Area and administration in the Soviet Union, 1917-1965: An historical model of spatial inertia

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Besides outlining the territorial boundaries of a nation's sovereignty, a map delineates those areas to which this sovereignty is delegated and within which it is exercised. The map in this sense portrays a spatial organization of the administrative process. Take the United States as an example: its governance is defined spatially by fifty states—the Federal Union. Within each state, a hierarchy of administrative responsibility is in turn mapped by counties, townships, and municipalities. Accompanying these, territorial divisions at the local level—school, water, and sanitation districts—integrate specialized administrative functions of governance. Functional specialization and decentralization by administrative area hold for the federal government as well: the Tennessee Valley Authority, Federal Reserve, and Internal Revenue Districts. For each of these examples, at both federal and state levels, a single or coordinate administrative task is assigned to a geographic area or region.

This assignment has been and remains an "abiding administrative problem", not only for the United States, but for all nation-states. In the past, political expedience and historical precedence provided the criteria by which administration was organized territorially; on the map, frequently the limits of authority were simply arbitrarily drawn. Once set, these ad hoc boundaries tend to create an inherent inflexibility in the administrative process; boundaries become inviolate, all too often making an administrative system non-adaptive and incapable of dealing with social and economic change.

So, if the administrative areas of the past are considered within contemporary environments, forces of change have made some areas obsolete, and past approaches to the territorial organization of administration inadequate. With this, new scales and forms of territorial organization have been proposed whereby administrative areas are comprehensive and functional in scope and spatially related to the socio-economic forces with which they deal. Often referred to as a "new regionalism", proposals along these lines are evident throughout the world. At the international level, they underlie the European Economic Community; in the United States, the "new regionalism", originally publicized and studied by

2. Merrill Jensen, Regionalism in America, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965, p. 3b. Within this volume John Gaus raises the point: "...a system of law and administration with its network of functional interrelationships once developed comes to have great potency for its own self-continuance and for shaping many of the other aspects of the regional complex of life which it enhances" (p. 390).
the National Resources Planning Board, gained renewed impetus through the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965. The Act provides for six to nine regional «action» commissions to plan economic development. Programs of a similar type have emerged in the United Kingdom and in Italy. But perhaps the most ambitious was that proposed for France, where administrative reforms set forth in the 1969 referendum called for twenty-one regions to which new elements of administrative authority were to be assigned. Other examples, such as metro-governments for Dade County, Florida, and Toronto, Canada, evidence similar attempts to reorganize administration along functional territorial lines.

Whether international, national or local, these examples suggest a continuing attempt to change the territorial dimensions of administrative organization to have them correlate more closely than before with socio-economic forces. And, through this reciprocity, administration supposedly becomes a more realistic instrument of direction and control.

In the Union of Soviet Republics, regionalization of this kind has influenced administrative organization for over four decades. It underlies administrative reforms in the Soviet Union implemented between 1957 and 1965; it remains a point of concern to Soviet governance: specifically, the planning and management of modernization and economic growth.

In its broadest sense, this discussion examines how and why institutionally territorial and functional or economic regionalization in the Soviet Union which creates a counterforce to administrative change—spatial inertia.

conceptual framework

Assignment of administration to area in the Soviet Union differs from that of most countries. Extending beyond mere supervision and hierarchical responsibility, Soviet administration touches upon all aspects of control within a politico-economics system and the realization of that control. For some, this point of view has fixed the operation of what they call a command economy. The administrative process in this model displays clear-cut boundaries for behavior, and (the concept of) control focuses on the issuance and implementation of orders; patterns and ranges of messages are predetermined and they are usually diagrammed as an administrative pyramid. Keeping in line with this imagery, executive authority resides in a high command which oversees operations. Its efficiency, in turn, is measured by the limited deviation of the system’s performance from the orders set by the «command».

