies on land transfers, new commercial exchanges, and licensing fees).⁹

In the debate on the mayor's report, many deputies charged that the city administration had sought to limit the soviet's role in the formation of the city budget. Immediately after the session, the maly soviet adopted measures to extend its own role in the development of tax policy.¹⁰ As a result, the chairman of the maly soviet and the mayor began to trade charges about the provision of budgetary information and the reasons for growing hostility between commissions and their respective departments over budget issues.¹¹

The differences between executive and legislative branches were exacerbated by the outbreak of a bitter teachers' strike in the spring. The majority of the deputies supported a resolution demanding that the city meet the teachers' demands, but the mayor responded that the city simply had no such funds. The soviet responded with a direct appeal to the president for financial support and by deciding to pay teachers from federal taxes collected in the city until the president met the soviet's demands.¹²

With both the soviet and maly soviet in an assertive mood, the maly soviet became deluged with proposals for legislation from deputies, commissions, and organized groups of citizens, and it sought some way to respond to the flow of proposed legislation. After considerable discussion, the chairman convinced the members of the maly soviet to grant him broader control over its agenda and to adopt very strict limits on debate. Although a number of deputies from Democratic Russia were critical of these changes, the new regulations permitted the maly soviet to deal with proposed draft legislation in a far more effective manner.¹³

The maly soviet's new leadership role made it the natural target for pressure from the city's most influential interest groups. Novosibirsk had long been a center of military-related production, and its leading enterprises had been seriously hurt by inflation and the federal government's failure to develop a coherent policy to help them convert to civilian production. The directors of the largest industrial combines had formed a council of factory directors to advance their interests, and in spring 1992 it turned its attention to the maly soviet.

A member of this council had been elected to the maly soviet in late 1991. In May, he abruptly interrupted its discussion of new internal regulations to condemn the soviet for failing to cope with the city's desperate situation and called for a special session of the soviet to deal with the issue.¹⁴

While the maly soviet worked frantically to organize the special session on short notice, the council of factory directors sought to mobilize popular support for its position. In the week before the special session, the council of factory directors published an open letter to federal government leaders that described the local economic situation in alarming terms. It claimed that the shortage of capital had forced many enterprises to adopt a four-day work week, to curtail pay for months, to furlough experienced workers and specialists, and to limit social services such as health care and child care. It added that enterprises attempting to convert to civilian production suffered particular difficulty and that the workers were on the verge of striking. The directors' letter attributed all of these difficulties to the federal government's policies, urged it to increase industrial wages, to provide more credit for conversion, and to settle the growing debts between enterprises.¹⁵ Furthermore, on the eve of the soviet's meeting, the directors sponsored a large street demonstration, which was supported primarily by its own industrial work force, on the public square next to the headquarters of the city soviet. When the full session was convened, the factory directors' representative reiterated the major elements of the council's letter, called for an increase in state intervention at all levels of the economy, and urged the federal government to provide financial relief to hard pressed local authorities.¹⁶

The mayor then reported on the city's efforts to "stabilize" the local economic situation. He once again stressed the importance of privatization of municipal property as the major source of new revenue for the city, but attacked the soviet's various commissions for hampering this process and the development of other sources of local revenue.¹⁷ He repeatedly urged the federal government to provide financial relief to cope with the unexpected consequences of the drive to establish a market economy.

The debate on these reports was intense and wide ranging. Some deputies vilified the federal government in orthodox Communist terms, charging that the inflation had been created by the federal government's desire to transform the country into a source of raw materials for Western capitalist states. Some insisted that the perennial appeals to the center were useless and that the city had to develop its own solution to local problems, but found it impossible to define such a response. Others claimed that the city simply lacked the authority to make significant decisions. Some called for the restoration of state orders to sustain enterprises, while others assailed the enterprise directors for begging for state handouts rather than adapting to new circumstances. After the end of the debate, the chairman of the soviet named an editorial commission, composed of representatives of the three major factions, to draft a resolution on the two reports to the soviet.¹⁸

