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The State of St Petersburg's Municipalities: Conditions for Local Governance in Russia

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Abstract

The State of St Petersburg's Municipalities: Conditions for Local Governance in Russia

The study's focus is put on the lowest level of Russian local politics, empirically represented by two municipalities in St Petersburg. It aims at identifying factors that influence the work of municipal councils. Municipal organs are since their establishment in 1998 officially self-governing and responsible for a wide array of activities within their territories. They are perceived as administrative domains in this paper, parts of a hierarchic domain-structure. The municipal domains are both fiscally and politically restricted by upper political levels – mainly the regional authorities – that heavily reduce the capabilities of the municipal councils' activities. Besides being dependent on resources from the regional and federal level, the municipal councils' budgets are reliant on taxing of commercial retailing within its boundaries. Joint with the basic social and demographic circumstances of a municipality, this factor is likely to shape the extent of the council's activity. The field study conducted specifies that while a geographically central municipality is engaged in infrastructure-maintenance and cultural activities, a peripheral ditto is mainly concerned with social help. Deputies in both districts perceive the current prospects of local government as being limited by outer influence, most of the people involved in the councils are unpaid and the resources needed to communicate with the inhabitants do not exist. The general and actual weakness of local governments is mirrored in the public attitudes, influenced by state-controlled media and revealed in participatory election turnouts. The election in December 2004 produced turnouts exceeding the legitimate limit of 20 % in almost all municipalities. However, the figures are to some extent the results of administrative pressure and liberals claim that plain frauds determined many outcomes. Tendencies point towards a politicization of municipal organs, whereas presently many perceive them as simply administrative. The municipal domain is characterized merely by responsibility instead of actual authority, ownership and substantial spatial impact. It is reliant on higher-level domains while competing for resources with neighboring domains.

Keywords: Local politics, municipalities, transformation, political legacy, local self-government, domains, political space, spaces of attitudes, local democracy, Russia, St Petersburg

Foreword & acknowledgements

Where is Russia headed? The question has been asked many times since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Opposed to the cliché, I am convinced that Russia can be understood with reason, but it will take a whole lot of reasoning.

Two-thousand-and-four was the year when former Soviet republics and satellites joined the European Union whereas Ukraine looks to have experienced a liberal turnover. At the same time, Russia seems to distance herself from the rest of Europe as Putin reestablishes some of the lost central authority. The renowned journalist Anna Politkovskaya sends this critical report in her most recent book *Putin's Russia*, “Yes, stability has come to Russia. It is a monstrous stability under which nobody seeks justice in lawcourts which flaunt their subservience and partisanship”. Undoubtedly, Russia is faced with a challenge; it may not be put simply as choosing the right path of two possible. Yet, if there is a path towards actual democracy, legitimate political decentralization is indisputably one of many needed signposts.

I would like to express gratitude to Thomas Borén for introducing me to the subject of Russian local politics. In addition, I want to send my thanks to the Swedish Institute for financing the minor field study, to Darya Khakunova for excellent interpreting, and to Oleg Pachenkov at the Centre for Independent Social Research for inviting me to St Petersburg. Thanks also to Ludmila Chernobrovkina, Vladimir Gel'man, Maria Bergman and Arnold Renting.

1. Points of departure

Municipalities are the smallest local administrative units operating in cities of the Russian Federation. During the Soviet-era, units equivalent to municipalities were components of *the executive vertical*, a hierarchic multi-tier administrative system. In the middle of the 1990s, a reform was launched to break this tradition through the concepts of decentralization and self-government, which are key ingredients in western-defined democracy. However, previous research has shown that the reform has only been moderately realized and that Russian municipalities cannot be perceived as autonomous (Gel'man, 2003, 2004a, b, d).

The idea of local self-government as a democratic feature, formally performed in the municipal reform, represents an aspect of transformation. The discontented implication, however, suggests that the political system could not deliver a realization of the reform. The local level became a brick played out against the strengthened regions (the other main local political level) by the federal authorities. The restriction of regional autonomy can be apprehended as a move in controlling the federation's centripetal forces, thus the objectives of keeping the federation integral and substantial decentralization lie in conflict. The misguided route of municipal development primarily suggests an immature political structure or alternatively half-hearted intentions of the legislators. Secondly, since such reform requires enforcement from outside the political structures, it suggests a deprived foundation of political culture. As Vladimir Gel'man puts it, "most of Russia's citizens are poorly prepared for self-government in their localities" (Gel'man, 2004a, p. 85). Yet, political culture also includes the local administrators, who also suffer from lack of experience in many areas of competence. Stenning (2004) stresses that the development of empowered local governance in post-socialist states "seems to have heralded a new era in local politics as localities are forced to adopt proactive economic strategies and to become political actors in their own right" (p. 88). In other words, changes in the political culture of both the public and local administrators would benefit the development of local governance.

Overlooking the context of Russian local government, the Russian Federation has since the break-up from the Soviet Union experienced a still-continuing period of economic and political transformation. The term *transformation* is used further on in the paper instead of *transition*, which connote a process from point a to point b, or from totalitarianism to democracy. The process is far more ambiguous and irregular. While different aspects of market economy and political liberalization have developed unevenly and only partially, many aspects of the Soviet-Russian society has been removed while some remain. Nevertheless, the fact that a vast majority of the country's population has been raised in a Soviet-society indicates that the Soviet heritage is not mainly manifested through exterior structures of society; rather the heritage goes beyond society, penetrating individual mentality and consciousness. Most researchers involved in transition-studies illustrate social and political structures as frames for political action. These frames formulate the likeliness of actions to occur, but they do not deprive the dynamics of politics as a process of decision and action (Karvonen, 1997, p. 75). These decisions and actions are likely to hail from individual and collective mind-sets embedded in Russian political cultures.

It appears risky to appreciate the duration of the transformation, and even more so to predict where it will lead. Western defined democracy is by no means the only possible end-station for a country experiencing transformation. Yet, while aspiring to seize hold of some aspects of a country's transformational state of being, a measure stick is needed. In this case, when examining components of local politics, the decentralization and self-government achieved in many European countries, conceived as elementary components of democracy, is being used indirectly. Not necessarily given that it is the right way to go, but since the formal

efforts in Russia so far has pointed towards this structural model as an example. Assessments may also be done from past conditions of local politics in Russia (another potential measure stick); however, such an approach seems anachronous in its nature. Nonetheless, the significance of the tradition of politics holds value as one of many illuminating factors. The problems of macro-political transformation in terms of authoritarian heritage and sluggishness are also attached to the local-level politics, not least in the sense that the structure and influence of local governments to a large extent is settled from above (Kirkow, 1997, p. 54).

So, besides the position of local political institutions in bigger institutional structures, other less tangible features as political culture and political heritage must be considered, even when looking at individual local political units.

1.1 Purpose of the study & focal questions

The overall aim of this study is to examine the function of Russian municipal organs and to produce an understanding about the low-level local politics of Russia. In particular, the study looks into the conditions for individual municipalities in St Petersburg. Focus is put on circumstances influencing the work of municipal councils', and in turn, the councils' influence on the inhabitants and the municipal territory. It also concerns the set-up for the municipal election that holds some aspects of the relationship between electors and deputies, and furthermore, the relationship between the municipal and the regional level. Finally yet importantly, differences between individual municipalities will be highlighted. Accordingly, the study's focal questions are formulated as follows:

- What is the current function of Russian municipal governments?
- What influences the function and the conditions for municipal governments?
- How, and why, do the reach and functions of municipal governments differ?

In a broader sense, the study purposes at illuminating parts of post-Soviet Russia's still-continuing transformation *through* the lens of local politics, a peripheral subject in both transition-studies and human geography (Gel'man, 2004a, p. 1, & Borén, 2002, p. 1). Since observers recognize general tendencies towards recentralization during Putin's reign as signs of decelerating political transformation, the state of municipalities may be a crucial indicator, in a genuine or figurative sense, of the state of democracy in Russia.

1.2 Methodology & sources

The overall method of the study may roughly be described through the chronology of the work carried out. Firstly, a primary assessment of the practicalities attached to municipal councils' activity was conducted. Secondly, the deputies' role, their characteristics and priorities were considered. Thirdly, the attitudes and perceptions of people (outside the political structure) regarding municipal administration were taken into account. Fourthly, the non-empirics provided understanding of the general situation for Russian municipalities through scholarly interpretations. These four stages made up a base of material analyzed through geographical concepts.

The empirical material was obtained through fieldwork in St Petersburg during one week in early December 2004. It mainly consists of interviews and observation. The

interviews varied regarding form, length and obviously, respondents. Most interviews were carried out in Russian with the help of interpreters. Deputies (in two municipal councils), researchers and most electors were interviewed in a qualitative (semi-structured) manner, not in the sense that the respondents could talk completely freely, rather they could respond freely to the questions asked. A few electors were also interviewed in a very informal manner during informal meetings bordering to friendly dialogues. Thus, the researcher provides thematic frames, while he lets the respondent influence the course of the conversation (Holme & Solvang, 1997, p. 99). In total, ten people were interviewed individually in St Petersburg while six were interviewed in a group. In addition, conversations with seven individuals were held informally, more or less about the subject of local politics. Two of the “formal” respondents favored being anonymous, yet most respondents only appear by their given name in the report. One has been given an assumed name. The quality of the interpreters shifted considerably, but the most essential interviews (with the municipal deputies) were translated distinctly. The interviews held in English also shifted in quality; therefore, segments of interviews providing vague or indistinguishable answers have not been used since the risk of misinterpretation seemed likely. A list presenting the respondents is found in the end of this paper.

Observations were carried out simply by moving around in the districts studied, noticing the physical (concrete) urban landscape; and by noticing the behavior and appearance of people germane to the study. The two districts visited were not subject to equal observation in terms of time spent there and areas covered. Furthermore, the descriptive information attained prior to the field study only regarded one of the districts. These circumstances suggest that a full comparative study cannot be carried out, yet, the interviews from the two districts were roughly equal in most aspects. Most of the questions asked were formulated in the same way, and the interviews lasted for approximately the same time (one hour). Thus, an evaluation of the two districts is achievable.

The empirics (interviews and observation) are one (1) of three bases of answering the focal questions of this study. The other two are (2) the historical background of local politics and general political structure in Russia and (3) contemporary scholarly research on the subject. A review of articles in a St Petersburg-newspaper about the subject was also done. In a six-month time-span, only four articles covered municipal governance, one of them is being used in this study. The historical background is constructed as a funnel, narrowing down the concerns and moving ahead chronologically to the current circumstances. The background provides the reader with the historical context of Russian political culture and the heritage of authoritarianism, which must be stressed as significant. The chapter *Russian political legacy* is mainly based on books written by historians and contemporary political science scholars’ consideration of history. Most papers on Russian local self-government are authored by political scientists, even though a few imprecisely display examples of geographical approaches. This fact has offered a challenging and stimulating objective for geographical theoretical concepts and perceptions. Thus, the theoretical sections including the analysis are based on geographical premises. Geographical perception and terminology also influence the presentation of the empirics. In a sense, the initial section regarding transformation also offers a base for explanation while the geographical theory rather illuminates the circumstances, offering ideas of awareness. In other words, the theme of the study is clearly multi-disciplined, yet it is mainly recognized and studied by the use of geographical tools. In considering the empirical material, the major foundation of the study, it is somewhat abstracted separately before being used as a subject to geographical theoretic handling.

The observational empirics may be described as both passive and participatory. When concrete space is observed, the observer does not inflict on its appearance or its shape. Yet in a sense, such observation is not passive since the researcher possesses his own hermeneutic

scheme of interpreting derived from individual experience and frames of reference that cannot be shut off. While a building's shape does not change, its visual function and esthetic quality does. The methodologist Andrew Sayer (1992) perceives observation as a *thought object*, divergent to *real objects* as facts (things or e.g. states of the world) (p. 47). In considering such ideas on the nature of observation when presenting the empirics in this paper, the researcher (observer) is present through the stylistic form, by using "I" and "me" continually. This presentational style does not change the subjective influence, instead it emphasizes the fact that the observations are *not* objective, expectantly it also clarifies whose interpretation is being used and when. Moving beyond observation, the researcher is far more influential on a respondent than on a building. Undeniably, this influence is likely to be even more significant under the circumstances given this on-place study. The researcher should be aware of what impression he may give of himself in the eyes of the respondent, if this is done truthfully, one must not necessarily seek to alter the impression given, but to identify it. An alteration does not promise to improve the outcome of the interview, but obviously one must adapt respectfully to local cultural "do's and don'ts". In this case, the researcher was a young, tall, badly shaved, male foreigner who could not verbalize in Russian, and who had not shined his shoes even though they were Italian. He took his hat off and did not use the word *information* during the interviews, which is told to have a suspicious meaning in Russia. Yet it is hard to tell what kind of characteristics of oneself is noticed and has an effect, and what does not. Borén puts it like this:

Neither as persons or researchers are we conscious about our whole being. Furthermore, neither can we gain full insight into whom the respondents believe us to be. (Borén, *forthc.* 2005, p. 66)

Borén also highlights some of the difficulties in the process of collecting research-material in Russia. Mistrust and suspicion towards foreigners resulting from propaganda and intimidation during the Soviet era still exists (*ibid.*, pp. 67–68). The fieldwork joint with this paper experienced one or two cases of such behavior, but it was not nearly as big a problem as the difficulty in making permanent arrangements. The time and location for the actual interviews corresponded badly with what was previously decided, this was also the case regarding informal appointments.

Methodology also concerns the managing of the empirical material, such as the process of selection. While being qualitative and individual, the empirics summoned up constitute an irregular set of different understandings of municipal politics, or a fragmented system of actors or agents. In finding the significant circumstances attached to the study's focal questions, they need to be arranged and somewhat categorized. Sayer's (1992) realist approach is a well-suited tool for arranging the unorganized empirics. He uses two definitions of the relations between actors in the system. Contingent (or external) relations are made up of similarities and characteristics, a banal example may be the fact that both the municipal and the city administration is made up by a majority of male deputies. Another example is that a deputy like other inhabitants of the municipality is allowed to vote, the deputy is also an elector. This study is concerned with another type of relations, so called necessary (or internal) relations (*ibid.*, pp. 92-94). These relations are shaped by the social and the political system that they also constitute. Each relation signifies a dependence, or interdependence. Sayer exemplifies this by considering the relation landlord-tenant, where the relation define the position of the actors; there can be no landlord if there are no tenants and vice versa (*ibid.*, p. 92). Thus, the relation between electors and elected qualify as a necessary relation, which is relevant to this study. As do the un-individual relation between the municipal council and the raion executive committee, operating on the next superior level. As we shall see further on, these relations largely decide and define the position of municipal councils.

1.3 Disposition

Following the introduction, chapter two presents different but compatible theoretical outlines. The outlines may be seen as a few tools from a geographer's toolbox, namely the *domain*-concept and a three-layer model that shed light on different aspects of space. The third chapter centers on history and foremost the structures that have sustained through history. It is constructed as a funnel, narrowing down the concerns from the origins of Russian political structure to local politics during Gorbachev's reign. Chronologically, the chapter ends with the Soviet break-up. Chapter four takes on the post-Soviet years and the launch of the municipal reform. Subsequently, the reform's implication in St Petersburg and possible future development for local governmental units are presented. Chapter five presents the empirical material collected during the field study. The presentation is given in a prosaic style of expression. The interviews are the center of attention, but surrounding observations are also included in the text. The first two sections depict visits to two St Petersburg districts, where interviews were conducted. The third section is concerned with the attitudes of the electors while the fourth section presents an interview with a Russian scholar. Chapter six offers an analysis of the empirical material from the theoretical settings presented in chapter two. Conclusions are drawn from the study and suggestions are given for future research on the subject. In chapter seven, sources and references are listed. Pictures and an official list of municipal activities may be seen in the appendix.

2. Theoretical settings

[...] we have two diverse systems in interaction. One is the predominantly time-directed warp of individual life-paths, which make up the population of an area and the concomitant capability constraints. The other is the more space-oriented set of imposed constraints of domains and bundles to which the individual may or may not have access according to his needs and wants. (Hägerstrand, 1979, p. 152)

In order to grasp the results from the study – and in order to deliver them further – a theoretical framework is needed. Below, concepts and theoretical presumptions concerned with the object of study are presented. Firstly, through a model that discerns spatial layers, aspects of a local government and its activities may be tracked down on each layer in different forms. Secondly, the concept of *domain* and *domain-structure* are outlined. Thirdly, previous research on the subject is presented, mainly through applied theoretical approaches. Fourthly, the significance of symbolism in St Petersburg is highlighted.