Though this command perception of the Soviet system holds to a large degree, its para-military bias is misleading and sometimes caricatures the administrative process. Too often, this popular image of the system pictures the Soviet Union as being run by pushbutton from Moscow. Rather than assume this authoritarian concreteness and structural closure, Soviet administration, though authoritative, is more open, and structurally more ambiguous. It more closely resembles a collectivity. When this association is recognized, a different imagery is drawn. Examined from the outside, the Soviet Union displays «uniformity through collective symbols, objectives and formalization of decision-making on behalf of the system as a whole.» But when dissected, the Soviet Union presents a less orderly picture, in which complex, perhaps indefinable, associations of suppliers, customers and bureaucrats interact. Hierarchical responsibilities and commands remain pertinent to this environment, but the Euclidian oneness implied by the command paradigm is restrained. Instead, administration becomes a constant battle to maintain and establish control over the system—setting priorities for action; mobilizing resources; measuring the success of operations; creating system objectives; and regulating change. Sometimes these tasks work in harmony, other times they oppose each other. Together they outline the sets of communications and behavioral responses which go to make up Soviet administration.

In their abstract form, they can be arrayed as administrative spaces not unlike Boudelle’s idea of programming space. Different, however, from that by interpreting control rather than economic development, administrative space encompasses two spatial imageries: one of domains, the other of surfaces. As an abstract space within the administrative process, a domain systematizes communication and feedback as duties and responsibilities portrayed as hierarchical relationships. For the Soviet system this sequence directs the economy. Carrying

6. For background to this imagery see: Georges Matore, L’Espace Humain—L’Expression de L’Espace dans la Vie, La Pensée et l’Art Contemporains, Paris, La Colonbe, 1961, pp. 61-83.

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this idea forward, and if transposed to territorial space, domains of administrative space emerge as an ordered hierarchy of administrative areas such as the township, county and state sequence in the United States or the raion, oblast and union-republic in the Soviet Union.

The second spatial imagery of administration deals with control as a series of message surfaces. Here, the vertical linearity associated with hierarchies gives way to a horizontal surface in which spatial continuity is derived from integrating and coordinating operations among activities or message centers. For the Soviets, administrative control over these emerges out of an optimal configuration of messages which, if translated into their territorial interconnections, stands as an economic region. Long ago, the Soviets described this notion as a functional territoriality associated with political systems.

For the Soviet Union, functional regionalization touches upon three organizing constraints: (1) national development planned by a central executive authority and executed by individuals or groups either directly or indirectly responsible to that authority; (2) democratic centralism; and (3) federalism. By setting priority sequences of events beforehand, central planning frames action patterns; it guides change and maintains structure by acting as a control mechanism for the system's collectivity. Once planning sets the system's direction, then management, through the administrative process, translates plan into reality; this step, in turn, is governed by a second precept—democratic centralism. Here, administration turns to behavioral limits whereby democratic centralism regulates administration organization and response by vesting executive authority in a high command—the centrality so often associated with the command model. As the origin of the decisions which determine action, the central executive authority sets forth policy binding throughout the country. This objective confronts a third precept—an administration which is federal in form and organized along ethnic distinctions—the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Fifteen in number, the union-republics of the Soviet Union are granted sweeping executive and administrative powers. They have, for example, the right to govern their foreign relations with other sovereign states; they may exchange representatives and conclude agreements with foreign governments. Union-republics can raise military forces and they are given the right to secede from the union. At first glance these powers are suggestive of an independent nation-state. But the fifteen union-republics are not sovereign, since they do not control their own destinies. Control rests elsewhere. Though they are delegated broad powers by the Soviet Constitution of 1936, that document also includes the provisos which prevent their being exercised. The exclusive right, for example, to regulate rests in the hands of the central government since it may abrogate actions of the union-republics. Furthermore, whereas federalism implies a territorial balance of administrative power in which both national and regional interests are recognized, in the Soviet Union regional interests are paid lip-service, while national interests govern administrative action at all levels. As far as secession is concerned, no comment is necessary.

