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Boris Kagarlitsky, "And thus, the Mossoviet..."

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“And thus, the Mossoviet...”

by Boris Kagarlitsky

Last spring, when Muscovites elected a majority from the “Democratic Russia” bloc to the city council, thereby opting decisively for the transfer of power from party institutions to the peoples’ choice, no one expected the transition period to be easy. Expectation was universal of clashes between the council’s new majority and the Moscow party committee (together with the latter’s supporters from the “Moscow” bloc within the city council). Conflict did indeed arise, albeit far less dramatic than many deputies anticipated.

Contrary to the democrats’ fears, the “Moscow” bloc did not concoct any systematic obstruction to the council’s work. Stormy debates over procedural questions cropped up at the first session, but, in the final analysis, the Mossoviet moved ahead more rapidly than the Leningrad Soviet, where the democratic majority splintered at the start into warring factions.

The issue that engendered real conflict was property, rather than authority. The Moscow party committee was willing to relinquish responsibility for the city’s impoverished economy and political life, but when it came to the matter of party holdings or property which the party committee’s leaders considered their own, the party bureaucracy was prepared to stonewall. Who can forget the abrupt transformation of *Evening Moscow*, the newspaper founded by the Moscow city council and later published jointly by the council and the city party committee, into party “property”? Argument dragged on over the buildings turned over by the previous executive committee to the account of the Moscow party committee’s administrative department. And this constituted only a trifling portion of the party’s property in the capital.

The Moscow party committee is, in effect, an enormous business empire. It controls financial capital,

newspapers, and real estate — like Donald Trump in New York, one might say. In order to convene its first session, the Moscow city council had to pay 10,000 rubles to rent a party-owned hall in the House of Political Education: the city council itself had no hall large enough to accommodate all the deputies and official visitors.

The Moscow party committee’s administration grumbled that the rent was too low, barely enough to defray overhead costs. There were fine words about how the party had forfeited any claim to monopoly over the House of Party Education. It was more than willing to give other organizations a chance to use the space ... As time went on, the truth of the matter became clear: negotiations were ongoing with an American firm over a possible joint venture — turning the House of Political Education into ... an entertainment center. I would not be in the least surprised to find myself greeted one day at the door of the House of Political Education by Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, and to be informed by a guide: “Here we have the deputies, here are the trained animals, here is the peoples’ party, here’s a casino: something for everyone.”

At the sessions of the Moscow city council commission on social organizations, the socialist deputies argued that the building ought to be municipalized. But the liberally-inclined majority balked at such a violation of the sacred law of private property.

The conflicts over the disposition of *Evening Moscow* and the House of Political Education were, as it turned out, the only predictable battles. Expectations notwithstanding, the principal struggle in the Moscow city council is not between the “Democratic Russia” and “Moscow” blocs, but within “Democratic Russia.”



Various factions and groups are at odds, and individual deputies are at loggerheads. In most cases, the competing groups are ill-defined, lack a political program or profile, and fall as abruptly as they rise. The overall picture is that of a war of all against everyone.

During the first days of the opening session, there were signs of sharp conflict between supporters of Gavriil Popov and Sergei Stankevich. A "division of roles" in the council's presidium guaranteed Stankevich a place of honor second from the top, but failed to quell passions. The attention of most deputies was focused on discussions of how the leadership of the commissions and the presidium was to be assembled. The battle over the makeup of the presidium took place entirely behind the scenes. It was scarcely indistinguishable from the traditional *nomenklatura* battle, with every group attempting to procure its "quota." The greater the need to satisfy all and offend no one, the larger the presidium became and the faster the number of posts on the commission increased.

The old model of putting together a leadership was reproduced faithfully in the selection of a chairman for the city council's executive committee. Gavriil Popov defeated a slate of opponents to be elected to the post of chairman (although Sergei Stankevich, Popov's only potentially serious rival, was forced to withdraw his candidacy before the elections — so as not to split the democratic majority, the public was told), but there were no rivals for the city's number 2 post, which Yuri Luzhkov won unopposed.

The city council turned out to be utterly incapable of enforcing its authority or even of garnering basic control over people and the structures they'd chosen. One must give the presidium its due. At least the leaders of the commissions and the members of the presidium regularly attended every meeting. Those Muscovites who had the patience to sit through to the second half of the Moscow city council's opening session undoubtedly recall the shameful moment when the council had to break up because it hadn't drawn a quorum — and thus couldn't even close its session.