The commission's draft was debated and amended from the floor. The final resolution incorporated both the factory directors' grim analysis of the city's plight and the mayor's recommendations on the need to levy additional local taxes to finance vital services. The resolution endorsed the acceleration of privatization, the levy of local taxes, the distribution of small parcels of land to needy urban citizens, and explicitly urged the federal government to lower the

level of the VAT tax and to return all VAT revenues raised in Novosibirsk to the city's budget.¹⁹

The decisions of the soviet's special session indicated that the maly soviet could help its parent body to reach an agreement with the mayor over economic policy. But the deputies quickly discovered that they could agree on a coherent program but could not by themselves create the wealth necessary to finance it. In late June 1992, the maly soviet and the mayor's office jointly sponsored a public hearing on proposed local taxes, which clearly revealed that citizens and enterprises were either unwilling or unable to provide sufficient tax revenue for the city.²⁰ Neither the federal nor oblast authorities provided sufficient support, and the soviet struggled on until it was summarily dissolved in fall 1993.

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The City Assembly Since 1994

In fall 1993, the Novosibirsk soviet fell victim to the increasingly bitter conflict between President Yeltsin, on the one hand, and his opponents in

the Congress of People's Deputies led by the chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Ruslan Khasbulatov, on the other. President Yeltsin, enraged and frustrated by many deputies' opposition to his draft constitution and his government's economic policies, summarily dissolved the Congress in September 1993. In early October, when the president's most ardent opponents sought to overthrow his regime, he called on the military to suppress the rebellion. A few days later, the president summarily dissolved all local soviets, transferred their authority to their respective executive branches,²¹ and promulgated new regulations naming the mayor as both chief executive and chairman of a new, more compact legislature to be elected in 1994.²²

The president's decrees were clearly designed to subordinate the legislatures to the executive branch in keeping with the Constitution of December 1993. In fact, the mayor of Novosibirsk, V. A. Tolokonsky, was able to run the city without any interference from an elected assembly for an entire year. In March 1994, citywide elections were held for a new, twenty-five-member assembly, but voter apathy had been so widespread that only ten deputies, including the mayor, were elected.²³ The assembly did not convene until a special by-election created a quorum with the election of six more deputies. When the assembly of sixteen deputies was convened in December, it elected the mayor as its chairman.²⁴

While the mayor immediately attempted to establish his dominance, the newly elected deputies not only resisted his authority but worked assiduously to broaden their role in the legislative process. At the very first session of the assembly, the mayor insisted on his right to set the assembly's agenda, claimed that it had no legal standing as a “juridical person,” and that the deputies should serve without pay from the city and had no need for an independent staff of their own.

He also urged the deputies to endorse his own nomination for the position of deputy chairman, who would lead the assembly in the mayor's absence and coordinate the activity of the assembly's various commissions.²⁵

But the deputies were not easily intimidated. Many insisted that the assembly did have judicial status; that the deputies deserved some pay for their services to the city and needed an independent staff, including administrators, a legal specialist, and press officer; and that they should be given some means of transportation (only one car had been assigned to the assembly).²⁶ While the mayor was initially cool to these requests, he relented in spring 1995 and provided the deputies with their own office, staffed by two secretaries from the city administration and equipped with a computer.²⁷

On more substantive issues, the mayor's role as chief executive of the administration and chairman of the assembly clearly gave him immense authority vis-à-vis the elected deputies. But it must be emphasized that his authority varied from issue to issue and was often dependent on the activities of the assembly's standing commissions. Although the assembly was too small to staff the wide range of specialized commissions that had been created by the soviet, in the first months of 1995 the deputies did establish three commissions—for budget/finance and social and economic questions, self government, and human rights and law. When the commissions functioned as originally designed, which was the case for the commissions on self-government and human rights and law, the deputies were often able to balance the mayor's authority to a considerable extent. When the commissions failed to operate, which was the case for the budget/finance commission, the mayor's authority was obvious to all.