Taking all these restrictions into account, one concludes that the union-republics do not form a federal union in the true sense of the phrase; rather, each represents a single domain within a centralized administrative organization.

And yet, political federalism remains a critical aspect to area and administration in the Soviet Union; for as Gaus and Jensen suggest, once purpose is assigned to area it creates a network of communication and identification which is practically self-perpetuating. Time and again this institutional territoriality represented by the union-republics has compounded the control of planning and administration and has conditioned attempts to implement a functional regionalization of the administrative process. This conflict hindered and continues to hinder practical applications of a «new regionalism» in the Soviet Union; it is clearly evidenced by the history of Soviet administrative regionalization.

Recognizing quite early in their history (1918) that modernization produces incongruities between administrative space and the territory it serves, the Soviets saw functional regionalism as an answer to the problem. Somewhat similar to Western thought covering spatial aspects of ecological organization,
early Soviet deliberations of administrative areas spoke of a spacial structure encompassing a «fundamental core» or «proletariat center»; peripheral to this center, a territory large enough to support «normal development of large industries» within the core marked out the outer limits of the region. This core-peripheral imagery is clearly illustrated by Soviet use of the words «tiagotenie» and «vzaimode­

2. Ibid.
3. Perroux speaks to an economic space as a «field of forces comprising centers from which centrifugal forces ema­

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In an attempt by Soviet planners to carry out a territorial outline of these functional interdependen-

FIGURE 1. Proposed Administrative Regions, 1921

Christaller talked about this centrality in terms of the relative importance of a center to a surrounding area through the «mutual dependence» between them. Walter Christaller, Central Places in Southern Germany, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Engle­

and regional governments, not necessarily the centralized control associated with the command paradigm.

Events show that economic federation and functional administrative regions were discarded. Just as in France, spatial forces seemed to have prevented change. First, existing administrative areas carried over from Czarist times acted as a conservative factor. Though admittedly impossible to document, it seems logical to expect even a revolutionary situation to have political and economic interests linked to existing areas standing as a roadblock to administrative change. Furthermore, and more important to future events, the institutional territoriality then emerging (1922-24) as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics downgraded any major alterations in administrative areas.1 Coming as it did almost simultaneously with the formation of a federal union predicated on the territorial integrity of ethnic groups, the proposed administrative regionalization

1. Federal union was not immediate. It evolved gradually.

The republic as originally framed (July 1918) covered all of what was «Great Russia». Included within these limits were autonomous regions and oblasts related to indigenous native populations. Provisional Soviet regimes also functioned in areas peripheral to the RSFSR, the Ukrainian SSR, the Belorussian SSR, and the Trans-Caucasian SSR. Actual union of these did not occur until 1923. In July of that year the USSR was officially constituted. It incorporated four union-republics: the RSFSR, the Belorussian SSR, and the Trans-Caucasian SSR (the Azerbaijanzhan, the Armenian and the Georgian SSR's). Two groups, the Bukhara People’s Soviet Republic and the Khorezm Socialist Republic, were bound by treaty to the union. In 1924 the Uzbek and the Turkmen SSR’s were organized. The Tadzhik people gained union-republic status in December 1929. Great Britain Foreign Office, Soviet Russia, His Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1924.

Great Britain Foreign Office, Soviet Russia, His Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1924.
tion introduced a set of spatial entities conflicting with these groups.

Thus it is not surprising to find the Soviets hedging against administration innovation. Instead of initiating a «new regionalism», the Central Executive Committee in March of 1963 accepted the plan to reform the administrative map of Russia in principle, but postponed its implementation.1 So when the Soviet Union embarked on «its great change» in 1928, its administrative map was a conglomerate of some fifty-two units, a few supposedly functional.2 The oblast, raion, volost system was introduced in the thirties, when centralized decision-making structure governed and in which area was incidental to administrative control. A ministerial system managed the nation and, with the exception of the union-republics where area and administration were linked through the chance location of certain industries, administrative space translated into a discontinuous territory in which functional territorial distinctions were irrelevant.

