

Institutional transformations of Russian local self-government: Lessons for sustainable economic development of the region

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Our paper analyzes the outcomes of the institutional transformations of local self-government (public authority) in the Russian Federation with a special focus on regional sustainable economic development. Under the current ongoing pilot reform of the selected territorial organizations of local self-governments that envisages the transition to a single-level model, the social and economic development of Russian municipalities is undergoing profound changes that would have deep institutional implications for the entire regional economic systems. One of the selected pilot regions for these reforms is the Stavropol Region of Russia. In the empirical part of the paper, we are presenting the results of the survey that was conducted between November and December 2023 among local residents and stakeholders of the Stavropol Region by the researchers from the Institute of Economics and Management of the North-Caucasus Federal University and the representatives of the Association “Council of Municipalities of the Stavropol Territory”. Our sample included 858 respondents aged from 15 to 82. Our results demonstrate that the perceived impact of the administrative reform varies significantly across age groups, place of residence, and settlement sizes. Residents of medium or smaller settlements and towns, as well as respondents aged between 36 and 60 proved to be more likely to perceive positive changes induced by the administrative institutional reforms. These results are of a special relevance for the state and municipal stakeholders and policymakers as well as for the local residents who are keen on promoting regional sustainable economic development and growth.

Keywords: *sustainable development; public administration; institutional economics; Russia*

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Институциональные преобразования российского местного самоуправления: уроки для устойчивого экономического развития региона

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В данной статье анализируются результаты институциональных преобразований местного самоуправления в Российской Федерации с особым акцентом на устойчивое экономическое развитие территорий. В рамках текущей пилотной реформы отдельных территориальных организаций местного самоуправления, предусматривающей переход к одноуровневой модели, социально-экономическое развитие российских муниципалитетов претерпевает глубокие изменения, которые будут иметь значимые последствия для всей региональной экономической системы. Одним из пилотных регионов для этих реформ является Ставропольский край. В эмпирической части статьи мы представляем результаты опроса, который проводился в ноябре-декабре 2023 г. среди местных жителей и муниципальных чиновников Ставропольского края исследователями Института экономики и управления Северо-Кавказского федерального университета и представителями Ассоциации «Совет муниципальных образований Ставропольского края». В выборку вошли 858 респондентов в возрасте от 15 до 82 лет. Наши результаты показывают, что воспринимаемое влияние административной реформы значительно различается в зависимости от возрастных групп, места проживания и размеров населенных пунктов. Жители средних и малых поселений и городов, а также респонденты в возрасте от 36 до 60 лет оказались более склонны воспринимать позитивные изменения, вызванные институциональными реформами. Полученные результаты имеют особое значение для государственных и муниципальных политиков, а также для местных жителей, которые могут быть заинтересованы в содействии региональному устойчивому экономическому развитию и росту.

Ключевые слова: устойчивое развитие; государственное управление; институциональная экономика; Россия

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Introduction

The changes in municipal reforms in the Russian Federation arise from broader political and economic transformations that have occurred in the country since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Chernyavsky and Vartapetov, 2004, Minaeva et al., 2023). In the wake of the USSR disintegration, Russia faced a difficult task of redefining and restructuring its political and administrative institutions to correspond with the elements of democracy and market-oriented practices (Strielkowski et al., 2020; Burkhardt, 2021). This emerging transformation included local government reform, as a primary catalyst for enhancement of decentralization, efficiency of public administration, and local democracy (Ross, 2007).

During the 1990s, the Russian Federation began with a highly centralized governmental organization inherited from the Soviet period with little real local governance and limited public participation in decision-making (Foa, 2022). However, in the 21st century, it became quite evident that the fragmentation and inefficiency of local governments in Russia constituted a serious institutional problem (Polishchuk et al., 2021). This realization led to the new reform efforts toward a more consolidated and coherent municipal system. The Russian government made a final touch in 2003, with the adoption of the Federal Law on the General Principles of the Organization of Local Self-Government in the Russian Federation, the so-called “Municipal Reform Law”¹. The reform aimed to make municipal governance uniform across the long and heterogeneous Russian territory, outlining the hierarchy of municipal entities and defining their functions and powers.