2.1 Spatial contents: political spaces and spaces of attitudes

In considering the contents within territorial boundaries of various sizes, it is helpful to dissect space into layers. Geographers often identify the landscape of visible objects as concrete space, a first layer that sets up conditions for a formation of *social space*. Social space is a set of configurations making up conditions for people living there. It involves questions like “who owns what and where?” and “who decides what?” etc. capturing *political space*. This layer does not merely concern the social and the political state in the municipality; it also covers the actions taking place. However, decisions are derived from *abstract space* (see Aner, 2002, pp. 51–62), the third layer concerning aspects of individual and collective thoughts and attitudes. From this point on, the term *space of attitudes* will be referred to as an aspect of abstract space, most relevant in this study.

The three-layer spatial model (see fig. 1) may be used to arrange and categorize events and phenomenon in a restricted area, but also to track down causal events. As an example, an idea on the third level becomes a political decision on the second, and perhaps a concrete spatial change on the first. In turn, the spatial change may influence space of attitudes in a direct or indirect matter, through social and political space (Westman & Hjelm, 2004, p. 6). Applied on the conditions of municipalities, all three layers are essential. Yet, the second and third layer appears the most central in terms of their potential dynamics. Thus, the inhabitant’s and the deputies’ attitudes and opinions towards the municipal council and the deputies’ mental activity constitute parts of space of attitudes. Whereas the extent and the nature of the council’s influence fit into social and political space.

Empirically though, the influence on each layer is not restricted to the territory of the municipality. Even if there is interdependence between layers of identical spatial boundaries, causal events or currents of influence cross these boundaries (see fig. 2). As an example, the municipality’s political space may have strong currents of influence coming from bureaucratic centers outside its boundaries, and people’s attitudes are obviously affected by external media and people. Even concrete space is subject to outer influence, e.g. by an industrial plant located nearby, polluting the air.

A distinction must be made between the two focal points of political space and space of attitudes. Both spaces overlap and are interconnected to some extent, also in the sense that deputies (in terms of decision makers and administrators) obviously generate attitudes. Even so, the former expression covers the political reach and the limits of decision making as well as the accommodation of a political unit (the municipal council) in a larger hierarchical

system of politics. The spaces of attitudes, on the other hand, illustrate people's attitudes (individual or collective) towards local politics.

Political space must be further discussed and put into a broader context. As the study evolves, we shall keep in mind the position of political space in the three-layer model since no spatial layer is ever cut off from its surroundings.

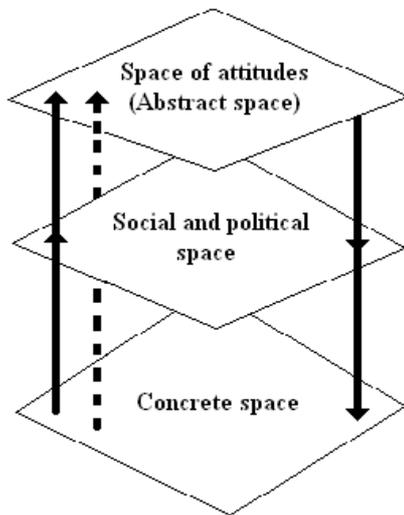


Fig. 1. Three-layer-model from Westman & Hjelm, 2004, p. 6.

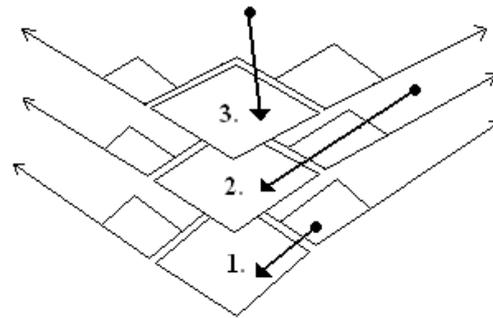


Fig. 2. Model illustrating outer influence on the three spatial layers.

2.2 Abstracting local government: scales and domains

According to Taylor and Flynt (2000), the general function of local government is derived from two main needs of the modern state. The practical need for decentralization tends to be rather uncomplicated; various functions are more efficient when decentralized as the remoteness of decision-making reduces. The second aspect is that the government function of the state requires legitimacy, which can be drawn from various degrees of local autonomy. Empirically, local governments will differ, but theoretically, the nature of local government will stay the same and be based upon these two tasks (*ibid.*, pp. 316–319). Empirical difference may rest upon the scale and structure of government-levels.

The local is the lowest scale, the highest the scale of worldwide international organizations. The middle scale of the nation-state is well established, but the intermediary scales between state and municipality can vary. Some states have no intermediary tier between the national and the local, others have several tiers [...] and relationships between these levels are highly variable. (Mamadouh et al., 2003, p. 456)

A scale is defined from relations with other scales. Consequently, “no scale exists without the other” (*ibid.*, p. 457). In theorizing on the subject of local governments, the relationship with other political or administrative levels is essential, regarding the obvious size of scale but more significantly, in terms of flows of influence. Accordingly, this is where it gets problematical since there are various types of influence and since the influences in their turn are relational and complicated to apprehend. The sum of influences constitutes the balance or the unbalance between the local government as a state-instrument and as an instrument for the locality. The influence channeled from each level to another in the hierarchy, generally from the top down, may consist of legislation, decisions and guidelines that can restrict or enforce the level influenced. Apart from the state influence, informal or party-restricted influence can

also be shifted downwards in the hierarchy. Furthermore, depending on the fiscal structure of the hierarchy, economic dependence (and interdependence) may keep subordinate levels in control in a constant manner.

The local level consists of small but numerous units, such as municipalities. Each unit's administrative body is formally responsible of stipulated areas of accountability, commonly areas of local importance. The areas of responsibility do not correspond with the whole territory within the unit-boundaries. Thus, there are in other words other areas of federal and regional responsibility inside the local unit's territory. The geographical concept of overlapping *domains* (or control areas) comes in handy when illustrating and deriving these segments of political space. Torsten Hägerstrand (1970) distinguishes a hierarchic system of domains, spatially recognized as a patchwork of zones dividing the cultural landscape, visible or not to the eye. Each domain is defined from the owner or manager (administrator) of the domain, in other words, an agent or institution that have the principal decisional-power inside its boundaries. Yet, domains are not merely spatial, they also

refer to a time-space entity within which things and events are under the control of a given individual or a given group. The purpose of domains [...] seems to be to protect resources, natural as well as artificial [...] and to form containers which protect an efficient arrangement of bundles, seen from the inside point of view of the principal. (p. 150)

The isolation of these containers vary considerably, since the wide-ranging domain-concept may be applied both to a favorite chair in front of the TV and a vast nation-state. Hägerstrand identifies house-property as the lowest link in the *territorial* hierarchy of domains. Higher levels as municipal-, provincial- or federal domains hold two explicit purposes, (1) to charge of common interests that require broader support that subordinate domains cannot mobilize; and (2) to exercise control downwards (ibid., 1988, pp. 44–45). These higher-level domains, which in Hägerstrand's argument include local government-domains, possess lengthy authority in time opposed to temporary domains as seats in the theatre and telephone booths. The lengthy or permanent domains are generally higher up in the hierarchy of authority, e.g. nation-states or multi-national companies (ibid., 1970, p. 150). Accordingly, when the dynamics of the domains are considered, this is where the concept gets exceedingly useful. Hägerstrand explains it like this:

Those who have access to power in a superior domain frequently use this to restrict the set of possible actions which are permitted inside subordinate domains. Sometimes they can also oblige the subordinate domains to remove constraints or to arrange for certain activities against their will. [...] Gaining access to power within a domain is a problem that may be solved in a variety of ways, of which only some are economic in the ordinary sense. (ibid.)

This quote emphasizes that systems of domains are dynamic, since the domains interact and produce changes in the conditions for other domains. The context of this interaction may be theoretically apprehended by a general consideration of Hägerstrand's time-geography. He argues that overlapping systems generate enduring change that continually redefines the relations between actors. This also goes for the system of domains; processes and domains compete for the same resources, material resources or simply space (ibid., 1991, p. 134). In this sense, space is not merely space. It should rather be labeled *action-space* as the domains seek areas of authority, not necessarily spatial areas but areas of influence (extended reach). We are now discussing the domain as a zone of control, which appears appropriate for this study rather than considering ownership-domains. Ownership identifies domains more clearly, it also seems as if such domains generally have bigger impact on concrete space, since ownership suggests extended abilities for the domain (see Améen, 1964, Lundén, 1997,

1999). However, Lundén's (1999) urban geographical study of Stockholm also highlights communal domains' impact on space. Importantly, the relation between communes is described as competitive in many senses (pp. 68–69). His study accentuates that competitiveness does not merely concern the vertical hierarchy, but also domains on the same level.

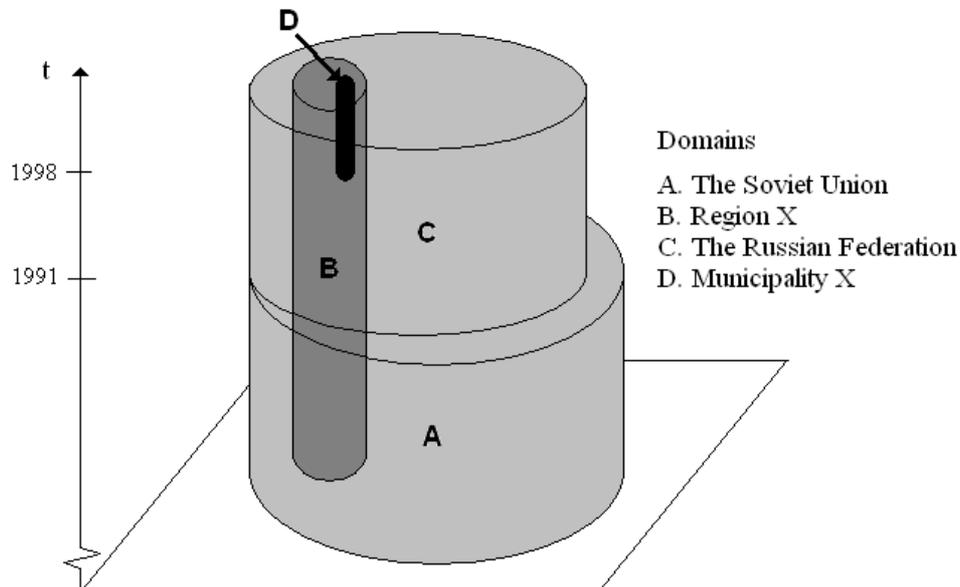


Fig. 3. Territorial domain-hierarchy through time (inspired by model in Hägerstrand, 1970, p. 151).

Figure 3 depicts three Russian territorial domains spatially, their basic positions, and examples of shifts (the top domain shrinks when the Soviet Union disintegrates, and the implication of municipalities). Obviously, a municipality's domain-boundaries do not correspond accurately with the boundaries of the municipal territory. The territory occupied by roads, buildings, schools etc. may belong directly or indirectly to upper state authorities' or private agents' influence and responsibility. When the stipulations are vague or trespassed for one reason or another, e.g. that the municipal level cannot fulfill the areas of their responsibility, higher levels or private agents may take over. Such interventions furthermore draw attention to the overlapping of the domain structure (see fig. 4). The model displays the fundamental links of influence between levels of government. The degree of influence is not appreciated, neither is the nature of the influence.

Another point that must be made is that if the influence of superior levels, as the region, is apparent on the municipality's authority, the municipal domain may actually be perceived as an extension of the region's ditto. Conversely, if authentic self-government and autonomy is achieved, the municipal domain strengthens the contrast to neighboring domains. The distinction between formal and actual authority must be emphasized, since an eventual gap gives meaning to contextual circumstances and suggests an analogue domain-structure. Yet, a municipal domain can never be truly comprehensive since it is positioned within the domains of regional and federal authorities. Instead, the domain is very particular, e.g. in areas of spatial maintenance and social help. One can regard the municipal domain as weak in the aspect that it cannot regulate and penalize the inhabitants or require their service in the same way as the federal domain can. Moreover, the locality's capacity to tax inhabitants varies; in the case of the Russian Federation, it is practically non-existent.

Before moving on, the term *reach* ought to be defined. Hägerstrand (1977) stresses that the word should not only be considered in the physical sense (pp. 187–188, see also Törnqvist, 1998, p. 108). In this paper, the term is only used in a non-physical and un-

individual sense. Consequently, when the reach of municipal councils is brought up, the term rather refers to the capabilities or the influence of the council.

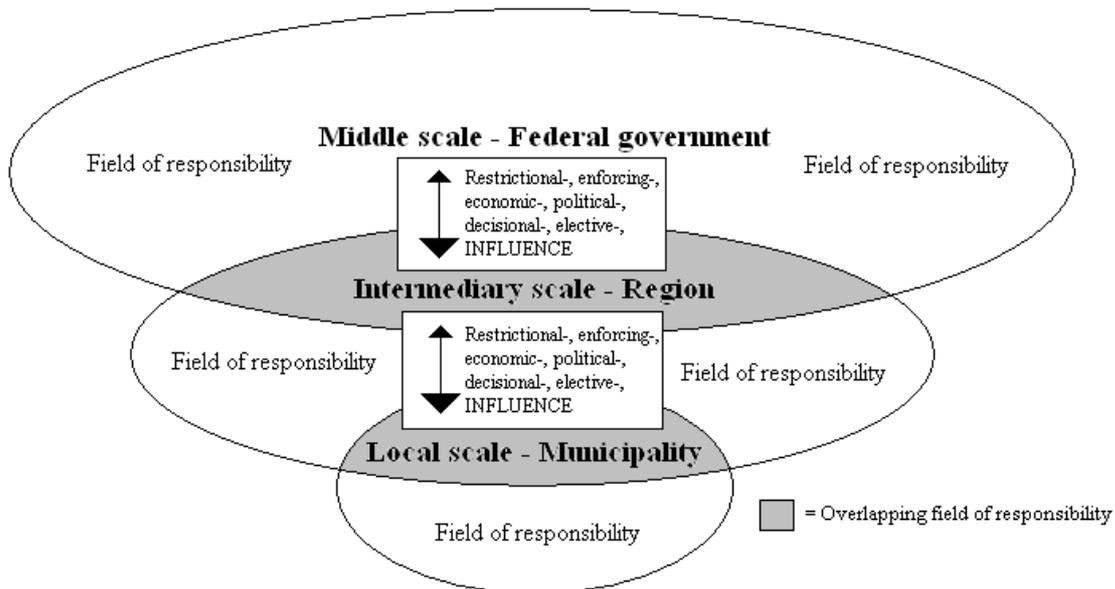


Fig. 4. Presumptive model of dynamic hierarchic interaction.

2.3 Previous research

Extensive multi-disciplined research has been carried out on Russia's post-Soviet transformation covering various social, economic, political and general aspects. Incongruously, Russia and other European post-socialist states do not appear to have been the center of attention for geographers. As Borén's examination indicates,

in both Swedish and international geographic research on the region exists a considerable discrepancy between prospective stimulating research and what has actually been carried out. (translated from Borén, 2002, p. 1)

Furthermore, the studies undertaken on the region have to a lesser extent contributed to geographical conceptualization and theoretical progress (ibid.). In the early 1990s, researchers of political science had much to deal with in the post-socialist region, but local government seemed to have been noticed as a peripheral feature of transformation study (Coulson, 1995, p. 1). Since then, local politics has been given more attention even though studies have mainly focused on the regional, rather than the municipal level (Borén, *forthc.* 2005, p. 126 referring to Lankina, 2001, p. 398–399 & Belokurova, 2000, p. 21). There are, however, exceptions - focusing on municipal self-government in Russia and the lack thereof. Two presentations from Gel'man and Borén, authors of some of the latest papers on the topic, might broaden the perspective and contribute with theoretical perceptions.

Vladimir Gel'man has considered the municipal reform and the requirements for actual self-government via the concepts of center-periphery and path-contingency (Gel'man, 2003). While examining the present status of the municipal administrations, he maintains that they cannot by far be measured as autonomous or free from the control of higher governmental levels. The state does not hand over power or resources to the municipalities, opposing the official legal declarations. Meanwhile, the regional and federal authorities try to push over the economic burdens of social obligations to the municipalities. As a result, the municipal

budgets are highly dependent upon economic transfers from the upper levels. In addition, amendments to the federal law from 2000 further weakened the prospects for local autonomy; giving the president of Russia and regional governors the right to discharge local governments for defiance of federal and regional laws. Based on these fading conditions of self-government, Gel'man suggests that the early 2000s resembles a "partial restoration of the subordinate status of local government typical of the Soviet period", a "municipal counterrevolution" (ibid., p. 49).