Judge the deputies as you will, their "low activity," about which the Moscow newspapers was assiduous in informing Muscovites, is not the only problem. The fact is, the city council, in its current size and structure, cannot possibly function. There are 480 deputies, and they're not even organized along party lines. It's more like a mob (or, at best, a midsized meeting) than a body of political power. The logic of mass consciousness operates here, not the rules of political life. The hall is easily swamped by emotion. It's no trouble to manipulate the crowd — if, that is, they even manage to convene.

The plan to regulate the trade of consumer goods in Moscow by requiring shoppers to show their passports as proof of residency is revealing in this regard. The deputies' actions were dictated by emotion, absent the benefit of complete information or competent expert analysis. Given the complexity of the situation with which the city had to contend, no such question should have put to the session without expert preparatory work. Several deputies, including myself, abstained from voting, inasmuch as we saw no possibility of a competent decision. Some voted no. The majority, swayed by emotion, voted in favor. The very next day, Moscow found itself in a state of trade war with the neighboring districts (*oblasts*). Supplies of foodstuffs earmarked for the capital were increased; residents of neighboring districts (*oblasts*) were expected to buy what they needed and take their purchases back home. The executive committee of the Moscow city council published a long list of goods, the sale of which was to be limited to one per person. Included was ... men's underwear. And, countrywide, Muscovites in the army found themselves being beaten up.

In retrospect, many deputies had second thoughts. The plan shouldn't have been adopted. More to the point, questions should never be decided in such a way.

In any case, who is running the capital? Who's in control? The council has no real authority, and the city party committee has withdrawn from the scene — not without taking a certain pleasure in observing the council's difficulties. Real power is divided between the executive committee and the council's presidium, lead by its chairman and vice-chairman. The presidium in turn relies on commissions which draft decisions. The question is, how capable are all these structures of acting as a unit?

A significant problem confronting the commissions is the lack of coordination of actions and our own incompetence as deputies. Here again, blame lies less with the deputies or their electors than with the structure that has grown up. Under the "old regime," the city's party authorities knew in advance whom they needed to have on the council's commissions. It was necessary to get X number of architects, X number of economists, of lawyers. Specific individuals were selected in advance. Whether this was good or bad is unimportant; more important is that somehow, the system worked.

When the (relatively) free elections took place, the voter of course didn't know about this, and wasn't interested. Nor was there any reason for the voter to know who was up for election in the neighboring electoral district, or what percent of, say, architects that

would give the council. Incidentally, the same system also obtained in district councils, but with more deleterious results: sheer numbers come to the rescue in the Moscow city council. Out of five hundred deputies, the probability is that there will be one or two specialists in just about any field.

How is this problems solved "out there"? More or less just as under the "old system," but on a multi-party basis. Every serious party with a claim to a leading role in the power structure knows that it needs specialists on this or that question. It designates its deputies in advance and arranges for the the ablest individuals to run in the more "reliable" districts, thereby guaranteeing their election. If all else fails, the experts are attached to appropriate deputy investigative groups. Commissions are assembled in a similar fashion, but include elected deputies from more than one party. The party or coalition that has earned a majority controls the commissions and pushes through its own previously agreed-upon agenda. Thus a union between competence and coordination of actions is achieved.

At the moment, everyone is delighted to have a number of parties on the scene. It's the basis for democracy, they point out. But what isn't so clear is what the parties are supposed to be doing. There's more than enough work, but, as matters now stand, the political parties can't — or won't — take it on. Broadly based blocs like "Democratic Russia," comprising coalitions of informal groups, independents, and highly placed political figures of varying status, are by their very nature unable to do accomplish these tasks. There is no unified political idea, no general organization, no ideological basis (if one discounts generalizations about the danger of totalitarianism and the benefits of democracy — fine for an opposition, but insufficient as a basis for consolidating power).

Thus do we arrive at the disagreement — in place of work on the affairs of the city — over whether to remove or let stand the bust of Lenin in the meeting hall. At least we're all competent to speak on this question.

When anything does get accomplished, it is thanks primarily to the bureaucracy. The presidium and the commissions have their own power structures, as does the executive committee. In 1990, the council's budget, independent of the executive committee's budget and general city expenses, amounted to nearly five million rubles. Not all that much: but an astronomical sum if we consider what we've actually achieved in that year.

