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REFORM, THE ELITE
AND SOVIET CENTER-
PERIPHERY RELATIONS*

The state of relations between the national leadership and political organizations of the periphery—including republic, provincial and local bodies—has been a critical concern to every national regime since the earliest days of Soviet power. Moscow has always been interested in guaranteeing its control over a diverse periphery, with that control largely dependent upon the reliability of hundreds of provincial and thousands of lower-level Party organizations and their officials. Although those agencies and officials were expected to carry out a political program hammered out at the national level, they operated within a varied geographical and organizational expanse that required concerted and continual central efforts at coordination and integration. The approaches adopted by Moscow to assure such control and coordination have varied by national leaderships.1

The perestroika reform program developed by the Gorbachev regime has profoundly influenced relations between the center and periphery. Between 1985 and 1990 a reformist national leadership consolidated its power and transformed the governing national elite while simultaneously promoting a program of radical change. The resultant confusion in the ranks of the elite, combined with the increasingly radical nature of the evolving policy program, helped to alter the power balance between national and subnational actors. Throughout this period the regime was compelled to address the dilemma of national unity and central con-

* An initial version of this article was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Association of Slavists/Association Canadienne des Slavistes, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, June 7, 1988. The author is grateful to William M. Reisinger and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this work.

trol while encouraging dynamic change. An important consequence was the emergence of subnational authorities ever more willing and able to assume responsibility for a mounting set of political and economic tasks. An equally important consequence was the fractionation and fragmentation of the political process. By the early 1990s a gridlock and immobilism had set in which left the country less able to confront its pressing problems.

This article examines the Soviet political elite and center-periphery relations in light of 1985-90 reforms. Personnel and organizational changes resulted in a redistribution of policy-making influence in the Soviet polity by the beginning of the 1990s. The latter 1980s entailed a major reinvigoration of the governing political elite, both in the center and the locales. An evolving new cohort of politicians came to dominate the country's political life in both Moscow and the locales. A wider range of interests came to be represented in the ranks of the decision-making elite. Meanwhile, a series of institutional reforms resulted in counterposing tendencies that altered the center-periphery power balance: there was a concentration of decision-making power in top national executive organs with a concomitant deconcentration of administrative authority to subnational bodies.

By 1990 these organizational and personnel changes had transformed the country's policy process, though the interplay of forces varied by republic and regional setting. Emergent informal groups, popular fronts and political parties assumed heightened profiles in the USSR's public life. By the end of 1990 they were increasingly able to structure and shape the national and subnational policy agenda. Democratization and glasnost' resulted in a more openly contested and complex political process. But the political system proved little-prepared to cope with the array of problems challenging authorities both at the center and in the locales.

I examine the transformed but beleaguered Soviet elite, assessing the impact of political reforms on the conduct of center-periphery relations. Five years of debate and reform left considerable political diversity in the USSR. Many settings experienced the emergence of a new elite, a transformed political environment and a new balance of forces conducive to a new politics of economic and policy change. But numerous other settings exhibited considerable resistance to institutionalized change, with more conservative officials maintaining power and more modest "reform" programs emerging. Overall, the first five years of the