Up to 1957, this situation characterized Soviet administration. Nevertheless, during the interim period, the Soviets continued to wrestle with the regionalization problem. At first, rather than stressing area and administration directly, Soviet attention centered on the geographic distribution of capital investments. Evidencing this, the Eighteenth Party Congress (March 10-21, 1939) spoke to the problems of territorial organization of economic growth and the definition of so-called territorial complexes as economic regions.3 Unlike the core-peripheral idea applied to earlier deliberations, the Soviets viewed functional division as being predicated on two spatial constructs: a territorial industrial complex and a regional complex.4 Other discussions of the territorial industrial complex described them as large industrial nodes from which planners sought economic advantages in raw materials, energy resources and transport development. Where grouped together as sets of industrial nodes, these then mapped what the Soviets classified as a regional complex.5

Following this line of reasoning, planners developed a system of economic regions or «hearth», which consolidated the remainder of the territories into larger regions;6 over a period of five years these included first a set of five, then nine, and finally thirteen (1944) (Figure 3).

Though these regions bore no direct involvement with the administrative process, they are important for several reasons. Their formation expanded the Soviet concept of functional division beyond what it had been in the twenties; now it clearly emerged as economic regionalization in which functional interdependencies touched upon production and market processes. Equally important, these regions presented an alternative spatial system to the one mapped by the federal union and other administrative units. Somewhat reinforcing this alternative, Soviet administration after 1942 utilized the economic regions for data collection and long-term planning. In this capacity, they were «general planning regions» and initiated a weak tie between regionalization and the administrative system.7

Up until May of 1957, when the entire administrative structure for planning and management changed, this tie remained tenuous. But with the dramatic reforms carried forward by Khrushchev at that time, the ministerial system gave way to what was called the «territorial principles». This idea draws heavily upon previous deliberations of administrative regionalization by emphasizing area as a basis for coordinating the administrative process. According out—

2. KPSS v Rezolytsiakh i Resheniakh Svezdov Konferentsiil i Plenumov Ts/i, 7, Geopolitizdat, 1954, p. 355.
5. Probst, op. cit.
7. Recent discussions use the terms large scale, average scale and small scale regions. The first type includes union-republics, parts of union-republics and groups of union-republics. V. V. Kistanov, Kompleksoe Rasvite i Spezialisatsiia Khoziaistva Ekonomicheskikh Rasiyor, Moskva, 1965, p. 28.
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FIGURE 3. General Planning Regions, 1944

GENERAL PLANNING REGIONS, 1944

1. Izvestia, March 30, 1957.
2. Ibid., Feb. 12, 1957.

Dragged literally out of the past, the councils served as a grassroots instrument for controlling the economy. For example, all industries within their territorial limits with two hundred or more employees came under the council’s purview. At its onset the council selected directors of enterprises; members of the sovnarkhoz were appointed by the union-republic; the sovnarkhozy supervised fulfillment of plans (particularly budgeting) such as enterprise accounts and investment capital construction within their boundaries; they were also responsible for research and development to improve productivity and efficiency of operation. In reality, the council itself constituted a formidable organization which stood as a microcosm of the bureaucracy it had replaced. In this sense Khrushchev did shift the center of gravity of management.

Whether or not the “territorial principle” truly tied administration to functionally determined areas—this can certainly be challenged. But even with the lack of a true economic regionalization, the 1957 reforms drastically altered administrative space and in the process utilized territorial space as the con-