This pattern became evident when the mayor presented his first report on the city's social and economic situation to the assembly in January 1995. The mayor declared that his administration's highest priority was the prevention of any further deterioration of the citizens' living standard in the face of continued high inflation and declining industrial production in the region. He reported that the city had extended additional welfare payments to pensioners and to families with children, had begun to take measures to prevent additional unemployment, and had worked assiduously to retain existing levels of vital services in education, public health, welfare, energy, transport, and culture and recreation.²⁸ But he also announced that the increased inflation and inadequate level of tax revenue had forced him to impose a freeze on all departmental spending at 1994 levels. He insisted that the administration would seek to increase appropriations from the oblast budget, to improve the level of tax collections (which had fallen below 50 percent), and to economize on administration expenses in order to maintain vital services. The mayor also reported that the city would increase its efforts to support local economic growth and entrepreneurship. He noted that the administration had already helped to establish a council of local banks to encourage and stimulate investment in infrastructure and production, and he claimed that the city was one of the few in the country to actually give tax breaks to entrepreneurs.²⁹

The newly elected deputies initially proved ill-prepared to challenge the mayor's analysis and program for action. For example, when they urged him to

shift resources from one hard-pressed area to another, he was usually able to overrule or dismiss these suggestions on the basis of his own expertise and mastery of budgetary materials.³⁰ The deputies' inability to counter the mayor effectively reflected the complete failure of their commission on financial/budgetary and social-economic questions. Its chairman had been elected on the basis of his previous experience as a deputy to the RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies, but he proved ineffectual in every respect. The commission was rarely convened, its sessions were badly prepared and produced no more than *pro forma* responses to important issues. When the assembly subsequently convened to discuss the mayor's proposals on economic policy, it was generally unable to provide a coherent critique or response, and too often simply seconded the executive's position. This pattern was all too apparent in the assembly's effort to deal with the question of the city's subway system. In January 1995, the mayor had optimistically informed the assembly that both the prime minister and finance minister of the Russian Federation had assured him of continued federal financial support for subway construction. But in February 1995, the director of the subway authority told the assembly that the federal government had reneged on its responsibilities and that the city could not possibly finance continued construction from its own limited resources. He urged the assembly to declare the construction of the subway to be the city's "highest priority" and to mobilize public and private support for the project; he warned that failure to act decisively would increase unemployment and endanger the integrity of the existing system.³¹

Unfortunately for the assembly, its budget finance commission had not discussed the issue, and its chairman had no recommendation on the subject. As a result, the assembly was hard pressed to challenge the administration's position. A minority of deputies questioned the need for subway construction when the city could barely provide basic services to its citizens, but they had little detailed information to bolster their opposition or win over those deputies who had doubts about the project. A bare majority concluded that failure to continue subway construction would be a major blow to the city's "prestige" and supported the administration's position. In the end, the mayor persuaded the assembly to define the subway's construction as the city's "highest priority," to call on both oblast and federal authorities to provide financial support, and to mobilize the regional deputies in the Duma behind the city's position.³²

A similar pattern emerged when the assembly dealt with the city's welfare policy. In February, the director of the city's welfare department reported that his agency was overwhelmed by the cost of providing aid to the city's pensioners, invalids, and poor people in the face of unremitting inflation. He noted that the mayor had sought to alleviate the situation by establishing a supplementary fund supported by private donors, but that had proved insufficient to provide free food and clothing and to subsidize housing and transport for the 230,000 citizens who needed support. He added that the influx of refugees from other parts of the CIS, who were crowding the rail station and needed immediate shelter, was an additional drain on the department's resources.