Adoption of a uniform municipal system as part of the transformation of the Russian local government was one of the key reformation direction aimed at improving governance efficiency, accountability, and effective economic development in terms of municipal units (Kalyugina et al., 2024). This reform aimed at introducing more compact and collective local governance practices into a broader national framework in order to take into account the need for diversity in governance practices across different regions of the large and diversified country. Furthermore, this reform attempted to optimize bureaucratic processes, improve transparency, and establish a participatory process leading to the more efficient local governance.

However, this appeared to be not quite enough. The amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation made in 2020, as well as the draft law “On the general principles of organizing local self-government in a unified system of public authority” submitted to the Russian State Duma in 2022 became the basis for the further development of local self-government in Russia². The new changes provided for the legal consolidation of a single-level model of organizing local self-government in the form of two types of municipalities: “urban district” and “municipal district”. This model was designed to improve the competency of municipal employees, increase the efficiency of local authorities, reduce the financial costs of their maintenance, as well as intensify the civic activity of citizens.

The goal of all these reforms is to maintain a level of governance that is constitutional and responsible for delivering public services. This involves clearly defining the roles of each local, regional, and federal authority to prevent service overlap and confusion, as well as clearly delineating the responsibilities of different levels of government. This is expected to enable more effective resource mobilization and empower local authorities to quickly respond to the unique needs of their constituents (Gudde et al., 2024). These reforms envisaged the improvement of the mode of delivery of essential public services, which included utilities, education, healthcare and social services in order to help local governments better deliver and manage these services (Zakshevskaya et al., 2020).

¹ Federal Law of 06.10.2003 No. 131-FZ (as amended on 08.08.2024) “On the General Principles of Organization of Local Self-Government in the Russian Federation”. https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_44571 (accessed on 10.09.2024)

² The draft law “On the general principles of organizing local self-government in a unified system of public authority”, submitted to the State Duma on January 25, 2022 under No. 40361-8. <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/40361-8> (accessed on 15.09.2024)

In addition, the municipal reforms also intended to increase the interest of local economic development and give local governments greater autonomy and necessary instruments for increasing investments and activities within their territories. Another main goal of municipal system reforms was improving democracy and accountability in Russian local governance. The reforms needed these mechanisms because they aimed to promote transparency, accountability, and civic engagement that would encourage residents to play a more active role in decision-making. Promoting a two-way dialogue between state institutions and citizens ensured that the communities were informed and consulted about the things that affect their lives. Thence, such reforms sought to create a governance culture in the Russian Federation that was more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the public by providing for effective public oversight and citizen participation.

When it comes to the links to the sustainable development, the administrative reforms of self-government, such as the ones described above, fall under the provisions of Sustainable Development Goal 16: “Peace, justice, and strong institutions”, which emphasizes the need for effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels (Hope, 2020; Haque et al., 2021). The administrative reforms would enhance governance structures by reducing redundancies, improving resource allocation, and fostering more efficient service delivery, aligning with the core principles of SDG 16. Furthermore, the inclusive approaches and addressing the differentiated impacts across demographics resonates with the SDG 16 focus on promoting inclusivity and equity in governance. In addition, the reforms address institutional inefficiencies and enhance local governance, as well as contribute to creating resilient institutions capable of supporting sustainable regional development thus touching upon the provisions of other interrelated SDGs, such as reducing inequalities (SDG 10) and building sustainable communities (SDG 11).

Institutional economics in the transformations of local self-governance

In Russia, the transition of territorial organization and local self-government to a single-level management system is aimed at increasing the level and quality of the implementation of regional and municipal authorities’ powers to resolve the issues of local importance (Zhestyannikov, 2022). This reform should ensure the comprehensive and sustainable development of municipal territories, create conditions for overcoming the unevenness of their socio-economic development.

This transition can be well analyzed and assessed from the point of view of the institutional economics according to its several aspects, such as institutional change and economic performance, embeddedness of institutions, collective action and governance, transaction costs and decentralization, as well as path dependency. Some instruments such as narratives, data collection, as well as the analysis of the available sources and literature can be used just for that purpose (Volchik and Maslyukova, 2021).

Let us start with the institutional change and economic performance. In the institutional economics theory, a strong emphasis is placed on how rules, norms, and governance structures can affect economic performance and to what extent (North, 2016; Volchik, 2020). The administrative reforms and transition to a single-level model of local governance that are taking place in the Russian Federation represent a clear example of the distinct institutional change. These changes can be linked to the works of Douglass North (1990) on the role of institutions in economic performance. North emphasizes that institutions may reduce uncertainty in human interactions and shape economic incentives, which could explain variations and mixed opinions of the local residents’ perceptions of regional administrative reforms (North, 1994). Within this context, North’s concept of “adaptive efficiency” can be recalled and used to evaluate whether the outcomes of administrative reform would result in sustainable and resilient economic systems in Russian regions.

