

Res Publica in Russia

Things and Publics in Current Municipal Reform

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The Year 2000 Millennium threat, linked to a potential computer breakdown, was never a big concern for Russian policymakers. By contrast, when Anatoly Chubais first formulated the problem of 2003 as the year of a total infrastructural meltdown, he was pointing to the most poignant issue that bedevils Russian publics and governments of all levels. Given the absence of investment into the maintenance, upgrade, and modernization of urban infrastructure since Soviet days, Russians of all social strata are spending major chunks of their lives meddling with leaking roofs, non-functioning water and heat supply, and electricity blackouts. One might joke that this was in line with a government intention to keep Russians away from politics, but given the massive local mobilizations over failures of heating and power systems, it is clear that public goods such as heat and electricity cannot be apolitical.

What are the political implications of such citizens' concern with *res publica*, that is, the most tangible and durable common things in the typical Russian *polis*? Let us take a look at the case of the city of Cherepovets, which is famous for being the closest equivalent of Steeltown in the United States. Its main company, Severstal, is very successful, recently acquiring production facilities in the United States, so one would expect Cherepovets to enjoy a relative abundance of resources. Its experience might be indicative of imminent problems that do not

disappear, even when the usual Russian lamentation (on the lack of funding) stops. This memo is based on fieldwork by a project on self-governing associations in northwestern Russia.

Building the Body Politic

Paraphrasing the opening lines of *Anna Karenina*, one can say that all rust-belt cities are happy in the same way, but unhappy in their own fashion. Our starting point is 1992. The city of Cherepovets can be said to have finally come into full existence only then, when all federally-owned buildings were transferred to the city's care. Until then, the city was a minor building owner; the massive transfer of apartments from Soviet ministries to city ownership increased its property tenfold (from 500,000 to 5 million square meters).

This transfer created two problems: money and coordination. Money was an issue because the city had virtually no budget for repairs and maintenance. In some cases, external funding was required. For example, the head of the newly created Department for the Transfer of Ministerial Housing at the mayor's office was given a World Bank grant to help cut the costs of maintenance of these apartments by reducing heating expenses. The grant was spent on building automatic heat regulators (*teplobmenniki*) in the basements of 67 high-rise buildings (about 10 percent of all housing in the city). The city owes \$29 million to the World Bank that it is obligated to repay using revenues from savings on heat production.

Second, the task of the day in 1992 was coordination. Since industrial enterprises which had operated under separate ministries (metallurgical, chemical, or fertilizer) had apartment buildings all around the city, their typical network looked like a star-shaped system: buildings linked by underground communication and utilities, with a central office as their head. Once transferred to municipal ownership, the newly created municipal sub-units (such as the municipal housing complex Metallurg, one of the four or five existing in the city) ended up having buildings, wires, pipes, and valves spread all over the city. Separate networks of all the other similar housing complexes built and maintained by separate ministries overlapped. That is, star-shaped systems crisscrossed, and often no one was sure whom a water pipeline under a given street belonged to, as the documentation was either stored away or lost. In Soviet days, one presumes, the relevant enterprises would be repairing the pipes, wires, and other links that were constructed together with the ministry-owned housing. Now the question of repairs arose: with everything technically belonging to the city, different municipal sub-units were not sure who was in charge of the maintenance of pipeworks here or there, or where the borders between their objects of care were drawn. With lack of clarity on who was responsible, no one was, and problems arose as a result. A car sank under the street pavement in a no-man zone between two housing

complexes, and among other incidents reported in interviews and newspapers, one municipal sub-unit cut the pipes of another one.

The task was to make the city a common thing, to integrate it all into a single coherent whole and, a distant objective, to make it function as an urban machine. The first among truly integrative measures, apart from creating the Department for the Transfer of Ministerial Housing, was the creation of a *gorodskaya liniya zhalob* (city complaint hotline) in 1997. The mayor himself spent six months manning this line and sending his personnel to all parts of the city to solve problems on the spot because the city had raised utility rates. If the city was charging more, it had to guarantee some quality in service delivery; otherwise, people would not pay at all or social unrest was possible. This was a step forward from sub-municipal coordination, which proved inadequate based on the overlapping star-shaped patterns. In one reported case, a hot water supply company requested that taxi company dispatchers ask their drivers to spot steaming on the streets of Cherepovets in the winter (the company had registered the leak but could not detect its whereabouts).