4. Of the 105 councils, ninety-four operated within the confines of four union-republics: the RSFSR, the Ukrainian SSR, the Kazakh SSR and the Uzbek SSR. Each remaining economic administrative region coincided with union-republic boundaries.
trolling device to set down communication and feedback. 
fall to the union-republics and their sub-domains, 
the sovnarkhozy. Some Western writers interpreted 
this rearrangement as a decentralization of planning 
and management.1 But the administrative changes 
premised a more immediate and pragmatic policy 
even though they drew heavily on the Soviet dis­
cussions of the twenties. Khrushchev simply juggl­
ed the administration’s table of organization to ef­
fect better communication to, and therefore control 
from, the center. 
This centralization is clearly evidenced by the plann­
ing procedures in which the burden for planning fell to Gosplan and its subsidiary agencies, the re­
public gosplans. Moreover, abolishing the min­
istries reduced the central decision-maker’s span of 
control to fifteen (the number of union-republics re­
porting to the center) and, on paper at least, prob­
lems associated with the ministerial system decea­
exed. This meant the «administrative distance» that had prevailed between the central executive and the en­
terprises it directed was reduced. 
Great as were their expectations, the reforms of 1957 never did remedy the difficulties the Soviets 
faced. First of all, the union-republics failed to live up to the management responsibilities handed to them; they were equipped neither in terms of per­
sonnel nor past experience to do so. In much the same vein Gosplan either could not carry out its tremen­
dous responsibilities, or else the leadership saw too much power vested in one agency and thus 
was not totally committed to the change. Another roadblock to meaningful administration touched the economic administrative regions. As arbitrary group­
ings of oblasti, they were a far cry from the functional divisions called for in a «new regionalism».
Predictably, administrative boundaries cut across exist­
ing territorial industrial complexes. Wherever regional 
coherence had previously existed, the reforms disrupted, and thereby destroyed, the basic assump­
tion for linking area with administration. Not only did these reforms disrupt existing territorial ties, but in addition the sovnarkhozy introduced a new set of regional commitments. Before 1957, planning and management had to contend with departmentalism.
Now, the reforms introduced a practically i-
 dentical phenomenon—territorialism, or what the 
US National Resources Committee (1935) had called a «balkanization» in the US National Resources Committee (1935) had called a «balkanization» effect.2 Rather than empire building within a departmental context, each sov­
narkhozy identified its operational goals with its ter­
ritory. This regional chauvinism injected an unfor­
seen element of commitment into Soviet admin­
istration which weakened the entire purpose of the 1957 reforms.
To remove these deficiencies and perhaps to strengthen centralized control over economic affairs, 
the administrative changes were gradually amended 
so that the bureaucracy once again began to concen­
trate within the central government. Between 1960 
and 1965 these amendments seemingly brought So­
viet governance full cycle and returned it to where it had been before 1957. For example, in July of 1960, 
the three republics (RSFSR, Ukraine and Kazakh) 
which contained the largest numbers of economic 
administrative regions organized republic sovnar­
khos—Councils of the National Economy (VsNKh)—
to coordinate the operations of the sovnarkhozh within their respective boundaries. In April, 1961, as a 
father hint at a rearrangement of administrative organization, Coordinating and Work-Planning Councils were established. In the move, two weaknesses in the regional economic councils were implied by the Soviets: first, the councils could not deal effectively with material and technical supply allocations; and secondly, regional administration required larger area units for effective integration of operation. Apparently with this in mind, the juris­
diction of the new councils was set down within seventeen new general planning regions (Figure 4). The Soviets then charged the councils with studying the integrated development of the economy and working out recommendations and proposals for the USSR Planning and Union-Republic Planning Commissions.8 
In a further step towards reversing the 1957 re­
forms, the union-republic’s position within the ad-


3. As part of this, the thirteen general planning regions, recognized since 1944, were increased by breaking some of them down into more detail. The Western Siberia region was reduced in size and some of its territory included within the Urals region; Central Asia and Kazakhstan were subdivided into separate entities; and what had previously been the North­
west and North regions were combined into a single area. Belorussia, which had been part of the Western region, was 
separated from it and excluded from the general planning cate­
gory—it remained simply an economic administrative union-republic region. The Central region was broken down into four parts: Central, Volga Viat, Central Chernooz, and Volga; and similarly the Southern region was subdivided into three components: Donets–Donuiper, Southeast and Southern. 