The commission on budget/finance once again failed to deal with the issue, and the deputies' discussion of welfare policy was ill-informed. While they were clearly distressed by the growing welfare burden, and repeatedly expressed their concern about the level of aid to children, they were unable to provide alternatives or make suggestions. Some deputies urged the assembly to demand the resignation of the federal government's minister for welfare, but this did not win widespread support. In the end, the assembly made no effort to define welfare priorities and simply blamed the oblast for ostensibly failing to develop a coherent welfare policy.³³

However, it would be inaccurate to conclude that the assembly simply followed the executive's lead on *all* economic issues. The assembly did play a more positive role when the executive's program seemed to be badly formulated. For example, in March 1995, the chairman of the city's committee on unemployment presented a report to the assembly that revealed that the city had done little more than establish some programs for those making the transition from state to private employment. In this case, the deputies were able to provide the department with a new sense of purpose and direction. After considerable discussion, the assembly urged the unemployment committee to focus on the reduction of unemployment among young workers and to establish a system of public works for the unemployed.³⁴

A different pattern of executive/legislative relations emerged when the commissions worked as planned. Both the commission on self-government and the commission on human rights and law actively participated in the development of legislation and provided the assembly with the means to challenge and even limit the mayor's domination of the legislative process. A number of factors seem to explain this development. First, the political issues discussed by these commissions did not demand budgetary outlays and could be implemented by the deputies themselves. Secondly, the chairmen of these two commissions proved to be extremely vigorous leaders in drafting legislation and providing questions for action to the assembly. (In fact, if the commission on budget-financial and social-economic questions had been as well led, the legislative process on budgetary questions might have been completely different.) Whatever the case, the actions of these two commissions helped the assembly to challenge or limit the mayor's definition of priorities and principles.

In late January 1995, the commission on self-government elected a chair who proved to be extremely well versed in parliamentary procedure and a vigorous and aggressive defender of the assembly's prerogatives. In his own brief remarks as a candidate for the chairmanship, he urged the commission to begin work immediately on writing the assembly's own regulations, drafting a new city charter, and reviving the system of self-government on the neighborhood level, which had been summarily abolished by the president's decrees.³⁵

The commission presented its draft of the assembly's regulations for its approval the following month. Most striking, the regulations granted the assembly and its commissions a far broader legislative role than the presidential or oblast regulations on the subject. The commissions were defined as *the* source of draft legislation and the locus for citizens' complaints against the city's depart-

ments, and the assembly's authority over the chairman was broadened. The regulations also included limits on debate and discussion that were strict enough to prevent the endless debates that had characterized the soviet, but were open enough to allow *all* of the deputies to express their views and participate directly in the legislative process.

Soon after the assembly adopted these regulations, the commission named a working group to draft a new city charter³⁶ and turned to the thorny question of deputies' rights to make inquiries about the executive's activities. The standing commissions created by the Novosibirsk soviet had enjoyed broad powers of oversight vis-à-vis their functional counterparts in the administration, but the president's

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decrees of October 1993 had abolished this practice. The commission now clearly sought to restore at least some of this authority to the deputies themselves. It issued a report strongly urging the mayor to order his departments to respond to deputies' inquiries "within a reasonable amount of time."

The commission also called on the local media to inform the

city's citizens of the deputies' rights to bring citizens' complaints to the administration's attention. In April 1995, the assembly approved this recommendation.³⁷

The following month, the draft city charter produced by the commission's working group was presented to the full assembly. The draft provided the constitutional basis for a democratic municipal government, and it outlined both the city's responsibilities and citizens' rights in considerable detail. The city was defined as an autonomous agency with the right to develop its own system of taxation in order to provide the city's citizens with a wide range of services including health, education, transport, welfare, distribution of production, culture, vacation, and the stimulation and regulation of trade. Citizens were expressly granted the right to present their own views through referenda, meetings and demonstrations, picketing, and elections; to refer their complaints directly to the administration; to be given full information on governmental proceedings; and to comment in the local media.³⁸

But the draft's definition of the mayor's authority seemed too broad for many deputies, and the assembly's discussion of the document proved extremely stormy. Some deputies charged that the draft had been "dictated" by the administration, and others sought to amend it to give the assembly direct control over the mayor's administrative appointments. When this effort failed, the assembly decided to submit the draft to public discussion before a final discussion of its provisions.³⁹