After the 1998 crisis, municipal financial problems were particularly acute. Raising utility rates became a key policy, with the goal of trying to redistribute part of the burden onto the shoulders of consumers. Tax collection to fill city coffers became another main goal. The city attempted to address both by the creation of some *res publica* that would link the city together. Its first effort, in 2001-2003, was to create a database of land and building possessions to increase tax collection and hopefully lead to sales or leases of new properties. The cost of creating the computer center which runs the database was about 57 million rubles. The income from tax regularization and new sales and leases amounted to about 250 million rubles, so the center boasts that its cost has already been recuperated many times. This system later served as the organizational model for the mapping of overlapping utilities, and the mapping of engineering networks is now being completed. Data on water, sewage, heating, and electricity networks are in the system. New data will include gas and telephone networks. As a consequence, the city will potentially be able to solve coordination problems related to maintenance excavation on the basis of its computer database, instead of having to send bulky commissions consisting of people from different municipal firms to physically inspect the problem and have a dialogue on the spot of the dig. Once they map utilities, they can offer sites for construction where, previously, a dense intermesh of communications precluded the possibility of construction without precise knowledge of the networks' layout.

The second integrative measure was the establishment of a common dispatcher service (EDS), which monitors citizens' queries on breakdowns. Rather than having to first determine whom a given property belongs to, dialing a single telephone number now sets the process in motion. The

repairs are not initiated by the service; it collects and channels information, giving citizens information on whom to call to start repairs. Each morning the head of the utilities department of the mayor's office listens to all complaints that have come in during the previous night and follows up on them during the day, checking whether measures have already been undertaken by the relevant municipal sub-units. EDS is described in interviews as a natural outgrowth of the 1997 city hotline: if you wish to make people pay increased tariffs, give them some understanding of the problems by referring them to the units that should take care of their concerns. EDS has also changed the perception of the utilities issues into an important and common city concern. Dispatchers were trained not just to send callers off to some other unit, but to call these units themselves, express care, and even talk to television and radio journalists about utilities. In the past, dispatchers were not allowed to discuss the issues since utility breakdowns were never considered to be a legitimate common concern worthy of public discussion: "Your radiator is leaking? It is your problem, so call your service provider!"

A third integrative measure, introducing a unified payment bill, was also developed by the computer center of the mayor's office and based on the address database it compiled while building the land and property database. The idea was to cut expenses by eliminating the intermediary payment offices of each municipal utility company, in charge of calculating the invoices and processing incoming funds. Furthermore, it makes the city a single body, since one pays everything at once and in one payment: the computer center receives all the information on projected monthly usage for the year, adds subsidies and waivers that apply to individual families, and compiles a unified bill. Payment is done through the Promstroibank office that processes wage payments for Severstal.

In terms of the organic metaphor that is so dear to the students of urbanism, a cadastre of urban networks and properties is the city's skeleton. EDS tells people in Cherepovets what organ is sick and tells them how to administer cures. The spinal cord of the system is the computer center of the mayor's office, which handles unified billing, EDS dispatchers, and, last but not least, a city website, giving the city an image of itself. A common utilities bill is the main means of metabolism and sends oxygen through the arteries of the system. Overall, the goal of creating the city as a single body, a goal that seemed so distant in 1992, seems to be very close now.

Implications

One should not consider these background reforms as merely structural, with remote political significance. When it comes to mobilization, frozen pipes serve as a better and more immediate factor for moving the public onto the streets than any fiery rhetoric. In order to have a lasting impact, however, social mobilization needs common ground to remain activated.

In the 1990s, hopes were linked to creating this common ground through political parties. The feebleness of their development, however, shows the problematic metaphorical character of political common grounds. Instead, tangible grounds like pipes, squares, and wires, all linked now into a common body of unified city networks, finally create more durable support for the continual reign of urban mobilization. Recent cases in Russia (for example, blocking bridge traffic during the protests over social welfare reform in January 2005) demonstrate that individuals in Russia are still concerned with using some parts of this infrastructure for political purposes. This demonstrates the imminent problem of local *res publica*: just building the physical infrastructure for political action is not enough. One needs a symbolic dimension to be added to physical linkage: *res publica* should perhaps be linked to conscious classical republicanism.

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