However, the processes and the outcomes of Russian local self-government are far diverse. While Gel'man sets the structural context of state political nature as the main determining factor, he uses the central-periphery theory to enlighten regional diversity regarding the degree of self-government accomplished by municipalities. Russian regions are generally monocentric, empowering the "...binary opposition of 'regional capital vs. the rest of the region'" (ibid., p. 50). This circumstance catalyzes conflicts between the region and the local level that gives fuel to self-governmental strives. In other words, the divergences improve the chances for local autonomy. The conflict is to various degrees apparent in most Russian regions.

The structural conditions of the region (to a large extent, the Soviet legacy), including the effects of central-periphery patterns, make up what Gel'man refers to as political opportunities, the first prerequisite in his path-contingent model (see fig. 5). If the political opportunities prove sufficient; that is, if the Soviet system was not very deep-rooted in the region, the next essential phase depends on individual reformist mobilization. The third phase depends on the strength and strategies of these individuals, alternatively the mobilization of opponents resisting reform (ibid., p. 52). The model, in all its straightforwardness, appears as a rational tool for its purpose. Yet, it requires a substantial dig-into the history of the region studied.

Favourable political opportunities	Emergence of agents of local government	Successful strategies of agents	Local autonomy
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Yes	Yes	No	No
Yes	No		No
No			No

Fig. 5. The 'path-contingent model' of the formation of local autonomy in Russia's cities. (Gel'man, 2003, p. 53)

Through a comparative case-study of the Pskov and Saratov regions, Gel'man identifies the shaping of two dissimilar paths. Center-periphery theory is here applied using another larger approach. Pskov oblast' covers a rather small area in northwestern Russia, close to the Estonian border. During the Soviet period, it was a peripheral zone with an undeveloped agricultural sector that did not contribute much to the state in comparison with other regions. According to Gel'man, due to the low level of interest from the state and a weak sense of localism, the political structure proved more receivable to a process of self-government. Gel'man regards Pskov as one of few lucky cases at least demonstrating some signs on autonomy (ibid., pp. 55–57). The Saratov oblast', a "highly developed industrial hub of the Middle Volga area" is not experiencing any movement in that direction. The region still suffers politically from embedded patron-client ties and monopolistic domination of agrarian bosses. These ties are derived from

the long period of patrimonial rule of the Communist head of the region [...] due to the huge inflow of resources from the Center for the large-scale irrigation program in Saratov oblast'.

Ruling cliques distributed these resources arbitrary [...], and urban bureaucrats as well as industrial managers had minor significance in the decision-making progress. (ibid., p. 53)

Thus, the oblast' was short of favourable political opportunities and still is. The urban actors belong to the peripheral political scene in Saratov, a backwardness restricting their mobilization. He argues that the region needs an urban breakthrough to balance the rural domination. In his concluding remarks, Gel'man takes a clear stand, emphasising the importance of big cities while taking "the urban side" in a broader discussion concerned with Russia's transformation in general:

[T]he continuing subordination of local governments in big cities, as well as the policies of redistribution of resources from centers to peripheries, makes the formation of an effective market economy and successful state-building on the local level unlikely. From the perspective of national development, big cities play a major role in Russia's globalization. They serve as mediators and missionaries in terms of the spatial adjustment of Russian peripheries to the modern world. (ibid., p. 58)

Thomas Borén's regional geographical thesis (Borén, *forthc.* 2005) contrasts with Gel'man's work in terms of methodology, theoretical framework and the general nature of the study; yet they have both reached parallel conclusions regarding the status of Russian local self-government. Even if Borén uses a more flexible formulation, stating that "local self-government has not realised its potential" (ibid., p. 123), his outlook for future progress remains rather pessimistic: Russian politics in general is moving in the other direction, towards re-centralization.

The overall aim of his thesis is to identify different forms of spatial change as well as to improve the understanding of how urban meeting places are created and shaped over time. In doing this, Borén aspires at recognizing some of the circumstances shaping contemporary Russia (ibid., p. 3). The empirics lean on field work conducted in the high-rise housing district of Ligovo, a peripheral St Petersburg district almost entirely rebuilt in the 1970s. Borén's empirics are based on participatory observation and informal interviews carried out between 1998-2000. The concrete results and descriptive passages of the study concerning the municipality and its local administration will be presented throughout this paper and be put side by side with the results of an up-to-date check on Ligovo.

Theoretically, Borén outlines the situation of political space as follows: The political space of Ligovo is made up by forces of course-relations (political currents and perceptions) that meet (or collide) at certain places (meeting places) and which existed before the municipal reform. The empirical question of whether self-governing municipalities have succeeded in moving the decisional power closer to the inhabitants equals the theoretical question of whether the municipality makes up a sufficient force of change to alter the existing balance (ibid., p. 123, 154). While an absolute balance of course-relations would mean that absolute space would not change, an unbalanced political space must therefore mean a change in absolute space (ibid., p. 154). The idea of confrontational course-relations bears some resemblance with Gel'man's explanation embodied by agents and agent strategy in shaping political space. Both theories should however be considered from an understanding of agents and course-relations as varying in strength and direction. In concrete terms, political space does not wholly consist of democrats and anti-democrats, the depiction of local Russian political discourse must not be painted in black and white.

2.4 A symbolic city - a city of symbols

Borén's study of people's lifeworlds applies so called "cultural approaches" which has experienced a general elevation within many social scientific disciplines.

What the cultural turn has meant for geography is a strong intervention of interpretive theories, methods and ideas in a field heavily influenced by tasks of mapping, describing societies spatially, and by economic thinking. (Marcus, 2000, p. 14)

The discipline of human geography has indeed experienced a shift; at least many geographers have turned to embrace cultural bases for explanation, moving away from material interpretations. Some scholars argue that the development has gone too far, that the shift actually meant moving from "vulgar materialism" to "vulgar culturalism" (Sayer, 2000, p. 166). This study aspires to travel on a middle-way by not turning away from material factors but by considering cultural features that appear applicable. Undeniably, "politics is not only about economic distribution but about recognition" (ibid., p. 169). Dynamic processes of politics

does not occur in a vacuum; nor is the product merely of the actions that take place in the formal institutions of government. Politics occurs within a cultural setting that determines how the members of a particular society think about and relate to the political process. (Kelley, 1999, p. 42)

One feature of culturalism is the emphasis of symbolism which moves beyond politics, influencing and channelling the way space is perceived. Both the place and the objects studied ought to be seen in this light.

The city of St Petersburg is an attractive subject for a symbolist approach. Founded in 1703 by Peter the Great, Russia's second largest city is now well famous for its architectural splendour and as the showground for historically worthy events. Tourist guidebooks relate to St Petersburg as "the city of high spirits and high art" and revolve around city trademarks as the Neva River, Nevskii Prospekt, the Hermitage and the Mariinskii Theatre. While the geographical position of the city in the outmost West of Russia adjacent to the Finnish Gulf has laid the ground for the conception of St Petersburg as the most European of Russian cities (which was also the intention of the founder); the spectacular features of St Petersburg's urban morphology has in the past embodied Russian alienation from Europe. To Marquis de Custine, author of *La Russie en 1839*, the Winter Palace and the block of granite holding the Bronze Horseman symbolized the massive sacrifices of human life under despotism. To him, St Petersburg proved that Russia was forever lost by culture to tyranny. The city may also be seen in the light of many uprisings and revolutions in history, such perspective tempts one to the presumption that potential sudden (political and social) change in Russia might first be seen in St Petersburg (Golosov, 2002, pp. 119–120). However, this approach is likely to fail given that the political significance of the city was heavily weakened when losing the status of capital to Moscow.

Perspectives like these perceive the city as a concrete or abstract entity in the same spirit as non-scientific writings tend to describe and explain a city's characteristics through personalisation of it. Pushkin's and Gogol's understanding and interpretation of St Petersburg does not qualify as science. Yet geographers strive to reach related qualitative perceptions of space within a scientific framework. Aner (2002, pp. 51–62) uses the term *sense of place* to capture emotional and imaginal perceptions of space that makes up an *abstract city*, this layer completes the concrete and social structures and adds subjective meaning to the place. According to Aner's definition, a *sense of place* is a set of abstract channels of identification

between the place and the people living there, not necessarily individual or collective (ibid., p. 62). In other words, a progression of identification requires tangible symbols. St Petersburg is bursting with such symbols carrying various degrees of potential identification, many of them with an apparent historical character. While the historical symbolism from the tsar-epoch is very much outstanding in St Petersburg, the 20th century-symbolism is apparent in most post-socialist states (see Stenning, 2004, pp. 99–100). Simultaneously the city itself, as shown above, brings significant meaning as a macro-symbol. An additional example is that of St Petersburg as a nationalistic symbol of persistence coming mainly from the siege during the Second World War. The importance of such experience is not likely to die away even if the “nation” dissolves as the Soviet Union did. Abstract space may consist of feelings of pride, dishonour, admiration, dislike, and indifference etc. towards the city and constitute a positive or negative sense of place. Aner’s awareness of these circumstances is crucial, but the perception appears unruly in terms of application, especially in a city of St Petersburg’s size. A vast majority of the city’s inhabitants does not live close to the prominent symbols of central St Petersburg. Obviously that does not mean that people living in non-central St Petersburg does not identify with those symbols, it is on the other hand likely that less prominent local symbols are of significant importance, charged with a positive or a negative sense of place.

Then, how does this symbolism apply to local politics and administration? First, public spaces formally attached to the responsibility of municipal councils may be seen as indicators of the action-space and priorities of the councils. To stretch it even further, a shabby playground may suggest a council weak of resources (political or fiscal or both) alternatively that the council have other priorities. Yet, many spatial symbols in an area are permanent, or at least out of reach for municipal councils. Such a symbol can be the elementary structure and morphology of the area consequential of planning many decades before the municipal council was established. Secondly, moving beyond concrete spatial symbols, the characteristics of the council and the deputies in it carry symbolist meaning in the eyes of others. This leads us to another element of abstract space: the space of attitudes (rather than the term *political space* which insinuate political power over territory). A look into people’s political attitudes on the subject of their local municipality can scarcely be isolated from their general perceptions of the regional, the federal or even the global political level. Nevertheless, this assumption relies on the condition that the municipal council is perceived as political and not administrative. And thirdly, as Golosov points out, historical symbolism and identities drawn from history

...is not an irrelevant factor in the shaping of contemporary political processes. The emerging competitive actors of St. Petersburg’s politics actively engage identity sets derived from local history in their attempts to mobilize voters. (Golosov, 2002, p. 135)

He continues by arguing that the democrats’ intentional use of symbolism in St Petersburg’s politics helped them maintain political mandates when democrats in other Russian regions failed (ibid., pp. 135–136).

3. Russian political legacy

Russia has long been seen as condemned by both history and geography to a system of government whereby a strong state takes the place of civil society... (Cambell, 1995b, p. 147)

The historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued in 1893 that the experience of the western frontier was the core of the American character and the foundation of American democratic society. Turner stressed that the frontier, while advancing westwards, away from European influence, not only produced individualism but “the striking characteristics of the American intellect” (Turner, 2003). History can clearly be constructed and interpreted to explain present purposes and opinions. Even though the patriotic overtones in Turner’s analysis correspond with another time-period, determinist explanation of history is still preferred amongst many present historians. German history is commonly analyzed as a chain of interconnected events, a *sonderweg*, which in the 1930s led up to the Nazi overtaking (Fulbrook, 1997). Possibly, an equivalent theory can be constructed to explain the account of Russia and the Russian people through path contingency. In its place, focus is here put on the long-lived structures of Russian society and internal politics along with the effect on different forms of local government. This approach aims at identifying the structural context rather than the causal events of Russian politics.

3.1 Origins of Russian political structure

From a geopolitical point of view, Geoffrey Hosking suggests that Imperial Russia’s vast territory and vulnerability initially needed an authoritarian state to remain intact. Nevertheless, the territorial range meant that the state could not control most of the population’s lives directly. The geographical distance between state and population required improvised and irregular administrative structures. Thus, instead of creating stable regulations and institutions, the Russian state encouraged existing power-relations and reinforced them. As in the ancient Roman Empire, this strategy was mainly implemented in peripheral areas of the territorial state (Hosking, 2002, p. 5). When Russia expanded, inhabitants of new areas were assimilated and integrated (*Russified*) through the regularly forced co-operation of existing groups of elites. Some scholars argue that this method of assimilation was reused in the aftermath of the Second World War, when communist ideology replaced Christian orthodoxy as the main instrument (Karlsson, 1999, p. 109).

Hosking distinguishes an organization of personal power-relations dating back to the Kievan Rus and Muscovy realms in medieval times. Steady patron-client relationships prolonged and reproduced in the social and economic structure of landlord-serf in Imperial Russia and the *nomenklatura* in the Soviet-era (see Miller, 1983). From the establishment of the empire, the strong structures of the base and the top of Russian society have endured. However, the institutional organization of the social layers in between has been “weak and labile” and dependent on strong personalities. According to Hosking, these circumstances lay the ground for the nonexistence of civil society in Russia (Hosking, 2002, p. 5). The absence of civil society in Soviet Russia resembled, according to some scholars, the core of Marx’s utopian vision of uniting state and society (Fish, 1995, p. 30). Nevertheless, communist totalitarianism liquidated “political life” from the agenda of Russians outside the party-structure (Pipes, 1994, pp. 269–270).

3.2 The heritage of political culture

Civil society and public political life can be understood as interrelated and mutually supporting conditions for democracy, alternatively, the essential substance of democracy (Putnam, 1993). Consequently, when economic and structural approaches fail, this perspective suggests another method in recognizing factors influencing the level of democracy in a country (Karvonen, 1997, p.102). In line with this discussion, as bearer of potential local self-determination, local political life can be regarded as a major element in unfulfilled democratization. Thus, awareness of the basic institutional structural circumstances does not single-handedly provide an adequate ground for grasping Russian political traditions. As previously stated, a broader scope emphasizing non-institutional composition is needed.

Identifying certain non-formal political cultures in a society tend to be complicated if not impossible, there is also the risk of falling into determinist and nation-tied explanation (Taylor, 2000, pp. 303–304). Political changes may come from within a political culture; conversely, the changes may also origin from superior regimes as in the beginning of the communist era. Donald R. Kelley argues, “no *single* political culture existed for all levels and segments of [Russian] society”(Kelley, 1999, p. 43), which seems reasonable. Yet, he identifies some essential aspects of Russian political culture closely related with the above-mentioned lack of civil society. The average citizen in prerevolutionary and Soviet Russia until Gorbachev was, according to Kelley, not a participant but a subject to government action.

As subjects, they perceive themselves as alienated from government, politically ineffective, and manipulated cogs in the wheel of state. As the traditional Russian and later Soviet way of speaking described it, “we” are the people, and “they” are the rulers. (ibid., p. 42)

According to Valerie Kivelson, an important change in Russian political culture took place in the late eighteenth century when “new Western ideas of government and state slowly percolated into the highest educated Moscow circles” (Kivelson, 1998, p. 11). Yet, the actual effect of imported ideas remains unclear, political culture in nineteenth century Russia was still dominated by the conformity to state-power. Prerevolutionary Russian political culture was deeply embedded in an atmosphere of autocracy and tsarist absolutism derived from the fifteenth century (Kelley, 1999, p. 44, Acton, 1990, p. 17). The state pierced through most aspects of a society that lacked inputs from other institutions. Politically aware members of the elite, often with Western education, were either engaged in governmental authorities or isolated from the real political life. Common citizens’ knowledge of and interest in state politics was constricted to the idea of a benevolent tsar and general distrust (Kelley, 1999, pp. 44–46). Kelley puts some emphasis on the meaning of strong personalities in prerevolutionary Russian political culture, but this aspect does not alone explain the events of 1905 and 1917. The revolutions should be seen in the context of multi-level social dynamics and, obviously, unsuccessful warfare and frail state government (Thompson, 1996, pp. 90–91). If political culture is seen as a non-isolated feature of Russian society, there is reason to believe that a shift took place earlier, during Alexander II’s period of reform (Hosking, 2002, pp. 285–292, 382). In other words, the changes in the formal politics (liberalization) did not necessarily change the informal political substance; yet, the prospects for political cultures to be expressed increased.

When the Provisional Government in 1917 decided on full suffrage to all adults, Russia was formally more democratic than many West-European countries. Then came October and the hasty Bolshevik rise to power. Utopian assumptions and the significance of the party were two of the main ingredients of the political culture imposed on Russian society. The

intenseness of the efforts declined after the civil war when a world revolution seemed unlikely to happen (Kelley, 1999, p. 48). Before the death of Lenin, the regime began the formation of the new elite ruling class based on membership in the Communist Party and institutionalized through the nomenklatura (Moses, 1983). The nomenklatura replaced the old elite aristocracy with intellectuals convinced to “lead the less sophisticated elements of society” (Kelley, 1999, p. 51). When Stalin took over, the party input on political culture took a more traditional and conservative turn emphasizing social stability, education, the family unit and disciplined labor. With Khrushchev came the dualism of modernization (de-Stalinization) joint with an enduring devotion to the one-party rule (Thompson, 1996, pp. 393–399). Contradictory politics continued to characterize Brezhnev’s leadership and resulted in uncommitted reforms (Gelman, 1984, p. 71–76).

