The Language of the Soviet Constitution of 1977: A Note*

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In the history of communism, the 1936 Constitution of the USSR stands out as a bewildering edifice of statements which, judged by their truthfulness, can compete even with the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), A Short Course (1938). By purely linguistic standards, however, "Stalin's Constitution" was a well composed document. Not only was it written in good, grammatically impeccable Russian, but its draftsmen had an undeniable sense of style: deliberately austere, restrained language effectively created an aura of solemnity and dignity.

Nothing of the kind can be said about the 1977 Soviet Constitution. Contrary to a raving and servile review published in an authoritative linguistic periodical, it is our opinion that the Constitution is written in very poor Russian. The language is an utterly inelegant mixture of bombastic rhetoric and bureaucratic jargon. Professor Beloded's assertions that the constitutional language is "clear and concise" seem frivolous in view of redundancies which abound in the text. For example, Art. 14, para. 2 speaks of "nalag na dokhody podlezhashchiie nalogooblozeniuiu", while Art. 68 refers to "dolg i obiazannost" without any hint what may be the difference between these two synonyms. The "Constitution of developed socialism", surprisingly, mentions "sacred" duties (sviazhchennyi dolg, Art. 62, para. 2).

Quite apart from its stylistic poverty, the constitutional text is replete with grammatical errors. We will review briefly a handful of them in order to illustrate our general statement. For the sake of clarity, the errors will be divided into several categories:

1. Incorrect Use of Prepositions

The draftsmen incorrectly use the noun kontrol' with the preposition za (Art. 14, para. 2: "kontrol' za meroi truda i potrebleniia"; Art. 147: "kontrol' za sobliude-niem zakonnosti"). The noun kontrol' should either be followed by the preposi-

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tion nad or by the genitive case of the noun (kontrol' nad kem-chem libo or kontrol' kogo-chego libo.)  

Art. 174 erroneously uses the preposition ot; the provision reads "ne menee dvukh tretei ot obshchego chisla", whereas it should read either "ne menee dvukh tretei iz obshechego chisla" or "ne menee dvukh tretei obshchego chisla".

2. Incorrect Use of Nouns

Several provisions, accumulating collateral nouns without dividing them by conjunctions or consistent punctuation, result in ambiguity. For example, in Art. 15, para. 2 three indirect objects as well as three direct objects are haphazardly accumulated without any conjunctions which would substantially clarify the text. In Art. 44, para. 2, to take another example, five instrumentals are brought together without any clear syntactic differentiation and this, for instance, impedes the comprehension of the relationship between the instrumental and the genitive zhiloi ploshchadi—does the latter term relate to spravedlivym raspredeleniem or to pod obshchestvennym kontrolem?

In some provisions, the elliptic coordination of nouns is in contradiction either with their lexical meaning or with Russian grammatical rules. Art. 148 may serve as an example of the former: the nouns dolzhnostnye litsa and grazhdane are used as if they were mutually exclusive. Such usage is obviously nonsensical because "officials" are also "citizens". A good illustration of the latter type of error may be found in Art. 173 (second sentence) which requires that all laws and other acts of state organs be issued, "na osnove i v sootnoshenii s Konstitutsiei SSSR".

3. Incorrect or Ambiguous Use of Verbs

In Art. 71 the verb ob"ediniaiutsia would suggest that the fifteen republics are at present in the process of unification (in English: "are uniting"), whereas obviously the message was meant to be that the republics are bound together in the form of a union. The provision should either use the passive voice ob"edineny or the form: "Soiuz SSR ob"edinaet".

Art. 82 incorrectly describes the relationship between a union republic and an autonomous republic, stating that the latter "nakhoditsia v sostave" of the former. The provision should instead make use of the standard expression "vkhodit v sostav".

In Art. 144 the verb obrazuet is used in an ambiguous way: it may mean either "creates" or "forms".

The expression "osushchestvliaiut rukovodstvo" ("exercise leadership") in