The commission also dealt with a variety of citizens' complaints. For example, an official in the local hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, enraged by the surge of proselytizing by foreign Protestant denominations, had urged the

city administration to limit those activities on behalf of the Orthodox faith. The mayor's office referred the issue to the commission on self-government for a reply. While the representative of the mayor's office seemed to be sympathetic, the majority of the deputies on the commission angrily rejected the request as a infringement of the religious liberty guaranteed by the Constitution and criticized the church for seeking a state-supported monopoly.⁴⁰

The assembly's other commission, which dealt with both citizens' rights and legal questions, initially seemed to have difficulty organizing its activities in winter 1995. But when a young journalist was elected as chairman in the spring, the commission began to deal with the controversial issue of the local militia's behavior toward organized crime. The commission's interest had been sparked by a strikingly sanguine report to the assembly by the head of the militia and by a citizen's dramatic complaint.⁴¹ In response, the commission carried out its own investigation of the militia, which concluded that the police had failed to act against organized crime and called for the establishment of an independent group of experts to assess police activity.⁴² Shortly afterward, the commission charged that the militia had itself become criminalized and convinced the assembly to authorize an investigation.

The commission also sought to resolve a long-standing dispute over the establishment of an agreed-upon site for large political meetings and demonstrations. This was not a minor issue, since many deputies believed that significant political demonstrations had been curtailed in the past by the city's limits on legal assembly points. The members of the commission, which included the chief of the militia, discussed the positive and negative aspects of various sites and reached a reasonable compromise. In early June, the assembly approved the commission's recommendation.⁴³

The commissions' various actions provided an effective counterweight to the mayor's authority and prevented the assembly from being reduced to a rubber stamp. While the mayor's position as chairman of the assembly allowed him to set the agenda and to shape legislative outcomes, the commissions responsible for non-economic issues helped the assembly to resist the mayor's domination. In fact, the mayor quickly learned that he could not push the deputies too far. A minority always defended the assembly's prerogatives as defined in its own regulations and resisted the mayor's efforts to limit them. Moreover, the small size of the assembly fostered a sense of cohesiveness and common purpose that had not been possible in the large soviet. The interactions between deputies at meetings of the assembly and the commissions (which were convened without the mayor's participation) helped to forge personal and political alliances.

The deputies' confidence was also bolstered by the mayor's periodical absences from the assembly. Tolokonsky was an ambitious politician who traveled frequently to Moscow and to a wide array of national and regional conferences. During those absences, the assembly was led by its deputy chairman, a former member of the Novosibirsk soviet, who made no effort to impose the same discipline as the mayor. In these sessions, the strict limits on debate were generally set aside and the deputies could speak their minds in some detail, as, for

example, in the assembly's discussion of the city's antiquated phone system in June 1995. The director of the administration's communications department reported that no Russian firm could be found to produce the equipment needed to modernize the system and that the only feasible bids came from foreign firms. Many deputies regarded these bids as outrageously high and the assembly became embroiled in an extensive and angry debate over the role of foreign capital, the transition to capitalism, and the problems of economic reform.⁴⁴

The debate over the phone system, while open and wide ranging, once again revealed that the assembly could do very little to overcome the city's immense financial difficulties. While the assembly was a more effective and efficient legislative body than its predecessor, it was no more successful in finding or creating new resources to meet the city's needs.

As a result, the assembly was obliged to appeal repeatedly to the oblast for financial relief, but without much success. The city urged the oblast to purchase new locomotives for the increasingly decrepit commuter rail system that served the city, to help subsidize the sale of bread to the poor, to modernize the archaic heating systems, and to absorb the cost of housing maintenance.⁴⁵ The city's leaders periodically complained that the oblast ignored the city's needs, limited city officials' participation in the preparation of the budget, and failed to act vigorously to collect taxes.⁴⁶

The federal government's policies only deepened the city's financial problems. In March 1995, the mayor told the assembly that the State Duma had slashed the level of income tax revenues collected in the city that could be returned to Novosibirsk for its own use and had forced the city to borrow funds to pay its medical personnel.⁴⁷ The mayor subsequently charged that the Duma had failed to respond to the city's plea to finance subway construction. He also claimed that the federal government's failure to establish a coherent tax policy for small and medium-sized business had thwarted the city's efforts to encourage local entrepreneurship and increase tax revenues.⁴