Many shifts occurred during the Soviet era, but according to Kelley, a few essential components of political culture prolonged until Gorbachev. The dominant role of the Communist Party and the exceptional function of the Marxist-Leninist ideology was introduced and reproduced in both mass and elite political cultures (Kelley, 1999, pp. 49–58). The Leninist ideology offered the citizens a way of understanding the world, yet, as a guide for day-to-day action it was unsuccessful. Rather, the upholding of the ideology functioned as a tool for legitimizing the regime (*ibid.*, p. 50).

Kelley uses the term ‘mass political culture’ when he discusses the Party’s impact on average non-elitist Soviet citizens. However, the term does not fully capture the nature and the width of the phenomenon, the state actually attempted to maneuver the citizens’ thinking. As Hosking puts it:

What gave the Russian revolution its impetus and the Soviet state its authority was the project of creating a new kind of human being, more harmonious, versatile, and socially conscious than people could be in a society scarred by class conflict and the division of labor. (Hosking, 2002, p. 434)

Then, did the project succeed in creating the “new Soviet man”? In any case, it achieved a new collective political consciousness and a widespread acceptance (rather than approval) towards political implications. Acceptance amongst citizens may have facilitated the overtaking of control in

all public agencies of socialization - the church, the schools and universities, the media, and the like – and [the Party] attempted to influence, if not completely to control, the role of the family itself. (Kelley, 1999, p. 55)

The political participation of average citizens was habitually restricted to demonstrate support for the regime, as voting in single-candidate elections. Yet, the conditions in totalitarian Soviet should not be exaggerated. As Kelley points out, several interviewed former Soviet citizens indicated that there were other possible informal ways of influencing official policies. Such as use of personal contacts within the government or through bribes (Kelley, 1999, p. 55). Anyhow, this channel of influence did most likely not apply for regular peasants and workers, the majority of the Soviet citizens. Moreover, such influence does not match general Western definitions of democracy (Karvonen, 1997, pp. 12–17).

During the period from the mid-1980s to the collapse in 1991, Soviet politics experienced substantial restructuring and reform. These crucial circumstances leading up to the current situation will be presented further on in the essay. First, the political history of Russia must be narrowed down to focus on the function of local politics.

3.3 Traces of local self-government in Imperial Russia

The form and function of local government or administration is largely dependent on the state leaders' idea on the relation between state and society in general (a constituent of their political culture). Yet practical conditions may also inflict on the shaping.

In England the “king’s peace” was imposed from above, through sheriffs and royal courts. In medieval Rus, the Prince was too far away and communications too poor; the community had to devise its own means of preserving harmony. (Hosking, 2002, p. 16)

This is one account of the characteristics of Russian rural local communities, known as the *mir* (village-assembly) or *volost* (the district), which later in the seventeenth century was to carry administrative responsibility for tax collecting and recruitment. The mir governed a large village or a number of small ones and was lead by an elected *starosta* (elder). Participation in the small community was uttered through direct democracy or social representation (Ohlsson, 1979, p. 40). As stated by Hosking, the persistence of the mir was based upon joint responsibility and the peasants’ special relation to the land that they cultivated. There was an idea of the land as being a common resource that concretized with the periodical redistribution of land among the mir-members (Hosking, 2002, pp. 16–17, 67). Besides land-distribution, the community accounted for investigating crime and judging minor illegalities; the community also functioned as an ecclesiastical unit. Nevertheless, princes and boyars in feudal Russia considered the mir as part of their estate management and made “[...] no distinction between public and private affairs” (ibid., pp. 67–68, 112).

In 1550, Ivan IV urged for closer official connection between the state and the small communities. However, since no midway institutions were formed and no support was given to establish horizontal ties between local communities, the reform failed and the main conditions remained unchanged for centuries to come (ibid., p. 112). In the later part of the eighteenth century, state-power was still composed of personal dependence. Although state orders had to be carried out, rural communities were in many aspects self-governing (ibid., p. 240).

It must be underlined that the mir was a rural phenomenon. If the significance of geographical distance on the level of local self-government is accepted, the lack of urban local autonomy may be comprehended since the state power was concentrated in towns.

Contemporary scholars of Russian politics lay emphasis on the need for a nuanced perception of the Russian authoritarian legacy (Kivelson, 1998, pp. 8–14). Indeed, the *degree* of authoritarianism and absolutism must be taken into account. Alexander II’s founding of *zemstvos* – rural elected assemblies – in 1864 may be seen as a de-authoritarian move, or even a democratic feature of Imperial Russian society (Ohlsson, 1979, p. 40). Generally, while the Soviet period saw negative assessments of *zemstvos*, there has been a recent positive reassessment by Russian scholars (Evans Jr, 2004, pp. 69–76). As we shall see, estimations concerning the function and autonomy of the *zemstvos* still appear to differ.

The *zemstvos* were established on two intermediate administrative levels – the *uezd* and the *guberniia* – while the state and the *volost* level remained unaffected. The *zemstvos* were intended to be entirely decentralized from state, which according to Lars Ohlsson was a result of a general liberal view of state and society as two different structures. The state was supposed to look after and direct state interests, while *zemstvos* would administer society in general (Ohlsson, 1979, p. 41). In reality, the relationship between the tsar representatives and the *zemstvos* was ill-defined on both levels which caused an ill-defined system of decision-making (Hosking, 2002, pp. 373–374). The voting system based partly on social class and partly on property qualifications. The nobles had the biggest electing-power, peasant representatives were often outnumbered (ibid., p. 293). Social antagonism in various areas

complicated the work being done in the assemblies, meetings were often used to resolve such issues instead of administrative ones (Ohlsson, 1979, p. 42). In 1870, municipal councils were set up according to the same principals in cities; however, the property qualifications for electors were even harder which resulted in small assemblies of wealthy nobles. While Ohlsson suggests the reforms as reflectors of liberal advance, Hosking accentuates that

The hybrid voting system reflected the regime's ambivalence about whether Russia was now a civil society or still a hierarchical one based on state service. Significantly, the *zemstvos* and municipal councils were introduced only in provinces where Russians constituted both the elites and a majority of the population. (Hosking, 2002, p. 293)

It is pointed out that *zemstvos* and municipal councils were not implemented in Poland, the Baltic or the Caucasus (Hosking, 2002, p. 293). Hence, the problems of self-government were not only of a social and economic nature, but also of an ethnic concern.

Some scholars suggest that these two forms of self-government “had very limited *self-governing* powers [and should] be seen as local administrative branches of the state” (Borén, forthcoming, 2005, p. 124, referring to Mitchneck 1997 & Lapteva 1996). Nevertheless, the *zemstvos*, and to some extent the municipal councils, is usually considered as liberal exceptions of Russian prerevolutionary authoritarianism (Kelley, 1999, p. 45). The opposing perceptions are likely to derive from different approaches.

However, most researchers seem to agree on the weakening of self-government from 1864 and onwards. Initially *zemstvos* partially accounted for education, medical care, infrastructure etc. financed by diverse forms of fees. Taxation and the police force remained strict state affairs. As early as in 1870, six years after the establishment, the tsar-state restricted the reach of self-governmental action-space financially, worried by the *zemstvos* broadening agendas (Acton, 1990, p. 79 & Ohlsson, 1979, pp. 41–42). Self-government was generally strained to passiveness until the outbreak of the First World War and the patriotism that followed. *Zemstvos* and municipal councils united in a union called *Zemgor* that offered to facilitate evacuation, medical care on the front, recruitment of labor and orders of military supplies (Hosking, 2002, pp. 388–389). In this sense, local governments actually *did* function as branches of the state.

Nevertheless, by the use of the so-called “third element”- specialists as doctors, engineers and lawyers – the *zemstvo*-reform still had considerable effects on Russian society and politics:

Those involved in running the *zemstvos* and [municipal] *dumas* acquired valuable experience in self-government and in public administration, which many of them later put to use as liberal opponents of the autocracy. (Thompson, 1996, p. 42)

3.4 Creation and transformation of the soviets

The resistance to tsarist autocracy elevated in the spring of 1905. Following turmoil and mass strikes, political advances were made by organized oppositional *soviets* (councils) consisting of workers, minor officials, intellectuals, soldiers and peasants (Ohlsson, 1979, p. 43) The soviet was set up to defend the interest of workers, and carried militant and revolutionary tendencies. The workers council initially resembled the mir in terms of figurative structure, which probably originated from smaller strike-directing worker committees.

Tsar Nicholas II's October Manifesto weakened the revolutionaries and turned liberal forces in *zemstvos* against the soviets (Thompson, 1996, pp. 75–76). The Duma was introduced in 1906 but somewhat kept in check by stipulated limitations and the State

Council, partly elected by the tsar (ibid., pp. 79). When the Provisional Government ascended in March 1917 after the tsar's removal from power, it was "from the beginning shadowed by the soviets" (Hosking, 2002, p. 393). The provisional prime minister Lvov tried to win the support of the soviets. However, when the Kadets (liberals), Mensheviks (social democrats) and the Socialist Revolutionaries (moderate socialists) defended the new alliance, they separated themselves from their popular base. These circumstances among others mentioned above gave the Bolsheviks an opening for seizing state-power in the autumn of 1917 (ibid., pp. 388–400).

Hosking underlines that the soviets of 1917 were different from those twelve years earlier,

they now had something to defend: the political settlement which had followed the departure of the old regime. They were local authorities and part of the postrevolutionary "establishment". (ibid., p. 396)

The free structure of the early soviets produced a wide array of differentiated councils stretching ideologically from extreme radicalism to more unadventurous socialism. Some were authoritarian and others were distinguished participatory democracies (Friedgut, 1994, p. 3). In addition, there was a gap between the leftist party's view regarding the assignments of the soviets. While the Mensheviks perceived the soviets as "revolutionary self-governments", the Bolsheviks described them as "revolutionary centers" purposing to achieve certain determined plans (Ohlsson, 1979, p. 45). It was the latter view that would be implicated after the Civil War and confine the rather unbound structure along with the democratic potential of the early soviets.

3.5 The local soviets

During the seventy-four years of Soviet rule, the soviets played a role far less than that envisaged for them in the spring of 1917. [...] they remained a clearly subordinate appendage of the state apparatus, administering services, but not governing their territories... (Friedgut, 1994, p. 3)

The soviets' intended role as local organs of power was replaced by the function as the intermediary link between the party and the people (Ohlsson, 1979, p. 131), they became large ornamental assemblies that seldom met (Cambell, 1995, p. 149). The arrangement of soviets on different levels is illustrated in figure 6. While considering the figure, attention must be given to the massive influence of the Communist Party embedded on all levels.

Subsequent to the October Revolution, the local soviets were arranged in three levels – *oblast* (guberniia), *uezd* (district) and *volost* (smaller district) – the two former intermediate stages were earlier partly governed by *zemstvos*. In 1922, the city soviets were re-established while the city-*raion* soviets served as the bottom link in urban areas. As the system of soviets stabilized, new legislation stipulated that if a city was considered as an *oblast*-centre, there was to be no election of an executive committee. Instead, the city soviet was lead directly by the Central Executive Committee (see dotted line in fig. 6). This was done to minimize bureaucracy and to relieve city planning. The centralist control of larger cities was somewhat compensated through smaller locally based commissions and sections; but not until the constitution of 1936 were the soviets standardized in most formal aspects (Ohlsson, 1979, pp. 71–72). Yet the formal content in Stalin's constitution did – as often repeated in Soviet politics – not coincide with reality (Lars Björilin, spoken). The constitution extended the electoral right of the citizens, and in every four years, there would be direct elections for

deputies to the national legislative body, the Supreme Soviet and the soviets at republic, district and local level (Thompson, 1996, p. 298).

In practice, however, the Party still controlled the process: citizens nominated candidates for election at public meetings in factories, farms, and other organizations, and local Party secretaries made sure that only reliable individuals were put forward. (ibid.)

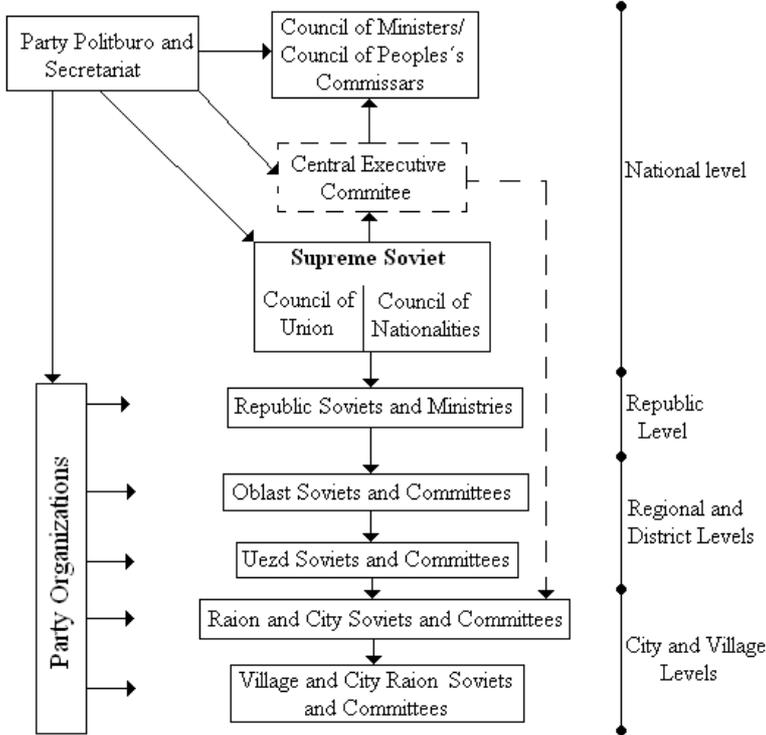


Fig. 6. Structure of the Soviet Government including the multi-level soviets. The Central Executive Committee was replaced by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet in 1936. (the sketch is based on a figure in Thompson, 1996, p. 209, and text in Ohlsson, 1979, pp. 71–72)

Not all nominees for the soviets were members of the Party, but they all had to agree on the Party’s policies. Local soviets were in other words controlled both by soviets higher up in the hierarchy and by party organizations on the same level. The conditions did not improve significantly during Stalin’s later rule. While the consumer and service sector grew under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, there were attempts to relocate the control of these from state enterprises to the local soviets. This reform failed and power was instead distributed to local executive committees and departments (Friedgut, 1994, p. 6). The role of the soviets, as non-autonomous, yet necessary links in the bigger machinery, persisted until Gorbachev. However, the position of local soviets should be presented more closely before moving on.

The local soviets held “some of the functions normally related to self-governed districts” (Borén, forthc. 2005, p. 126 referring to Lapteva, 1996). As an example, the city soviet bureaucracy included a department for planning and architecture that was formally responsible for all that happened within each city’s boundaries. Though in practice,

the structure of decision-making was such that [the city soviet] did not figure very prominently in terms of its political influence, in terms of its claim to financial resources, or in terms of its ability to determine the course of actual development. (Bater, 1996, p. 126)

Bater's explanation ties together different aspects of the same problem, namely the subordinate status of city soviets corresponding with the situation for local soviets in general. The subordination rejects any outlooks for representing local interests, the core of self-government. As Thomas Borén puts it, "the determining factor was national, and not local or even regional, priorities" (Borén, *forthc.* 2005, p. 127).

Theodore Friedgut adds some reservations. He argues that the local soviets did have some areas of independent functioning. They maneuvered a large part of the consumer services as sanitation, education and housing. Nevertheless, local administrations were denied entrance to production and retailing of goods (Friedgut, 1994, pp. 5–6). Directions of prolific activities came from other actors and institutions. These circumstances may help to clarify local soviets' deficient of financial resources.