Another aspect to be considered is the embeddedness of institutions. Institutions tend to be deeply embedded in the social, cultural, and historical context of any given region (Strielkowski and Popov, 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2020). The differing perceptions of reform across age groups and settlement sizes could be analyzed through the lens of embeddedness. For example, Polanyi (1944) suggests that economic systems are rooted in and influenced by social relationships. This notion explains why certain groups of stakeholders or citizens might view the reforms, such as the administrative reform of self-government, more positively.

Moreover, in the works of Ostrom (1990), governance and collective action are analyzed within the context of how communities tend to self-organize in order to manage resources and achieve collective goals. This can be used to explain the complex interactions between local stakeholders and the regional government during the administrative reforms leading to institutional change. Stakeholder perceptions align with Ostrom's concept of participatory governance.

Furthermore, institutional reforms, such as those considered in this paper that include moving towards a single-tier governance model tend to affect transaction costs (e.g., communication, coordination, and enforcement). This effect can be explained in terms of transaction costs and decentralization. For instance, Ronald Coase's theory of transaction costs (Coase, 1959; 2013) can be applied to examine whether these reforms reduce costs for local government and residents, thus promoting regional economic development.

Finally, institutional reforms in Russia are likely to follow a path-dependent trajectory, where historical institutional arrangements influence present reforms. The works of Paul David (1985; 2019) on path dependence can help the researchers to explore how past governance structures and policies shape the outcomes of the current reforms in Russian regions.

The administrative reforms in local governments in selected Russian regions can be analyzed for their alignment with Ostrom's design principles for sustainable institutions, such as inclusivity, accountability, and adaptability. However, in order to do so, the governance models of the regions that underwent the reforms need to be compared to other Russian regions which may not have experienced similar reforms. This is beyond the scope of the current study.

Data

The data was collected through the survey conducted between November and December 2023 among local residents and stakeholders of the Stavropol Region in Russia using the online mode (the so-called "Computer Assisted Web Interviewing" (CAWI) method). The survey was administered by the researchers from the Institute of Economics and Management of the North-Caucasus Federal University and the representatives of the Association "Council of Municipalities of the Stavropol Territory" who used the network of local gatekeepers in order to make contact with potential respondents and convince them to participate in assisted surveys by phone or in person.

The selection of the Stavropol Region as a case study for our research was not accidental. The Region (also known as "Stavropol Krai") is located in the North Caucasus region of Southern Russia and it is a part of the North Caucasian Federal District. Stavropol Region borders several regions: Krasnodar Region to the west, Rostov Oblast to the northwest, Kalmykia to the north, and Dagestan to the east. Moreover, it shares its southern borders with other regions of the Russian Federation, such as Chechnya, North Ossetia–Alania, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia. Its varied landscape includes steppe, semi-desert, forest-steppe and mountainous areas.

The region was subjected to the amendments made to the regional legislation on the territorial-administrative structure of the Russian regions thus becoming a pilot test project for the new administrative reform. In 2020, all municipal districts in the Stavropol Region, as well as urban and rural settlements subordinate to them, were abolished and transformed into urban and municipal districts. As of January 1, 2021, instead of 230 municipalities, the new territorial structure of the region included only 14 municipal districts and 19 urban districts. In 2022, the transition to a single-level model of local self-government organization was fully completed and currently the territorial structure of the region includes 7 urban and 26 municipal districts. Thence, it seemed interesting to investigate changes resulting from these reforms, as perceived by local stakeholders and residents.

The selection of respondents was carried out by the method of convenient random sampling. The total valid sample size constituted 858 respondents ($n = 858$, 75% female, 25% male, aged between 15 and 82, mean age: 43.7%, median age: 48 years; 56% residing in urban areas and 44% residing in rural areas).

Within our sample, 55% of respondents were municipal employees; 20.9% were employed; 11.2% were temporarily unemployed; 8.8% constituted pensioners, and 4.3% were entrepreneurs. Thence,

there might be a slight skewness towards the “professional” view of the reforms by the employees of municipalities who constituted the majority of our sample. At the same time, in our opinion, the views of these people can reflect the “expert” analysis of the reforms and their outcomes which makes them valuable in the research design.