Conclusion

The replacement of the Novosibirsk soviet of 140 deputies by a compact assembly of twenty-five (in actuality only sixteen) had a significant impact on the legislative process. Most important, the sharp reduction in the number of functional standing commissions narrowed the scope of legislation proposed to the assembly and limited its oversight of the executive's various departments and its capacity to respond to citizens' complaints. The dissolution of the soviet simply eliminated the specialized commissions for education, budget, welfare, transport, public health, energy, culture, and others. While varied in their effectiveness, they had clearly allowed many deputies to use their professional knowledge in both the development of legislation and the supervision of the administration. The commissions had often been plagued by absenteeism, but they had helped to educate the deputies about a wide range of municipal problems.

The commissions created by the assembly were granted a central role in the legislative process, but the size of the assembly made it impossible to establish

more than three commissions with exceptionally broad mandates. This decline in the number of commissions undoubtedly bolstered the relative independence of the administration's departments from legislative supervision and clearly strengthened the mayor's overall authority. Nonetheless, when the assembly's commissions were able to function as originally designed, thanks in large measure to vigorous leadership, they played a major role in drafting legislation and providing the assembly with the means to balance the mayor's authority. As a result, the assembly was not reduced to a rubber stamp as many had feared. The mayor clearly had his way in some areas of public policy, but in many others he was obliged to share authority with the deputies.

Overall, the assembly, led by a vigorous mayor, responded to the city's major problems more quickly than its predecessor. The fusion of executive authority with the chairmanship of the assembly helped to overcome many of the debilitating disputes between executive and legislature that had plagued the soviet. While the two branches had been able to cooperate on some vital questions, the institutional separation of legislature and executive had hampered the soviet's effectiveness. Obviously, conflicts between mayor and assembly existed, but they did not seem to slow the legislative process.

Furthermore, the reduction in the size of the legislature clearly fostered the elected deputies' sense of collective responsibility, their sense of their own usefulness, and an appreciation for democratic rules of procedure. The size of the assembly obliged each deputy to engage in far more cooperative behavior than was possible in the soviet. Each deputy had to serve as a member of two commissions (to assure a quorum) as well as participate in the assembly's bi-weekly sessions. While some deputies found these responsibilities burdensome, most developed a positive view of their own activity and of the assembly's capacities. Moreover, these interactions provided a constant education in the values of democratic procedure. The assembly's meetings were open to the public and media, and all decisions were reached by majority vote after open, if sometimes limited, debate. While the deputies were sometimes browbeaten by the mayor, most expressed their views freely and explicitly. And the meetings of the commissions, which were not attended by the mayor, were models of democratic discussion.

The establishment of both the soviet and assembly demonstrated that it was not difficult to implement significant political reforms. In fact, the democratization of the existing soviet structure in 1990–91 was done with almost startling ease. The introduction of full civil liberties and multi-candidate elections, and the elimination of party officials' control quickly transformed the moribund soviet into a genuine legislative body. And the president was clearly able to transform utterly the entire system of local self-government with the flick of a pen and without significant opposition.

But the experience of both soviet and assembly also revealed that no amount of political reform could help the city to cope with the problems created by the federal government's economic policies. The assembly was clearly more efficient and effective than its predecessor, but it had no greater success in finding the revenue essential to deal with the city's problems.

It seems possible that such difficulties may threaten to undermine the legitimacy of local elected institutions. Students of comparative politics have been long held that citizens' conceptions of institutions' legitimacy are linked with their sense of institutional effectiveness. Many deputies and other local observers agreed that the soviet's inability to reverse declines in citizens' standard of living caused the dramatic drop in participation in the elections for the assembly in 1994.