Conclusively, it is not accurate to discuss Soviet local administration in terms of self-government and autonomy. Local perspectives were systematically suppressed by central authorities, directly from above or indirectly from local Party organizations. When Lars Ohlsson concluded his thesis in 1979, his forecast on future development and reform was not very bright:

Perhaps one can draw certain conclusions concerning the great value that lay in a functioning and persistent tradition of self-government: when it is abandoned or heavily weakened during a long period, it may be difficult or impossible to successfully re-establish functions that at one point were considered valuable. (translated from Ohlsson, 1979, p. 290)

3.6 Gorbachev's reforms, electoral democratization and break-up

By the 1980s, the Soviet citizens had become predominantly urban and relatively well informed of the political circumstances affecting them. Segments of society had also grown critical and discontent addressing a more participatory system while disappointed at the defaulting reforms during Brezhnev (Thompson, 1996, p. 470). Brezhnev was followed by the two uncertain short-time leaderships of Andropov and Chernenko. When the latter's health condition seriously worsened in December of 1984, Gorbachev gave a speech that implied key parts of a reform program later to come. He underlined the need for decentralized management and increased self-government as integral ingredients of *the socialist democracy* (*ibid.*, p. 473). Following his promotion as head of the Party three months later, Gorbachev began the first phase of liberalization focusing on the policies regarding independent organizations. The concept of "Socialist pluralism" amounted in toleration of newly formed NGO's and political activity remote to the confinements of state (Fish, 1995, p. 32 & Thompson, 1996, p. 484). Yet, independent organizations, often considered as important variables in a civil society, were not officially recognized by the state until 1990 (Henderson, 2003, p. 35).

Gorbachev was soon drawn in to carry out more changes; the reforms snowballed unintentionally as some argue (Thompson, 1996, p. 470). His *perestroika* needed *glasnost* to function effectively. While the restructuring process regarded both economic reforms and changing attitudes, the concept of openness intended to deconstruct the patron-client networks which was hindering the process. Paradoxically, Gorbachev was himself highly dependent on such networks (Hosking, 2002, p. 578).

In 1987, Gorbachev turned his attention to the political structure and electoral democratization. Some claim that this was done to mobilize new segments of society against the reform opposition (Kelley, 1999, p. 88). He succeeded in winning approval for multi-candidate elections, a limitation of official posts on two five-year terms, and for constructing

a new system of soviets. The soviet-reform did not directly involve the local level, it intended to replace “the primarily symbolic, rubber stamp Supreme Soviets with active, popular assemblies” elected at republican and national levels. Democratic elections for the new national Congress of People’s Deputies were held in 1989 with a voting turnout measuring 89.8 percent (Thompson, 1996, p. 483). The voters decided on two-thirds of the congress composition while the remaining seats were reserved for Party controlled representatives of state organizations (Fish, 1995, p. 35). Most districts had two or more candidates up for nomination while some districts were subject to old-fashioned manipulation. The result of the election produced upsets at many places where Party chiefs lost against reformers. Many eminent politicians had to give up their posts, including the first secretary of the Leningrad Party committee and several government ministers (Kelley, 1999, p. 90). Yet, on the national level, Party members made up 87.6 percent of those elected, while national minorities and women were considerably few (Thompson, 1996, p. 484). Steven Fish appreciates the significance of the election accordingly:

The election [...] produced anything but a radical legislature. It did, however, allow for the election of some individuals - albeit a small minority - who harbored revolutionary agendas [...] and lent them a public platform from which they could bring the era of debate-free lawmaking by faceless figures swiftly to a close. Perhaps of greatest moment, the balloting engendered the closest thing that the populace had ever known to a real election campaign. (Fish, 1995, p. 35)

The aforementioned speech by Gorbachev in 1984 revolved around decentralization and self-government. Although his rule managed a substantial decentralizing of state, the same effort was not achieved regarding local self-government; alternatively the latter proved more difficult to implement. The shift of decision-making within the local political arena, from executive committees to the representative council of the soviet, met many problems. District and city soviets disagreed on policies and their execution; moreover, the legislation was not clear regarding the property on the mutual territorial space (Gel’man & McAuley, 1994, pp. 22–23). In any case, decentralization strengthened the lower-level soviets’ independence, as the links to higher levels were weakened (Borén, forthc. 2005, p. 128, referring to Lankina, 2001, p. 400).

Subsequent to the election, Gorbachev failed to gather a reliable supporting coalition while liberal challengers, as Boris Yeltsin, strengthened their positions. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989 along with unstable conditions in other satellites and republics further weakened the Communist Party and consequently the Soviet system. However, the main force “spelling the doom” for Soviet socialism was the failure of economic reforms and economic collapse in 1990-1991 (Thompson, 1996, p. 494). A failed coup attempted by high-ranked conservatives in August 1991 gave Yeltsin the upper hand and hurried Gorbachev’s resignation (Kelley, 1999, pp. 160–161). Even before the coup-attempt, the Russian Congress of People’s Deputies and Supreme Soviet had become multiparty bodies; the Communist Party was banned soon after. The Soviet Union ceased to exist on December 31.

4. Struggle for local self-government

...on the one hand, since the late 1980s local self-government in Russia has made conspicuous advances in overcoming the authoritarian structures of the Communist state [...] On the other hand, institutional development has been marred by grave political and institutional setbacks... (Wollman, 2004, p. 122)

Crassly, the early 1990s detachment from Communist rule allowed for a process of democratization. However, it did not prove as simple as that, the process that did take place was shaky and uncertain. The concept of local self-government was mainly used as a weapon for the central authorities against regional governments.

The first section of this chapter considers the events taking place until the implementation of municipal self-government and clarifies the overall structure of Russian contemporary politics. Subsequently, the reform's implementation in St Petersburg – the study's focal area – is presented. Finally, a forecast is given that considers a proposed law and its possible effects on local political structure.

4.1 Conditions for local government in post-Soviet Russia

According to the federation treaty of 1992, three categories of membership in the Russian Federation were set: Administrative territorial units, including most of the previous provinces and the cities of Moscow and St Petersburg (former Leningrad), territorial areas for particular nationalities, and national republics within the Russian Federation (Kelley, 1999, pp. 31–32).

Led by Yeltsin, The Russian Federation experienced a difficult process in drafting a new constitution. Following conflicts between Yeltsin (in favor of strong presidency) and the parliament, the former suspended the Congress of People's Deputies and Supreme Soviet in September 1993 (Cambell, 1995, pp. 146–147). In October, Yeltsin continued with abolition of local soviets at the city level and below while the oblast' and republican soviets were "invited" to dissolve themselves (Kelley, 1999, pp. 24–26, Hahn, 1994, p. 270). New elections to the *duma* and a referendum to ratify the new constitution were held in the spring of 1994. Included in the constitution, that later came into effect, was the right of local self-government. Local government was defined as separate of the state and as an independent and self-responsible activity intended to resolve "matters of local significance" (Gel'man, 2003, p. 48 referring to the federal law of 2000, Article 2). However, the formal constitutional definition did not correspond with the actual politics of Yeltsin at that time. Subsequent to dissolving the local soviets, Yeltsin shifted control back to the executive branches of sub-regional levels, this move led to that "the local authorities hereby again became part of a general executive power vertical [...] controlled by the regional authorities" (Borén, forthc. 2005, p. 129). Consequently, the conditions for local government from 1993 until 1995 bear a resemblance to pre-perestroika times. Then, why did Yeltsin – whose popularity based on principles of democratization, or at least resistance towards the old regime – pursue a policy of strong regions and dependent local councils? Some explain Yeltsin's policies as a pragmatic balance act. In keeping his authority, Yeltsin had to support the regions – that had previously supported him – when the evolution of local councils invested with power raised. Consequently, the local level was reinforced later in the 1990s when the regions had grown too strong (ibid., pp. 129–130). Another explanation suggests that an apparent ineffectiveness of local councils did not fit as the right instrument in carrying out sweeping reforms in a short

period of time; along with the view that “representative democracy, if introduced too early in the reform process, necessarily impedes progress” (Cambell, 1995, pp. 158–159).

In 1995, a new federal law was approved that allowed the right of local self-government – as it was declared in the constitution – to be put into practice. The legislation was a result of the increasing autonomy of the regions that posed a threat to the federal level, that reacted by again focusing on instituting self-government on the municipal level.

[T]he Yeltsin administration had come to regard local government as an political check against regional regimes, as a political machine to mobilize opposition to them, and as an agency that has in the past and could in the future deliver pro-Yeltsin vote where the republican and regional regimes had failed to do so. (Lankina, 2001, p. 401 quoted in Borén, forthc. 2005, p. 129–130)

In the following year, Russia joined the European Charter on Local Self-Government and autonomy was formally given to the municipalities - the lowest level of local administrative units often referred to as the “third level”. In 1998, a majority of Russia’s municipalities held one or two cycles of elections for local councils.

4.2 The municipal reform in St Petersburg

A short clarification of the general levels of Russian politics since the reform may come in handy before moving on. The federal level consists of President Vladimir Putin (since January 2000) and the government, chosen by the President. In addition, the дума (the national parliament) operates on this level. Below the federal, is the regional level that includes the cities of Moscow and St Petersburg, which possess regional status. Both cities are lead by publicly elected Governors who are both delegates of state power and leaders of the federal subject. Besides the federal influence, the city direction also consists of a publicly elected legislative assembly. The next administrative unit is the raion that is controlled by the regional level, thus indirectly attached to federal decisions. The territory of the raion includes a varied number of municipalities whose councils are formally detached from upper levels and entirely elected by the inhabitants.



Fig. 7. The first, second and third administrative level paralleled with examples of territorial/administrative units.

Regional governments did not welcome the evolving principle of local self-government; the Governor of St Petersburg tried impatiently to delay the process before resigning in 1996 (Borén, forthc. 2005, p. 130). Yet, the time-plan for execution of the law corresponded with what had been decided by Yeltsin in 1995 (Wollman, 2004, p. 116). In 1997 – two years after the employment of the federal laws – St Petersburg established regional laws that made the implementation of municipal self-government possible. The city territory was divided into 111 municipal administrative districts (9 satellite cities, 21 settlements and 81 intercity

municipal districts), enclosed into twenty pre-existing raions (Website of Saint Petersburg municipalities, 2004). The territorial division co-insisted to a large extent with the traditional district boundaries.

Some parts of the general formation of municipal councils are stipulated from above, while the inner formation is decided by the municipal deputies. The Charter of Municipal Formation articulates that the council should consist of seven, ten or twenty deputies elected by the population through direct elections. The deputies' term of office is four years. Along with these outlines, the charter decides the overall structure of the institutions of the administration as well as the name of the posts of municipal employees (ibid.). Dissimilarities regarding the inner arrangement are results of decisions taken by the councils themselves, as stated in a document published by Saint Petersburg municipalities:

[T]he structure of bodies in each municipal formation may differ from others. Public election[s] of heads of municipal formations are possible in accordance with the current legislation, however today the head of municipal formation in St. Petersburg is elected from among deputies. The executive body [...] may be either [a] separate legal person or [a] division of [the] Municipal council. (ibid.)

This framework suggests a potential for diversity in the formation of the councils, yet the actual activities of the councils appears to be more important. The activities should be based upon questions of local significance, which according to the official direction includes a wide array of areas: Organization, maintenance and development of pre-school education and services of culture, sports and public health, distribution of sanctions to marriage, maintenance of sanitary well-being and preservation of the environment, organization of military-patriotic education of citizens, protection of citizens in case of emergencies etc (ibid., see appendix).

Obviously, these activities require financial resources. The incomes of the municipal administration is lifted from

- Local taxes entered on the basis of Laws of the Russian Federation
- Deductions from taxes of St. Petersburg (a part of the tax from sales [(VAT, value added tax)] under the rate of 0, 4 % at the common rate of the tax of 5 %)
- Grants from the budget of St. Petersburg (for realization of minimally necessary charges determined by the Law of St. Petersburg) (ibid.)

As Gel'man points out, Russian municipalities are in general very much dependent on regional and federal grants. In 2001, the municipalities accounted for 32 % of the overall spending of Russia's consolidated funds, yet the councils only controlled 17 % of the total revenues (Gel'man, 2003, p. 48, referring to Ivanchenko, 2001).

Another round of municipal elections was held in July 2004. The voting turnouts proved very low, a majority of St Petersburg's municipalities failed to reach 20 % which was proclaimed as the lowest acceptable participatory outcome. As a result, 67 municipalities hold a new round of elections on the 19th of December 2004 (Gel'man, spoken).

4.3 A forecast

As it looks right now, the entire system of local governments will be transformed due to a new ambiguous federal law that will be implemented on January 1, 2006. The regulation redefines the self-governmental status of local governments as equivalent to *public power*. Furthermore, fiscal decentralisation is stressed in the legislation, in the sense that the

resources of local-governments shall be evened out. The allotments of resources will be delivered from the federal level, bypassing the region and the governor. A minimum level of municipal taxation is set to guarantee basic standards for social services. At the same time, the law stipulates that if a local government's debt exceeds 30 % of their budget, they will be declared bankrupt and the administration will be taken over by the regional authorities. Chiefly, regarding the structure of local politics, the law includes a marking out of new administrative units, on different local scales, that will be given self-government status. In urban areas, the raions will be specified with such status, whereas no authority is distributed to municipalities. A two-level model of local self-governments, similar to many European local political models regarding shape, seems to be in the making. However, St Petersburg and Moscow has managed to achieve exceptional status from this directive, the organization of self-government will therefore be decided by the city governments (Gel'man, 2004c, pp. 276-279).

Gel'man offers this interpretation of the proposed law, which to him seems highly contradictory.

[The lawmakers] have presented their legislative proposals as decentralizing measures. [...] [C]ritics of those bills have argued that the adoption of that legislation would result in the further centralization of power in Russia. It is apparent that the acceptance of those laws would centralize the *regulation* of the powers and responsibilities of local governments, by shifting the greater part of the legislative authority over those matters from the regional governments to the central governments. (ibid., p. 282)

The renewal of the local political formation seems to result from Putin's determination to bring an end to conflicts between different levels of government. The future changes are challenging to foresee, especially in the case of St Petersburg. Yet, the law proposal looks to benefit poor municipal districts, perhaps council's with meagre resources will be able to operate in new areas of interest.. Other than that, nothing in the legislative proposal points towards a general enhancement of municipal councils. More well-kept municipalities pose a risk of losing a great deal of their action-space due to a new "even-out"-distribution of funds. Fundamentally, the main control is merely transferred from the region to the federal authorities. Such a scenario, of "centralised decentralisation" appears baffling and does not embody genuine democratisation.

5. The state of municipalities in St Petersburg

Given the historical context and the background of Russian municipal units, a presentation of the empirical material seems appropriate. The presentation is given in a narrative language differing from the stylistic form of previous chapters.

The first two sections cover the visits to two municipalities in St Petersburg and the interviews conducted there. Section three presents the views of a few electors while section four presents an interview with Vladimir Gel'man, involved in research on Russian local government. The fifth section is a check-up on the municipal election and the following debate. The chapter ends with a short summary.

5.1 Ligovo revisited

When I tell my translator Darya that we are going to the southern suburbs to do an interview, she looks somewhat surprised. But soon after pointing out Ligovo on the map to her she giggles and inform me that St Petersburg residents does not define the district as a suburb. She first had thought that I was going to take her to Pushkin or Pavlovsk, places that I regarded as small satellite cities. Upon arriving at Prospekt Veteranov – the south west end station of the Metro – some time passes before we locate the right mini-bus. The bus drives westward through rather uniform residential areas built in the 1970s. It had earlier seemed to me that the further I got from St Petersburg's CBD the higher and more modern the buildings were, but we were now going sideways in the same "time-ring". When we are dropped off on Partizana Germana in Ligovo, I notice that the urban landscape had not changed significantly from the place we got on the bus from. High-rise houses of nine or ten storeys stand symmetrically, some exteriors wear green and orange colours but most of them are plainly grey and unclean. In front of us – surrounded by the residential houses – are a small one-storey shopping mall and a large parking lot. Several people move across the asphalt field while avoiding the biggest puddles of melted snow – a skill everyone in St Petersburg seems to possess. We walk to a long blue two-storey building behind the mall where the municipal office is supposed to be located (see fig. 8). The building is in worse shape than many of the neighbouring ones, on the bottom floor is a bar and some kind of a beauty salon. On the second floor, next to a youth club, is the municipal office. Three people are inside. One of them is Anatolii who at once invites us to the meeting room. He is the Vice Chairman of the 'Uritsk municipality number 40' council, which is the administrative name of the 54.000-inhabitants-municipality; the traditional name Ligovo is normally used in daily speech. Anatolii wears a thin black leather jacket over a beige pullover and oversized eyeglasses. He looks to be about 55-60 years old.

It is about four years since Thomas Borén (forthc. 2005) interviewed Anatolii before the municipal elections of 2000. At that time, Anatolii had the post of deputy engaged in the field of social help. He described himself as a white crow in the midst of many dishonest and crooked people involved in political affairs for own causes (ibid., p. 130). The formal action-space of the municipal council did not coincide with the real situation. Even at the formal level were the self-governmental status and the councils' resources restricted since the city of St Petersburg initiated a law that heavily altered the federal principles of municipalities. Anatolii argued that the municipal reform from the beginning was instituted because Russia wanted to become member of the Council of Europe which required a certain degree of decentralization (ibid., p. 131).