In the final analysis, all questions will be decided by the commissions-presidium-executive committee triangle. Moreover, the range for bureaucratic games has

no bounds. The role of the council's sessions is shrinking even as it becomes increasingly difficult to obtain a quorum. The deputies find themselves confronted with the choice: do they address commission politics, or the affairs of their own electoral districts? In a system based on political parties, it is possible to transfer responsibility for a range of affairs to members of one's political grouping. (Such a coherent division of labor is, by the way, the current goal of a segment of the socialist party within the Moscow city council). But an independent deputy has to be everything at once and make independent decisions on all questions — to be both a politician and an expeditor (*tolkach*). Both functions are necessary, but it is harder to combine them. Increasingly, the deputies are dividing into two groups who have little in common.

Initial attempts at open discussion of the need for council reforms met with "bayonets" from the leadership and its supporting majority. "Criticize the new soviets and you play into the hands of the party authorities"; "Whoever criticizes 'Democratic Russia' supports the cause of the CPSU"; "If you're not with us, you're against us," echoed every time the supporters of the new leadership faced questioning. But soon, these very deputies from "Democratic Russia" began to recognize that the city needs radical administrative reform, and that the "renewed" organs of power are transitional and therefore incapable of achieving this reform. The faster they leave the scene the better.

In the spring of 1990, socialist deputy Vladimir Kondratov proposed the idea of such a reform. In his opinion, the weakness of the Moscow city council could be ameliorated by simplifying drastically the entire system. In place of the thirty or so small district councils, we need nine or ten zonal municipalities with real power and responsibility. The functions of power in these places can be assigned to the councils at the sub-regional ("microregion") level. We need a (citywide) council that is much smaller (100-150 deputies maximum) with a single executive authority. Coexistence with and duplication of the functions of the executive committee and the presidium is a mindless bureaucratic game, unjustified by historical precedent.

With the passing of half a year, the idea of administrative reforms began to take hold of the minds of the new city bureaucracy. A plan for the reform of the city administration began to circulate within the Moscow city council. But the city leadership's interpretation sounded rather different from the idea articulated by the radical deputy (Kondratov). The district councils, which by that time had managed to quarrel seriously

with the Moscow council, were actually abolished, and their rights partially given over to the microregions. At the city level, the democratic structures were completely razed along with the old councils' structure.

The socialists considered the formation of new councils on the basis of an actual multiparty system a necessary condition for success of municipal reform. Voters would thus get a chance to vote not just for the best people, but for alternative parties' ideas on the city's or the metropolitan region's development. But all that happened was the consolidation of the personal power of the the presidium's chairman, Gavriil Popov. The new administrators were already able to get along without the councils. The elections helped them put together their own bureaucratic power structures. Henceforth, the continuation of the councils' democratic games became superfluous. In place of the municipalities or councils of the new type there should have appeared administrative organs, subordinate to the central authorities, so that the ruler of Moscow is personally responsible only to the ruler of Russia, that is, Boris Yeltsin, and the rulers of the districts are personally responsible to the ruler of the city. Power would thus again become completely independent of the population.

In August 1990, *The New York Review of Books* published a programmatic article by Gavriil Popov, "The Danger of Democracy," wherein he argued that democracy and the participation of the masses in politics hinders the carrying out of economic reform. On September 18, Popov's supporters participated in a demonstration whose slogan was: "For order in the city! In the meantime, the situation in Moscow deteriorated rapidly. The shelves were empty, cigarettes disappeared, bread was lacking. By September, it was already clear that trouble was brewing with the

heating of residential district housing. The city leadership, unwilling to recognize that it their own behavior was the root of the severe deterioration of the situation, blamed the disorder on sabotage by the old bureaucracy and the central government. In a country used to central authority, inertia made this a plausible belief. Popov and his surroundings thereupon awarded themselves unlimited power.

Clearly, the democratic experiment in the capital has failed. Despite public fears, its gravediggers turned out to be not the old bureaucrats and communists, but the new oligarchy arising under the banner of the struggle for democracy and renewal. But are they new? After all, the majority of "Democratic Russia's" leaders are precisely those who emerged from the old power structure, where they represented definite groups. The formation of an indissoluble bloc of communists and liberals proceeds apace. Meanwhile, Muscovites stand in lines, buy cigarettes at free market prices which have turned smoking into a luxury for the select few, and wait for a miracle from the promised government program of a conversion to capitalism in 500 days.

Miracles are rare in Russia. Catastrophes are much more common...

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Boris Kagarlitsky is the author of The Thinking Reed; The Dialectic of Change; and Farewell, Perestroika, all published by Verso. Since April 1990 he has been a member of the Moscow city council (the Mossoviet).

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