NOTES

1. Theodore H. Friedgut and Jeffrey Hahn, eds., *Local Power and the Post Soviet Politics* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994) and Jeffrey Hahn, ed., *Democratization in Russia: The Development of Legislative Institutions* (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

2. "O mestnom samoupravlenii v RSFSR," *Vedomosti sezda narodnykh deputatov RSFSR verkhovnogo soveta RSFSR*, 29 (18 July 1991). This law was published in the local press and many deputies used their copies for guidance during sessions of the soviet and maly soviet.

3. Our discussion of the standing commissions is based on personal participation in their sessions. The author was unable to attend sessions of the commission on transport, culture, sport, etc.

4. *Protokol malogo soveta*, 25 December 1991.

5. *Ibid.*, 8 January 1992.

6. *Ibid.*, 13 January 1992.

7. *Ibid.*, 28 January 1992.

8. *Ibid.*, 28 January 1992 and 13 February 1992.

9. *Protokol desyatoy sessii gorsoveta: pervy etap*, 19 March 1992 and *Protokol desyatoy sessii gorsoveta: vtoroi etap*, 25-26 March 1992.

10. *Protokol malogo soveta*, 24 March 1992.

11. *Ibid.*, 15 April 1992.

12. *Protokol desyatoy sessii gorsoveta: treti etap*, 16-17 April 1992. Yeltsin had supposedly ordered an increase in teachers' salaries at the beginning of the year, but the funds had never been provided.

13. *Protokol malogo soveta*, 5 May 1992 and 15 May 1992. Some members of the Democratic Russia faction objected to the changes in regulations and walked out of the session of the full soviet, bringing its deliberations to a halt. But the *maly soviet* overcame this crisis by creating a conciliatory commission to cope with these objections and the session was resumed. The author observed the commission's deliberations. See *Protokol desyatoy sessii gorsoveta: Pyaty etap*, 20 May 1992.

14. *Protokol malogo soveta*, 26 May 1992.

15. *Sovetskaya Sibir*, 21 June 1992.

16. *Protokol odinnadtsatoi sessii gorsoveta: Pervy etap*, 10-11 June 1992.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. The author attended most of the public hearings. Although the questions from the floor were in written form (in keeping with Soviet practice), they were sharply critical of the proposed taxes.

21. *Sobranie aktov prezidenta i pravitelstva Rossii*, 41 (10 October 1993), 4306-4307.

22. *Ibid.*, 43 (25 October 1993), 4481-82 and 44 (1 November 1993).

23. Less than 25 percent of the voters participated in the elections in other districts.

24. *Novosibirskoe gorodskoe sobranie deputatov: Protokol*, 14 December 1994.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 6 April 1995.

27. *Ibid.*, 20 April 1995.

28. His report provided a detailed discussion of each city department's activities. A number of them were consolidated to lower the costs of administration. See *Novosibirskoe gorodskoe sobranie deputatov: Protokol*, 19 January 1995.

29. Ibid.

30. For example, when the deputies argued that aid to children not be reduced under any circumstances, the mayor replied that this would be impossible without imposing increased rates for citizens living in city housing.

31. *Novosibirskoe gorodskoe sobranie deputatov: Protokol*, 2 February 1995.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 16 February 1995.

34. Ibid., 16 March 1995.

35. *Postoyannye kommissii po samoupravleniyu: Protokol*, 24 January 1995.

36. Ibid., 15 March 1995.

37. Ibid., 15 April 1995.

38. Ibid., 18 May 1995.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 23 May 1995.

41. *Postoyannye kommissii grazhdanskikh prav*, 14 April 1995. A young woman had complained that the militia had failed to respond to her complaint that she had been assaulted by a member of the local mafia. Direct intervention by an elected deputy forced the militia to respond, but the deputy was then himself assaulted and given permission to arm himself with a gas gun.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid., 1 June 1995.

44. *Novosibirskoe gorodskoe sobranie: Protokol*, 15 June 1995.

45. Ibid., 6 April 1995.

46. Ibid., 14 April 1995.

47. Ibid., 9 March 1995.

48. Ibid.