Fig. 8. The building accommodating the municipal office (top three windows to the left) in Ligovo.
(Photo: Philip Westman)

The municipal election in Ligovo of 2000 was held jointly with the election of President and Governor. Anatolii expressed worries that people would not know about the municipal election, and that the limited information would drown in the attention given to the higher-level elections. Campaigning was mainly done by passing out pamphlets and putting up posters on billboards. The presentations of the candidates followed the same pattern containing a portrait-picture, name, year of birth and a short text of the candidate's background as well as a slogan. Anatolii's slogan read: "As long there is strength, I want to be useful to people" (ibid., p. 132). The exact voting turn-out for Ligovo municipality is not published, but the result was accepted and Anatolii was re-elected as deputy and later chosen by the council as Vice Chairman.

Anatolii politely asks us if we want to smoke and then takes a seat. After presenting the purpose of the interview and my areas of interest, he spontaneously starts off by telling me about the Ligovo municipality and the council. Ligovo is the most populous of the municipalities in the Krasnosel'skii raion, which in turn is the largest of St Petersburg's twenty raions. The municipality is divided into four districts that elect five deputies each for the council, totalling twenty deputies. Eventually, I vaguely manage to take some control of the conversation by putting forward my questions, starting with why he decided to run for election in the first place? Anatolii tells me about his past career as a submarine officer in the Soviet Union navy and the experience it brought him. With a hint of a smile, he says that he got used to protect people and sought to continue doing so as a municipal deputy. As a retired naval officer he receives military pension, but he did not want to sit at home doing nothing. As a deputy, he did not receive any income. Only the Chairman and the Vice Chairman work full-time and raise wages from their work; thus 18 deputies work without payment. As Vice Chairman, Anatolii has a monthly income of "20 minimal wages" that currently equals 600 roubles totalling 12.000 roubles (app. 300 USD).

When we get into the issues of the council's influence and activities, his voice raises while gesticulating more eagerly. The municipal council is mainly involved in social help; the foremost concern is underprivileged children in poor families. Unwaged adults can receive 1.700 roubles per month if they cannot support a child's basic needs. Poor elders can also receive some support. The council also provide money purposed for school-uniforms in the beginning of each semester in September to needy children. Anatolii cannot present any figures of how many children receive support or how many families that applied for it. In its place, he continues by emphasizing that the council also fund youth clubs and patriotic education for children and teenagers. Not much has been done in terms of maintenance of yards and public spaces since the last election and apart from a couple of small playgrounds, nothing is being put up. The municipality council's focus has since 2000 been shifted more towards social help. Plumbers and electricians who maintain the residential buildings are hired and paid by the raion executive committee. Anatolii says that they obviously would like to do more in both social help and physical maintenance but that the council is heavily limited by weak resources. There are practically no industries and no large-scale commerce in Ligovo bringing substantial tax revenues. When the new federal law passes, new areas of social service will be added to the responsibility of municipalities. Anatolii is worried that the expected increase in funding from the city will fail to cover the new activities. He believes that the situation for municipalities in general may worsen. Besides possible fiscal problems, he is concerned about what will come to pass when responsibility is shifted from governmental specialists to non-paid and non-professionals.

Anatolii rises from his chair each time the phone rings, but he never picks it up. At two occasions, the door to the office opens and people ask Anatolii various questions. Apparently, there is a lot of activity in the office this Friday, two weeks preceding the election. Either way, Anatolii seems comfortable in the hectic surrounding. We continue the interview by asking him about the relation and interaction with the residents. According to Anatolii, he is recognized by people everywhere he goes; he is often stopped and involved in conversations. "I'm closest to the populace and they can talk to me whenever they want to". The municipal office in Ligovo is open every weekday from 10 am to 6 pm, the executive branch of the Krasnosel'skii raion is only open three hours a day for the public. He looks puzzled when I ask him about what common public complaints he receives. He does not see himself as a politician, and he does not think that the public does either. Anatolii insinuates that he is more of a volunteer involved in social help than a political creature. If someone is displeased by e.g. some work being done in their buildings, they do not confront him. Most issues belong to the responsibility of the raion. He can not come up with any negative critique he has got from people concerning the work carried out as a municipal deputy. Despite the weak resources, he is satisfied with what has been done since 2000. The council's internal organisation has improved and internal disputes are resolved through voting or compromises. Every two weeks, the raion executive council gathers deputies from each of the seven municipal councils. They meet to discuss and inform each other about the activities in their respective districts.

5.2 Two weeks prior to the elections

Anatolii has never been a part of any political party, neither is none of the other deputies in Ligovo currently members of any party. However, that is about to change, some of the candidates up for the December-election represent political parties of various size. Anatolii suggest that parties experiencing disappointing outcomes in the latest federal election now are trying to gain back power on the lowest local level. He is bothered about this possible

politicization and argues that the activities of the municipal council ought to be maneuvered by pragmatism.

Campaigning is mainly done by giving out pamphlets in public spaces and in mailboxes in the respective parts of the municipality where the candidates stand for election or re-election. However, Anatolii and four other members of the council have tried on a new method in reaching members of the electorate. They have - with their own money - purchased a two-page add in a TV-guide given out free of charge in the Ligovo district. General information about the time and location of the election is followed by presentations and pictures of the candidates. On the next spread are pictures and articles about Britney Spears and Brad Pitt. The TV-guide is the closest equivalent of a local newspaper or magazine customized for Ligovo.

Borén's study of the media situation in Ligovo in 2000 still seems to be accurate:

[T]here is no local newspaper in Ligovo, and other printed mass media seem to neglect this part of the city. The local press that do[es] exist in Ligovo consists of 2-3 commercial letters delivered freely in the mailboxes on a regular basis. The letters have no editorial material but consists solely of short commercial announcements. In the other newspapers in the city, Ligovo and Krasnosel'skii raion are only sporadically covered. (ibid., p. 138)

However, Borén suggest that the local TV-station (that belongs to a state-owned company), covering Krasnosel'skii raion a couple of hours every week, is more significant in terms of locally tied information. The station has previously done check-ups on the municipal councils' activity in the raion. Thus, local television

helps the inhabitants to keep track on the municipal authorities. In doing this, they also help the raion and other city authorities to keep the municipalities in check. (ibid., p. 143)

Anatolii hands me two numbers of a four-paged newspaper (or newsletter, depending on definition) founded in the beginning of 2004 named Krasnosel'skii Raion. It covers events and public announcements, e.g. war-patriotic celebrations and memorials in the raion. On the first page of the first number are addresses, telephone numbers and open hours for the municipal offices. The paper is given out every second month by the raion, it is in other words dependent on regional funds and directives.

The poor medial circumstances restrict the council's communication with the population and consequently the voting turnout. Yet, Anatolii is more troubled about the fact that the municipal election is held solitarily – disconnected from the presidential and regional elections. It is harder to get people to the ballot boxes single-handedly. Even so, he is confident that the voting turnout will exceed those of this summer “when people were at their *dachas*”. Then the turnout failed to reach 20 %, which meant that the election result was legally rejected.

After about an hour, Anatolii respectfully says that he must return to his work. He asks me if we can meet the next day (Saturday) for a more informal talk. We agree on doing a walking interview around the district at lunchtime.

When I meet Darya at McDonald's on Sennaya the next morning, I ask her to call Anatolii and settle our appointment (since his English is as bad as my Russian is, our last telephone conversation was not very successful). Regretfully, Anatolii cancels out on the interview. He is busy and proposes that we meet on Monday or Tuesday. Anatolii's cancellation required a change of plans: I suggest that we pay Darya's municipality a visit; they will also hold re-elections in two weeks. She tells me that we cannot be sure to find someone to talk to, she does not know about the routines of municipal deputies, but since it is not uncommon to go to work on Saturdays in Russia, there is a chance.

Twenty-year-old Darya combines her university-studies with working as a guide and translator. She lives with her parents on Petrograd Side, an island in the north of central St Petersburg, cut off by the Neva River. Darya is clearly a proud resident of St Petersburg. Her grandfather drove trucks on “the Road of Life” across Lake Ladoga during the siege and her father works as a physicist developing long-distance robot technology. We take the Metro to Sportivnaya on the island’s west side, a newly renovated station next to the city’s largest football stadium and Dostoyevsky’s favorite orthodox cathedral. Most buildings are built during the first two decades of the 20th century. The architecture and the condition of the exteriors vary largely from building to building, but most are six- or seven levels high. We walk down Bolshaya Pushkarskaya, one of the island’s three main streets. There are not many shops or restaurants along the way, a contrast to the urban landscape on the other side of the Neva, around Nevskii Prospekt. We pass two abandoned houses (see fig. 9) and a small park before deciding to locate the municipal office. Darya is pretty much unacquainted with the municipal council. She did not vote in this summer’s election, only in the regional and presidential ditto. Yet, she is aware of the upcoming election through campaign-posters put up on building walls and an information sheet on the entrance to her house. Darya calls her mother who is engaged in administrative education of city employees, she provides us with the address to the municipal office. The office is situated on the third floor in a rather well kept brick building, the sign outside reveals the municipality-number 58. Contrary to Uritsk (Ligovo), most St Petersburg municipalities are not officially named, but numbered. The office looks closed, but after a while a woman opens the door, she tells us that there is some activity at a nearby school, where the election will be held. The school is just a stone-throw away.



Fig. 9. An abandoned building in municipality number 58 partly used for commercial advertisement. (Photo: Philip Westman)

Upon entering the school from a vast empty yard (see picture in appendix), we meet two people, a man and a woman, both looks to be in their late forties. They are putting up small

standardized presentations of candidates along the wall leading from the entrance. Both appear rushed, but they agree on doing short interviews. The man (both preferred to have their names left out) wears a big mustache and a handsome jacket, he is member of the election committee that will arrange and supervise the election in Municipality number 58. This work is non-paid. Normally, he works as a mathematical scientist. He responds diplomatically to some of my questions before Darya has finished translating them, he obviously understand some English. He tells me that the municipal council consists of ten deputies of which four are women. In total, 43 candidates are running in the upcoming election, only a minority of them is attached to political parties. All the candidates were presented in a newspaper covering the entire Petrogradskaya (Petrograd Side) Raion. He had the same task in the election of 2000 that generated a 23 %-turnout, 3 % above the limit for acceptance. This summer's election failed to reach that limit; in accordance with Anatolii's explanation, he says that many electors were away from the city at the time. He expects a higher participatory turnout of about 25 % in two weeks. When asked about the influence and the reach of the municipal council, he keenly passes the questions to the woman who has been standing behind him during the interview.

The woman is blond and dressed in a thick coat. She has been a deputy in the council since the year of 2000. Besides that, she works as a schoolteacher specialized in history in general and St Petersburg-history in particular. She was advised to run in the election by good friends of her – and since she had worked with eldercare before being a teacher – she considered taking part in the municipal administration as a rather natural thing to do. She has never been close to joining a political party. In addition to social help, she thinks that the main aspiration of the council is to maintain the territory. She says that during the last four years, the council has accomplished many of the goals set up: e.g. organized help for disabled and pensioners, published a book on the history of the district and arranged patriotic programs for children. They have also installed a car with medical instruments for home-examination devoted to citizens who cannot afford medical help. In terms of maintaining the territory, the heating systems and the tubes in all residential houses have been repaired and modernized, and many of the doors have been exchanged or repaired. Darya confirms that this has been done in her building.

We are interrupted when the deputy's phone rings out the state hymn of the Russian Federation, but she pushes the no-button and returns to answering my questions. She seems frustrated with the council's weak economic resources. The municipality only has small shops within its territory. She says that the neighboring municipality (number 59) has a much better economy due to a big marketplace only a hundred meters from the municipality-boundary. She says, "They never asked us, the people living here, how to divide the territory into municipalities" She perceives the economic conditions as very much unequal. There are also substantial differences from region to region; she thinks that municipalities in St Petersburg and Moscow are more limited in their influence economically than dittos operating in smaller cities. She does not see her municipality as an independent unit but as reliant on the raion's executive committee. Generally, she thinks that much have improved since the municipal reform was implemented in 1998, as have the cooperation between municipalities during the last years. Still, she thinks that municipalities and local democracy in Russia develop slowly and will probably continue to do so. My closing question is if she thinks that higher election turnouts are likely to expand the reach of the municipal council. She replies "probably not", perhaps insinuating that a change is more likely to come from above.

We leave the school and continue down the main street heading east. There are many campaign-posters on the walls, but they all belong to the same candidate. Abruptly, another poster (see fig. 10) appears frequently while the previous withdraw as we entered the neighboring municipality number 59. I did not experience any striking changes in the city

landscape except for the market mentioned by the deputy and a couple of newly built playgrounds (see fig. 11). The playgrounds are identically fashioned in traditional Russian patterns and motifs.



Fig. 10. Campaign-poster put up along Bolshaya Pushkarskaya and (Fig. 11) a newly built playground further down the same street. (Photos: Philip Westman)

5.3 Attitudes of a few electors

My first appointment upon arriving in the city was at St Petersburg State University's Faculty of Geography and Geocology. Before meeting the Administrative Director of one of the "laboratories" of the faculty, I received an opening conversation with Natalya, a female Assistant Professor, and two young students of her named Jura and Gregorie who told me about how they perceived Russian local politics and the outlook for municipalities. They had previously co-worked in a project that aimed at increasing deputies' knowledge of the regional economic and political structure, this was done in a single municipality (number 8) on Vasilevsky Island where some parts of the university is located.

While Natalya regards the project as successful, she says that it made her realize the frustrating situation of municipalities. She tells me that practically no one cares about the municipal level. Jura and Gregorie agree, one of them does not vote at all while the other has voted in regional and federal elections. Both live on Vasilevsky Island, but they do not know much about the ongoing in their own municipalities. Jura says that he thinks that some kind of election is on the way, but he is not sure when or where it will be held. When I ask them if they would recognize the name of deputies in their municipal council, both say that they would not. However, they would maybe recognize pictures of some of the deputies since they have seen campaign-posters with their portraits. One of the students says that the politicians operating at federal level is as unaware and unconcerned with the municipal level as most people on the streets. Moreover, the city administration considers municipalities as part of their ownership. All three believes that the lowest political level will develop slowly towards self-government since it is a young organizational structure – however, all depends on the actions of federal agents. Jura adds that Russia requires a strong presidency, which may not be compatible with strong local units.

The general idea of most people I met was that young people are rarely involved in politics and never involved in local politics. While some elders vote in municipal elections, young people do not. Yet by the end of the field study, I had the chance to interview Katya who did vote.

Katya is 30 years old and studies medicine. She lives in the Dekabristov district on Vasilevsky Island, but as all respondents, she does not know the number of the municipality.

She has voted twice before in municipal elections. Her parents have insisted her to vote, and who to vote for, but this time she will decide on her own. As she grows older, she feels more politically responsible. Yet, she regrets that “as most Russians, [she is] not politically educated”. Katya says that the municipal election is as important as the federal because it directly affects the place where she lives. She hopes that whoever is elected will clean up the courtyards and improve the infrastructure. Not much has happened since the last election. In her district, maintenance of old buildings have changed to the worse while new ones have been kept in good shape. The new residential buildings that are not state-owned have a group of five people that singly work on the maintenance. Katya explain that encouraging physical changes in her neighborhood, e.g. that the streets are much cleaner nowadays rather is a result of Governor-power than of municipal decisions.

As in other municipalities that have failed to generate participatory turnouts above 20 %, re-election in Katya’s district will be held December 19. She has received plenty of information through special newspapers and leaflets put in her mailbox, still she only hears about the municipal council when there is a coming election. Vasilevsky’s newspaper rarely mentions anything about it. There are eight candidates running in her part of Dekabristov, some of them do not live in the area. The election will be held in two schools. She does not remember which candidate got her vote in the last election or if the person was elected. However, after reading about this year’s candidates, she has decided on whom to vote for, but she cannot remember his name, after all it is two weeks until election day.

Alla, who looks to be about 60 years old lives in Dostoyevsky’s old neighborhoods a kilometer south of Nevskii Prospekt called Kazansky district. Her municipality managed to reach the 20 %-limit in the July-elections, therefore no re-election is held in December. In contrast with previously visited districts, there is a lot of commercial activity around Kazansky that propose better economic conditions for the council. Yet Alla says that the elected deputies only manage half of what they promise before the ballot. They had promised to put in secure gates to the courtyards and new doors to the staircase, which has not been done. Instead, they have spent money on putting up new TV-antennas. Alla has voted on a friend of hers who works at a nearby youth club in the last two elections, but she was never elected. Still, Alla prefers to put in the ballot herself, she is not convinced that everything is conducted legally; maybe her vote is used either way.