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FIGURE 4. General Planning Regions, 1961

GENERAL PLANNING REGIONS, 1961

The economic administrative regions into forty-seven areas (Figure 5). In this change some boundaries were redrawn, possibly to effect a more functional mapping of economic communities in the Soviet Union. Significantly, the Soviets appeared to be shaping a policy in which economic regionalization replaced national determination and acted as an instrument of furthering centralized control, and setting the union-republics aside. For example, in a statement appearing in the Ekonomicheskaia Gazeta (May 28, 1961) writers indicated the «boundaries of the union-republics set as they are by nationality do not coincide with present day economic borders». And when the consolidation of administrative regions took place in 1962, for the first time economic administrative boundaries clearly cut across those of the union-republics and lesser nationality-based administrative units. Totally ignoring nationality and its associated institutional territoriality, one sovnarkhoz united the four Central Asian republics under a single administration responsible to the central government. In key matters of planning and management—construction, material and technical supplies and, most important
As suggested earlier, Khrushchev had sought the answer to the administrative dilemma by deconcentrating and rearranging administration structure according to the territorial principle. Turning away from this approach, Brezhnev and Kosygin restored the ministerial system. Administrative space was divided (once again) into domains according to All-Union and Union-Republic ministries. Central control extended through five state committees: those for agriculture; science and technology; planning (Gosplan); construction (Gostroi); and material and technical supplies. The domain and responsibilities of the last clearly revealed the degree to which the central executive maintained its sovereignty over the economic system. Controlling over seventy per cent (by value) of the economy’s supply inputs, the materials and technical supply committee, through its territorial agencies, governed the movement of...
production between suppliers and customers no matter what their department subordination.¹ In this sense, the administration, after 1965, held even tighter control than before.

The leadership abandoned the sovnarkhozy, and its related central agencies, such as the USSR Council of the Economy, and, most important, indirectly returned the union-republics to the apex of the territorial hierarchy for administration. Almost tragic, perhaps comical, in its historical proportions, the significance of the union-republics was again extolled. In his initial statement, «On Improving the Organization of Management», Kosygin envisaged an «emphasis on the economies of the country’s republics and regions with expansion of the economic powers of the republics»¹ A speech by Lepeshkin, a Soviet expert on public law, called for a «restudy of the relationship between the center and the republic, especially now when the experiment in setting up individual major economic regions and forming inter-republic economic bodies with them has failed to justify itself».² Significantly, this public recognition of economic regionalization’s failure and a possible re-emphasis on the union-republics for planning and management underscores the republics’ durability over time.

Conclusions

Time and again this territoriality associated with the federal union has reasserted itself; and it remains one of the most persistent forces to be reckoned with in Soviet administration. In fact, today some Soviets indicate that even if ethnic distinctions disappeared, the federal structure might be retained for economic administrative purposes.³ So, as far as administrative regionalization is concerned, area and administration in the Soviet Union remain linked by forces other than economic rationalism. And the Soviet Union’s failure to implement an administrative system based on functional spatial criteria reveals what Wirth has already noted as one of the inherent difficulties of economic regionalization in any modern state. «Boundaries emerge out of social and political strife and are not always the result of rational reflection»⁴.

⁴. Ibid.

Είς το προσεχές τεύχος θα δημοσιευθεί συζήτησις επί του θέματος των άρθρων των συνεργατών της 'Επιθεωρήσεως Κοινωνικών Έρευνών, κ.κ. Κ. Παπαγεωργίου («Το περιφερειακό πρόβλημα της 'Ελλάδος», τεύχος 13) και Δ. Πλέσσα και Κλ. Ντάβου («The Greek regional problem: some analytic and policy perspectives», τεύχος 14).

Discussion on the articles written by the collaborators of The Greek Review of Social Research, Mr. C. Papageorgiou («The regional problem of Greece», issue No. 13) and D. Plessas and Cl. Davos («The Greek regional problem: some analytic and policy perspectives», issue No. 14) will be published in the forthcoming issue.