Following a small lecture about my work and human geography in general at the State University’s Philological Faculty, I had the chance to talk with six students about how they perceive the local politics of Russia. Not surprisingly, they were not very informed and not very interested in the municipal reform. Most of them were under the age of 18 and could not vote, and besides that, they were more attracted by federal politics. Once again, the argument “Russia needs a strong leader” surfaced. While some of the students uncovered wishes of a more western-like or democratized Russia, they argued that a strong leader must lead them there. One girl said that young people need political education, based on a modern democratic understanding, rather than the patriotic education often offered. Then, when old people die away, they will be able to transform Russia – but not necessarily in a western-European course. When I asked them if they believed that patriotism and democracy are compatible in a society, their response gave me a hint of their main dilemma. Two girls said that regions should not have too much power, if they do get autonomous, they will break out from the Federation. No one wanted to see Russia disintegrated, not because of economical reasons but as one girl said, “because I love my country”.

I met many people (most under the age of 30) informally during my stay in St Petersburg, and I was frequently asked about the purpose of my visit. After telling them about my concerns, the most common response was “why local politics?” when everything is either way decided by Putin and the federal government. People who were not citizens of the

Russian Federation and therefore could not vote did not know anything about municipalities, yet some argued that they are probably corrupt like other levels of government.

While being concerned with people's attitudes towards local politics one must also include the *lack* of attitudes and the non-awareness exposed by others. The respondents described above possess knowledge of their municipal council's existence and their fundamental function. They also comprise excerpts of knowledge of the council's activity gained by different sources of information and their individual interests' contact with the municipality's activity. Attitudes may be based only on a person's knowledge, but in many cases, individual attitudes seem to lean on general, rather than on specific knowledge.

5.4 From the specialist's viewpoint

We have heard the opinions and experiences of a few deputies, students, and "regular" people. Their stories tell us about their individual relationship with the object of study. Primarily, they make up qualitative material essential in a case study. Secondly, they are extractions from a wider picture, or if one will – a few small brush-strokes on an enormous painting, alluring the observer to conceive of how the total painting looks like.

Luckily, there are academic scholars aspiring to capture this bigger picture. I went to see Vladimir Gel'man on the St Petersburg European University; he specializes in Russian local politics and researches the outcomes of the municipality reform. Initially, I sought to find out what elements and conditions he perceived as affecting the municipalities' influence the most. In a previous interview with Anatolii Ivanovich - geographer at the St Petersburg State University - the respondent said that all the problems currently facing municipalities originate from deficient fiscal circumstances. Gel'man agrees that insufficient funds are the main problem in its directness. As an example, his inner-city municipality with 32.000 inhabitants disposes of a budget totaling 20 million roubles, 626 roubles (app. 24 USD) per capita. Generally, the fiscal situation is currently worsening resulting from the fact that municipal taxation is being restricted. At least, the municipalities' economic situation is less acute in St Petersburg measured up to the conditions in Russian rural areas. Gel'man argues that the economic situation does not dictate the prospects of a municipality's institutional structure and the level of democracy achieved. There are examples of wealthy Russian municipalities with extensive oil industry on its territory, where the actual decisional power has been shifted from councils to oil companies (see Webb, 2004). Gel'man adds that the economic situation naturally is dependent on the political situation, which also has worsened during these last years. Yet, municipal dependence on the region may not be as strong in St Petersburg as in other parts of Russia since St Petersburg's districts are relatively small.

Concerning the size of administrative units, Ivanovich said that a federal law most likely will pass in 2005 commanding the Russian regions to merge into 28 larger units. St Petersburg would then be a part of the Pribaltiskii (near the Baltic) region consisting of Leningrad, Novgorod, Pskov and Kaliningrad oblast'. According to him, a similar development will also be experienced by municipalities. Gel'man does not find this course of events very likely, but perhaps a few small municipalities will merge together in order to overcome deep economic crises.

When we get into the subject of the upcoming elections, Gel'man provides a rather pessimistic forecast. He argues that the legislative assembly pressures the municipalities by setting up the 20 %-turnout limit. This will probably result in law-violations and deceit in terms of manipulation of elections and election-results. He says that there are already cases where schoolteachers have compelled parents to vote while threatening not to grade their children. This is just one example of administrative pressure. In a bigger perspective, Gel'man

says that Russia is currently experiencing a re-centralization of power, and that there is no such thing as democratization of Russia, “instead, we are heading in the opposite direction”.

5.5 Two weeks following the elections

Being back in Stockholm in the beginning of January, I receive a mail from Gel'man telling me about the election. He writes that the municipal election succeeded in terms of voting turnouts, but that the turnouts in fact was a consequence of different types of administrative pressure. Up to 40 % of participants voted before the election day and legal suits have followed in many municipalities.

In a follow-up with Darya, she informs me that she did vote. Each block of flats were assigned to certain polling stations located in schools, in a college and in the municipal office. The polling stations were open from 8 am to 8 pm on election day. Darya voted in another school than the one we had visited earlier. Information about the candidates was put up on a wall before the entrance to the ballot-room. Inside, there were many desks assigned to different residential buildings. Darya showed her passport to an old woman (mainly elderly people seemed to be involved) sitting behind one of the desks. She wrote down Darya's name on a list. Then she put her signature on the list and received a ballot that enabled her to vote for a maximum of three candidates or against all. Municipality nr 58 reached a turnout exceeding 30 %. Yet, two weeks after the election, Darya is not sure if her candidate was elected. She has not been given any information of the outcome besides the participatory turnout figure. The election has not received much attention in the state-owned newspapers. Even so, Vladimir Kovalev on the liberal newspaper St Petersburg Times reports an average turnout for all St Petersburg-municipalities of only 25 %, 65 of 67 municipalities managed to reach above the 20 %-limit, validating the outcomes.

In some districts the official turnout exceeded 40 percent after City Hall organized early voting a few days before election day, attracting city residents with free food packages, Internet access cards and checks to buy medicine. (St Petersburg Times, 21/12-04)

The early votes have resulted in many complaints from liberal party members. Mikhail Amosov, head of the Yabloko faction in the Legislative Assembly says in the article that

Nikolai Rybakov, a Yabloko candidate in Slavyanka municipal district, in southwest St. Petersburg, got an estimated 63 percent of votes on Sunday, but only 5 percent in early votes while United Russia candidates, received 95 percent of early votes, and Rybakov failed to be elected, Amosov said. (ibid.)

Alexei Kovalyov, a lawmaker in the Legislative Assembly's Union of Right Forces faction suggest that “[t]he election results in districts where the early voting exceeded 2 percent or 3 percent of turnout should be annulled” since “[t]his was just simple bribery of voters all through the city”. He also gives an example of a “successful” election, naming municipality number 8 on Vasilevsky Island where Yabloko candidates won a majority. “Unlike in other districts, they put a stop to City Hall's attempts to bribe voters and all of the deputies, who were elected before kept their seats on Sunday” (ibid.). He refers to the district mentioned by Natalya and her students during our meeting at the geographical faculty. Possibly, their project had an effect on the election results.

The liberal outrage does not merely concern the early votes, they argue that the City Hall use a broad strategy to turn the municipal system into plain decoration. Amosov claim that officials “just stuffed the ballot boxes in favor of the City Hall-backed candidates”. He

also states that many electors were refused to see the electoral rolls by the polling station staff, and when they eventually did get to see them, 90 % found that they were recorded as having already voted, while they in fact had not. Amasov finishes off by saying that he has “never seen such frank and open fraud before” In response to the criticism, City Hall representatives deny all accusations saying that “[t]hey just don't want the authorities to exist[, i]f they have any arguments they should go to court”. According to Gel’man, they later did, but by writing-time the processes have not yet been decided. In addition, City Hall accused the Yabloko fraction of distributing leaflets with the wrong addresses of polling stations in an effort to confuse voters (ibid.). Nina Shubina, head of City Hall’s committee for contacts with municipal councils concluded the results as follows:

We are very happy with the results which show that voters are interested and active. And the protest vote was not as high as predicted, just 6 percent or 7 percent on average. Seven hundred new lawmakers [(municipal deputies)] have joined the system at the municipal level and are ready to work closely with City Hall, which is a good result. (ibid.)

Vladimir Yeryomenko of the United Russia party says that he does not believe there were any sorts of briberies involved in the election-procedure since people got their presents after they had voted. Although, he says,

[i]t has probably influenced the motivation of voters[.] [B]ut in conditions when the municipal elections are not popular among people City Hall has done a colossal amount of work to attract residents to the polling stations. (ibid.)

To disentangle truth from untruth in the turmoil of opinions following the election is an intricate task. However, the evolvment of two opposing positions – essential ingredients for a public debate – must be taken into account. While there does not seem to be any worthy and impartial arena for such a discussion, the political climate of St Petersburg cannot be explained as being one-sided. Likewise, the conditions for agents of these political camps to act should not be regarded as equal in any respect. The main obstacle for a public discussion now seems to be that the “state-side” is not strained to participate in any discussion. Instinctively while overlooking the situation, a politically engaged middle-class – an aspect of civil society – appears required to set pressure on the state. Broader segments of the public must demonstrate disapproval with central decisions that deviate with a democratic course. In late January and mid-February 2005, demonstrations were held in St Petersburg and many other cities against Putin’s policy on pensioners’ welfare (Dagens Nyheter, 19/1-05, 13/2-05). It was not members of the middle class but poor senior citizens who expressed their dissatisfaction. Perhaps a lean forward, yet the dissatisfaction must not merely concern economic decisions, there has been no public demonstrations following the municipal election.

5.6 Summary

The peripheral and the central district display much dissimilarity regarding geographical location, physical morphology, infrastructure, and commercial structure etc., presumably the demography and the nature of social issues differ as well. Such perceivable circumstances shape the primary aims of the municipal councils. While the Ligovo-council focuses on social help and youth clubs, the council in Municipality 58 has extended their activity to maintenance of infrastructure (spatial impact) and cultural doings. The councils’ focus is

likely to be determined by the conditions of the infrastructure and the inhabitants, whereas the tangible fields of activities (and their intensiveness) is resource-dependent. The central district's deputy argues that they have weak resources in comparison to the neighboring district, yet there is a lot more commercial activity than in Ligovo. Besides the funding from the regional and federal authorities, municipalities are economically dependent on taxes from commercial enterprises within their territory. Neither of these sources of income are within the control of the municipal councils e.g., they cannot encourage entrepreneurship by giving access to shop spaces etc. since the council is not in possession of such infrastructure, only designated maintainers. Formally, the councils are responsible for maintenance of public areas and some state-owned infrastructure, but they do not single-handedly possess the decisional power to either plan or go through with any substantial constructions, even on empty spaces. This is not a very significant issue in the visited municipalities since neither have resources for putting up new infrastructure. Yet, it is another symbol reminding of another form of dependence, mainly upon the region (the city and the raion); the federal level is not seen as controlling the municipalities to the same extent. While the deputies take pride in what their councils have done in their districts, there are many things undone that they would like to do. Regarding the way the elections were conducted, the position of the municipalities is locked in a sense. The necessary increase in election-turnouts was not a product of them reaching out to people but by upper pressure. Even if higher turnouts are achieved in a genuine way, by a general increase in public awareness and interest, one of the deputies is skeptic that it would change the fundamental state of the council's influence.

6. Assessing political space - an analysis

Given the presentation of the empirical material, an analysis is achievable. The first section answers the focal questions from what has been ascertained. These answers are in the following three sections nuanced and analyzed by means of the geographical tools presented in the second chapter. The theoretical sections aim at abstracting the position of Russian municipalities while roughly asserting possible future developments. Following the analysis, conclusions from the study are presented in a straightforward manner. The last section shortly advocates fields of future research on the subject.

6.1 Returning to the focal questions

Let us go back to the focal questions posed in the introduction. The function of Russian municipal governments differ depending on the budget attained, sequentially the size of the budget is partly dependent on taxation of commercial transactions on the municipality's territory. Consequently, central districts that are more likely to host shops, malls and restaurants are also more likely to have a municipal council with relatively wide reach. As the empirics showed, reach may e.g. be employed to repair heating systems in residential buildings, put up playgrounds, publish a book on the history of the district etc. Yet social help seems to be the main focus of municipal organs. In the peripheral district of Ligovo, social help was nearly the single concern of the council. Generally, the tasks of local governments are administrative rather than political in its nature; in contrast, the entire municipal level has been used as a political tool by upper levels of government. The outcomes of the previous municipal election in St Petersburg was actively interfered by city officials, representing the regional level of Russian politics. Besides such direct political influence, the regional level controls the part of the municipal incomes not provided by taxes. In this light, municipalities cannot be perceived as self-governing. This weakness in addition to the poor action-space of municipal councils is reflected in public attitudes and manifested in election turnouts, which are far lower than those of regional and federal elections. People do not receive information regarding their local governments other than in connection with elections, and then it is channelled through flyers, pamphlets or short announcements in state-owned raion-newsletters.

6.2 Spaces of dependence and distrust

Let us now process the excerpts from the discourse of St Petersburg local politics. The drop-downs in dissimilar urban landscapes and lifeworlds of the city make out a set of irregular heuristics. While shifting focus from a peripheral to a central district, some contrasts appear clearly by observation. Some appear after scratching the surface as a result of dialogues, whereas some divergences may not be identified and may or may not be relevant. Perchance, the similarities make out a more significant base of understanding Russian local politics. Hence, while considering the different conditions for these municipalities' activity in terms of resources, physical morphology and individuality; noticeable, the political spaces of restrictiveness constitute a major element in both places (or in both municipal councils). Such

perspective suggests the municipal council as a symbol of powerlessness and subjugation, wherever it may be located in the city.

In regarding people's attitudes, one can either see the attitudes themselves as symbols of their context or identify the targets of the attitudes and their symbolic meaning. As seen, the objects targeted may, as symbols, be filled with meaning from other objects or phenomenon. As an example, when people perceive the municipal council, they make a judgement from what they have experienced as far as the council is concerned, but they may also shape an opinion drawing from other experience, e.g. their general idea of how politics is conducted or has been conducted in Russia.

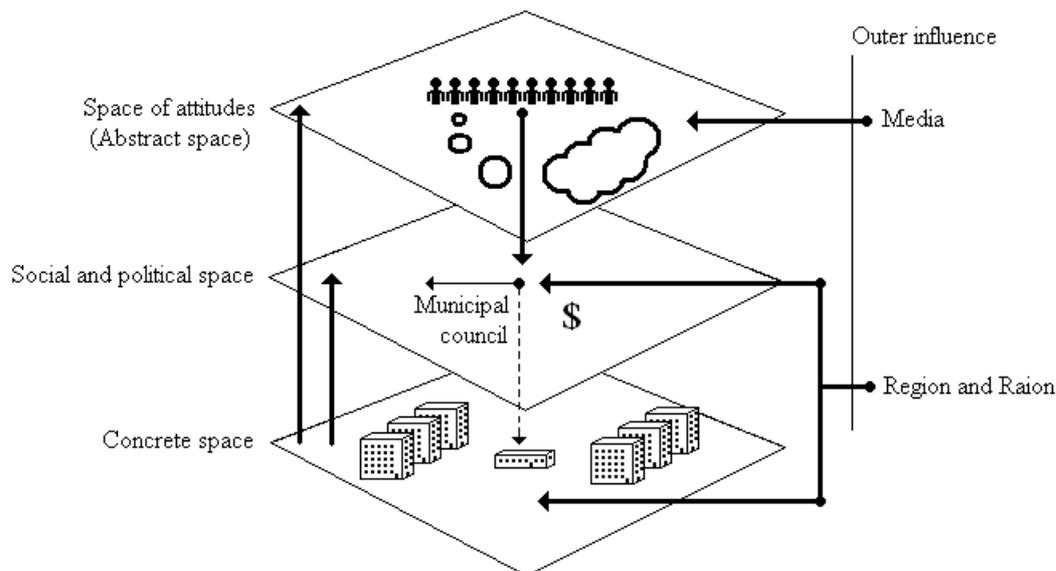


Fig. 12. A rough illustration of flows of influence.

A return to the three-layer model may illuminate the circumstances presented in the empirical section. The municipal council itself and its activity constitute parts of the second social and political spatial layer, while one of the visited municipalities also operates parts of the concrete layer. Naturally, the municipal office and e.g. campaign-posters also make out concrete features. Nevertheless, the main impact on the function and ability of the municipal council is likely to come from two currents of influence. Firstly, the earlier discussed control “from above”. Fitted into the three-layer model, this influence distinguishes itself as inflicting the municipal social and political layer from geographically remote administrative nodes (as the raion office, the city hall, and to some extent Moscow). The flow of influence coming from the raion executive committee may be typified as direct through its authority and actual spatial impact, whereas the city hall’s (the region’s) influence is indirect since a great part of a municipality’s budget is controlled from there (see fig. 12). Hence, by using Sayer’s vocabulary, the political systems of these municipalities are mutually open, while they do display certain irregularities (Sayer, 1992, pp. 122–123). The abstract space (including space of attitudes) of municipalities is “open” in the same sense, but cannot be asserted as a system. The attitudes of the inhabitants are shaped in various ways, individually and collectively. Attitudes towards the municipal council are likely to be influenced by other experiences of politics since not much information seem to reach the inhabitants. Non-official information concerning municipal politics is apprehended from mouth to mouth or from external media that, when they do cover municipal politics, focus on the municipal reform in general and not on individual municipalities. The level of public attention given to municipal councils may be said to correspond to the election turnouts that are very low compared to those of federal and regional elections. Generally, people consider the local units as politically powerless, as

administrative units that do not make much difference. Some people are very uninterested in politics while some consider the federal and regional politics as more significant and some express distrust, saying that “the system” including the municipalities is corrupt. Not much attention is given to the formal self-government status, by neither deputies nor electors.

If we disregard the external influence for a moment and isolate municipal space while still focusing on the council, a vital circumstance appears. The vertical influence is unbalanced, at least in the two bottom-layers. Concrete space carries out more influence on political space than vice versa. Thus, not only outer influence keeps the municipality in check. We will come back to this angle in the next section by looking into the need for shops and supermarkets, necessary constituents of concrete space influencing the reach of municipal councils.

6.3 The municipal domain

If a domain is perceived as a spatial sphere constituted by ownership and absolute control, then the domains of these municipalities merely exist. In using a lighter definition pertaining to influence and responsibility over certain territory, the *formal* municipal domain (as it is stated in official legislation and documents) appears strong and influential. Conversely, when considering the tangible and currently existing influence and reach of the municipalities, the domain weakens in terms of command and authority. The municipalities’ self-government is not entirely restricted since upper levels are not directly involved in all decisional processes. Yet, economic restrictions (which in fact are political) confine local autonomy in an indirect way. Thus, the municipal domain is not a pseudo-domain; rather it is a subjugated ditto with vague boundaries and deficient action-space. Anatolii in Ligovo stressed that the municipal council is not very political but that a politicization was to expect. Since the municipal council does make decisions and prioritize certain areas of influence, it is not accurate to refer to their activity as purely administrative. Yet the range of political alternatives is likely to minimize when the resources do. Foremost, municipalities appear political on a higher scale, as tools of upper authorities, not as much in a local sense. Therefore, the municipal domain may be seen as administrative.

Let us go back to Hägerstrand’s concept of hierarchic domain-systems. As an administrative territorial domain, the municipality is the smallest, encapsulated by the raion’s, the region’s, and the federation’s domain (in a sense, one can go further with international unions etc.). Besides scale, the municipal domain differs from upper domains by the designated self-government status, and obviously, by its function and activities. The influence of municipal domains is restricted, mainly by deficient budgets. Their incomes are derived from two sources, funding from upper levels (external incomes) and parts of value added tax on sales. The first source of income is practically impossible for the municipal domain to influence, at least individually. The second source may possibly be altered e.g., by encouraging entrepreneurs generating tax-incomes, but it is not very likely. Roughly, the municipal domain’s degree of influence appears to be dependant on its concrete contents in this sense, in other words, the commercial activities on its territory. Figure 13 displays two neighbouring districts, district B has a big commercial complex within its territory, close to the district-boundary. Since the boundary is not manifested in the urban morphology, a considerable proportion of the residents in district A do their purchases there, the residents do probably not know in which district it is located, and they probably would not care if they did. Either way, this spatial circumstance largely decides the budget for the councils, thus weakening domain A while strengthening domain B. Even if the districts would be identical in every aspect besides the location of the big marketplace, the economic conditions for the municipal councils would still differ to a large degree.

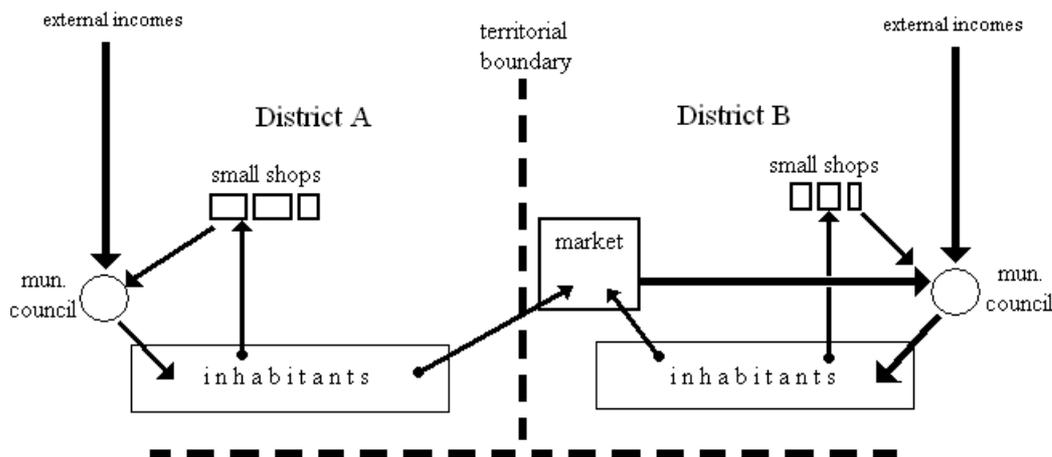


Fig. 13. Generalizing sketch illustrating the flows of resources in neighboring municipal districts.

In a way, this district-to-district situation corroborate with Lundén's analysis of the relationship between communes in Stockholm. He argues that the communes make up a mosaic of decisional domains, and even if the communes co-operate, they constantly struggle competitively to attract advantageous businesses (Lundén, 1999, p. 68). The empirical material in this study cannot conclude that such competitiveness subsist, nevertheless, the prerequisites of inter-municipal competitiveness are very much present. Given the present situation, the grounds for such struggles may be even stronger than in Stockholm, since the distribution of resources from above is not evened out at all between Russian municipalities as it appears. However, this will probably change if the new federal law comes to pass. Then, a "balancing system" is likely to apply.

As described above, the municipal domain is partly dependent on its concrete spatial contents and partly on upper authorities. These dependencies are of different natures and strengths. External forces may decide to what extent, and how, the concrete space will influence the council's conditions. Moreover, the external influence is more unpredictable measured up to the concrete spatial influence. As an example, members of the municipal council can continually roughly calculate the funds derived from commercial activity on its territory. Neither the municipality's demography, and consequently, neither the needs of the inhabitants, is very likely to change dramatically. However, the size of funds and the directives from upper levels of authority are more likely to be unforeseen since they are outside the council's reach (or even its vision).

The municipal domain – normally covering a relatively large territory – appears weak. If the domain was to be measured up with smaller (in terms of territory) domains of medium-sized companies, in all probability, the company-domains would exceed the municipal ditto in terms of general influence. Apart from larger budgets, companies may influence people outside its domain to a larger extent than the municipal council. Accordingly, we ought to consider two forms of domain-hierarchies, one regarding size and encapsulation discussed by Hägerstrand, and one regarding actual power. The latter hierarchy would rest upon the *level of influence* that is or may be carried out on the territory.

Hägerstrand (1970) also implies that superior domains generally are persistent or permanent (p. 150). From such a perspective, the municipal domain's weakness may be seen in the light of its immaturity since it is a very young administrative domain. If the domain requires a certain span of time to sink in and mature, then a new institutional transformation does not appear very beneficial. Future changes in the local politics of Russia are difficult to foretell, but as shown, new laws regulating municipalities and lessening their powers are about to be implemented.

6.4 Facing the conundrums

In formulating the problems of the Russian local level of politics, a viewpoint is needed; such can be articulated as follows.

Municipal organs are restricted and indirectly controlled by external (and superior) authorities, both fiscally, and informally politically, as the latest election demonstrated. A municipality is also influenced by the attitudes of its inhabitants, not only by their election votes and absence thereof. The weakness and subjugation of the council is mirrored in the attitudes of the inhabitants, many have already lost faith in the local administration, while many never had any. The latter example is likely to be a result of the Soviet-legacy. Still the low participatory rate among young people that logically cannot have experienced the Soviet way of conducting politics, at least not as adults, is puzzling. Either way, while the electors or the deputies at first glance carry a heavy responsibility for turning the development around, such a resolution does not seem likely. The external influence, mainly regarding fiscal constraints, appears robust and out of reach for grassroots single-handedly. This argument does not suggest that a change must be manoeuvred from above alone, yet a first effort ought to. An empowering of municipal domains is required regarding authority and resources, not necessarily through adding new fields of responsibility. They are already outrageously oversized compared to the councils' actual capabilities (see listing in appendix). Neither changing the territorial size of municipalities appears very efficient; the domains are reliant on its spatial contents rather than its size. But obviously, enlargements can promote underprivileged domains if they are merged with a neighbouring domain that is better off. Yet, such reorganization is likely to be costly, and the structural problems are likely to remain since the spatial contents in the whole patchwork of municipal domains will remain unaltered.

Signals in federal policy suggest an increased recentralization during the next few years of Putin's presidency. Yet it remains unclear how the status of local governments will develop, but judging from a newly proposed federal law, it looks like the federal authorities will capture amplified control of local units. Some scholars suggest that the *executive vertical*, the Soviet multi-tier decisional mechanism, is being restored. Such a scenario brings to mind the Russian tradition of a state-system that opens up during a short period and then closes. A comparable conduction came about after self-government was instituted in late tsarist-Russia, in forms of the previously discussed *zemstvos* and *city dumas*.

6.5 Conclusions

A straightforward summing up based on the initially posed questions ought to be presented:

- What is the current function of Russian municipal governments? The function of municipalities differs, but generally, activities within the field of social aid commonly appear to be central. Evidently, the function and the action-space of municipal councils do not correspond to the formal portrayal of their areas of responsibility. Generally, the role played by municipal governments is currently not very considerable in Russian local politics.

Expressed theoretically, municipal governments are mainly involved in activities influencing social and political space. Concrete space may be changed if the council owns access to necessary resources.

- What influences the function and the conditions for municipal governments? The conditions are set by (1) the municipal budget, partly dependent on funds from the regional level (the city

hall) and partly by deduction from small parts of the tax from sales within its territory. The conditions for municipal activity are also influenced (2) politically by the regional level (including the raion). Such influence is apparent on election results, manipulated through administrative pressure on electors. The extent of municipal councils' activity (their function) is obviously to a high degree given by their budgets, but in a sense, the selected areas of activity are more likely to result from deputies' priorities, in turn influenced by the needs of the inhabitants and the infrastructure.

The domains of municipal governments are parts of hierarchies of encapsulating domains. Regarding size and encapsulation, municipal domains falls under the region and the federation in the hierarchy. However, a hierarchy regarding political and fiscal power does not necessarily follow the same order. Other (smaller in spatial size), non-political domains with larger budgets may be stronger in terms of public influence than the municipal domain.

- How, and why, do the reach and functions of municipal governments differ? Once again, the size of the budgets is of considerable significance. Different economic capabilities are derived from the amount of sale-tax collected, hence, a municipal council with extensive commercial activity within its territory is more likely to have a relatively good reach and vice versa. The strength of municipal domains is thus partly dependent on its spatial contents, and partly on its hierarchic context. The councils' functions are also partly dependent on what is demanded by their inhabitants, since they elect the members of the council. Yet, regarding the low voting-turnouts, the mistrust showed by many people, and the cases of manipulation, the public voice does not appear very significant.

Conversely, the council's communication with people is restricted despite that the municipal level is supposed to be "closest to the people".

While the current conditions of local governments in St Petersburg does not offer the space needed for a realisation of its potential, the future prospects are dependent on the city's position towards the federally proposed legislation. Yet, an implementation of the ambiguous law offers no guarantees in deciding the route of Russian politics. Another posed option is to merge both municipal and regional units. Such reorganization is not likely to change the structural nature of conducting politics. Taken as a whole, there is clearly something missing in Russian political culture, suggestively a civil society and a progressive middle-class.

6.6 Outro

Many pieces of Russian local politics deserve further attention from academics, not political scientists alone. In the case of municipalities, broader empirics are needed, preferably based on intensive field studies. Furthermore, observations of the proposed law and its effects will require new research, possibly reformulating the conditions for the local politics of Russia. There are many prospective issues that this study barely touched upon that would be both interesting and valuable to look into. These are some points worthy of consideration:

- People's awareness of municipal districts and their boundaries
- The absence of district-names
- The initial division of the municipal territory
- Municipal co-operation
- The relation between municipal councils and local entrepreneurs
- Local government in Russian rural areas

In addition, a better investigation of the municipalities' economy is needed which has not yet been submitted. Furthermore, besides specified issues attached to local politics, a vast area of research-fields lay open in Russia, not least for geographers. It appears that the big question for (especially for Nordic) geographers ought to be: Why is the absolute and the "cultural" distance to Russia so very dissimilar? With regards to Russia, a geography of the interesting differences – both tangible and imagined – is prospective in enhancing the (theoretical) understanding of the world.

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Borén, Thomas, *Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University* (regular talks from the end of October 2004)

Chistobayev, Anatolii Ivanovich, *Faculty of Geography and Geoecology, St Petersburg State University* (2-12-04)

Gel'man, Vladimir, *Faculty of Political Science and Sociology, European University in St Petersburg* (7-12-04)

Zigern-Korn, Natalya, *Faculty of Geography and Geoecology, St Petersburg State University* (2-12-04)

Anonymous and semi-anonymous:

Alla (assumed name), *app. 60 yrs., living in Kazansky district in central St Petersburg* (1-12-04 to 8-12-04)

Anatolii, *app. 55-60 yrs., Vice Chairman of the Uritsk MO #40 (Ligovo) Municipal Council* (3-12-04)

Female, *app. 40-45 yrs., Deputy of the Municipal Council of MO #58 in Petrogradskaia Raion* (4-12-04)

Jura and Gregorie, *19 resp. 21 yrs., students of Regional Development at St Petersburg State University* (2-12-04)

Katya, *30 yrs., living in Dekabristov district on Vassilevski island* (6-12-04)

Male, *app. 45-50 yrs., Member of the Municipal Election Committee of MO #58 in Petrogradskaia Raion* (4-12-04)

Six students, *five girls and one boy 16-18 yrs., St Petersburg State University's Philological Faculty - English studies* (7-12-04)

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8. Appendix

8.1 Listing of municipal tasks

The questions of local significance decided by institutions of local government in St.Petersburg include:

- 1) acceptance and change of the charter of municipal formation, the control of its observance;
- 2) possession, using, disposal of the asset which is in the property of municipal formations according to the current legislation;
- 3) formation, ratification and execution of the local budget;
- 4) introduction and cancellation of local taxes and tax collections, definition of concrete rates and granting of privileges on payment of taxes and tax collections according to the current legislation;
- 5) acceptance of plans and programs of development of municipal formation;
- 6) maintenance and use of a municipal available housing and the uninhabited premises transferred to the municipal property by laws of St. Petersburg;
- 7) organization, maintenance and development of municipal establishments of preschool and basic general education;
- 8) organization, the maintenance(contents) and development of municipal establishments of social protection of the population, culture, physical training and sports, public health services;
- 9) distribution of sanctions to marriage to the persons who have reached age of sixteen years in the order established by the family legislation;
- 10) organization and realization of trusteeship and guardianship, including children who have stayed without care of parents, according to federal laws and laws of St.Petersburg;
- 11) maintenance of sanitary well-being of the population of municipal formation, realization of actions for preservation of the environment in territory of municipal formation;
- 12) establishment of the municipal organizations, including the unitary enterprises based on the right of economic conducting;
- 13) repairing and gardening of house and courtyard territories;
- 14) organization and maintenance of municipal archives;
- 15) maintenance of municipal information service;
- 16) maintenance of activity of mass media of municipal formation;
- 17) creation of conditions for maintenance of the population of municipal formation with services of trade, public catering and consumer services;
- 18) organization of fuel supply for the population of municipal formation and municipal establishments;
- 19) organization and maintenance of protection of social order at the expense of local budgets of municipal bodies;
- 20) maintenance of granting of social services to the population of municipal formation due to means of local budgets;
- 21) assistance of employment of the population of municipal formation due to means of local budgets;
- 22) organization of work on military-patriotic education of citizens of the Russian Federation in territory of municipal formation;
- 23) maintenance and development of public transport;
- 24) organization and realization of actions for protection of the population and territories from extreme situations of natural and technogenic character.

(from the website of Saint Petersburg municipalities)

8.2 Photos from the field study



School in district nr 58 where one of the polling stations was set up. (Photo: Philip Westman)



Residential buildings in Ligovo. (Photo: Philip Westman)



Deputy in municipal district nr 58. (Photo: Philip Westman)



Anatolii, Vice Chairman in the Ligovo municipal council. (Photo: Philip Westman)