Table 1 below depicts the personal realization of consequences of the administrative and territorial reforms in the Stavropol Region by the respondents.

Table 1
Indicators of perception of administrative and territorial reforms in the Stavropol Region

Nothing has changed for me	Do not know	Yes, I felt it	Yes, I definitely felt it	Total
Have you personally felt the consequences of the administrative and territorial reforms in Stavropol Region?				
35.30%	13.30%	19.70%	31.70%	100.00%

Source: Own results

Moreover, Table 2 that follows reports the indicators of positive changes that occurred in the the functioning of municipal government and local self-government bodies after the creation of municipal and urban districts (the abolition of village councils) in Stavropol Region.

Table 2
Indicators of positive effects of administrative and territorial reforms (abolition of village councils) in Stavropol Region

Elimination of duplication	Clearer assignment of powers	Raising salaries	Do not know	Other
What positive changes have occurred in the functioning of municipal government and local self-government bodies after the creation of municipal and urban districts (the abolition of village councils) in Stavropol Region?				
21.10%	17.70%	7.40%	45.30%	8.50%

Source: Own results

What follows is an empirical model that estimates the perceived changes attributed to the administrative reform based on the social and demographic factors among respondents.

Empirical model

Our empirical model is based on the estimation of the logistic regression. The dependent variable is the perceived change attributed to the administrative reform, while the independent variables are represented by the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents such as the age group, the place of residence (urban or rural areas), occupation (social status), and town size.

Thence, the framework for the logistic regression analysis can be presented in the form of the following equation:

$$p(X) = 1/(1+e^{-(\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_k X_k)}), \tag{1}$$

where:

- $p(X)$ – the predicted probability that $Y = 1$ (in our case, the perceived changes of the municipal reform in Stavropol Region marked as “yes” = 1 or “no” = 0);
- β – the intercept (bias term);
- $\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots, \beta_k$ – the coefficients for each independent variables X_1, X_2, \dots, X_k (town size, age group, social status, and place of residence);
- e – the base of the natural logarithm.

Furthermore, the list of independent variables and the coding used in the model can be presented as follows:

- TS50 – residence in the town or settlement with the size over 50 thousand residents;
- AG36-60 – age group between 36 and 60 years;
- SocStat_retired – social status being retired (pensioner);
- AG60 – age group 60 years and more;
- SocStat_entrepreneur – social status of being entrepreneur (sole trade or owner of the business company);
- PR_urban – place of residence in an urban area;
- SocStat_municipal – social status working as a municipal employee;
- TS10 – residence in the town or settlement with the town size up to 10 thousand residents;
- SocStat_tempunempl – social status of being temporarily unemployed (out of labour force).

The results of the empirical model are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of the empirical model

Variable	Coefficient	Std. error	Z-value	P-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
TS50	-0.523***	0.189	-2.755	0.005	-0.894	-0.150
AG36-60	0.434***	0.167	2.593	0.009	0.106	0.762
SocStat_retired	-0.482*	0.327	-1.471	0.141	-1.123	0.159
AG60	0.302	0.315	0.957	0.338	-0.316	0.920
SocStat_entrepreneur	0.343	0.375	0.913	0.361	-0.393	1.079
PR_urban	-0.186	0.215	-0.868	0.384	-0.608	0.234
SocStat_municipal	0.151	0.182	0.825	0.408	-0.206	0.508
TS10	0.097	0.208	0.468	0.639	-0.310	0.505
SocStat_tempunempl	0.112	0.266	0.418	0.675	-0.411	0.634
const	-0.039	0.257	-0.154	0.877	-0.544	0.464
Pseudo R-squared	0.417					
N	858					

Note: *** – significant at 0.01 level; * – significant at 0.15 level.

Source: Own results

The results shown in Table 3 reveal that respondents in the age group between 36 and 60 years appear to be significantly more likely to report feeling the consequences of the administrative reform compared to the reference group ($p = 0.01$). Positive coefficient (0.434) suggests higher likelihood of the reforms leading to the prosperity, sustainable economic development, as well as overall growth of the region.

At the same time, the size of the settlement (over 50,000 residents) comes through as negative and significant. Residents in larger towns are significantly less likely to report feeling the consequences ($p = 0.006$). The negative coefficient (-0.523) indicates a lower likelihood of the perceived changes indicating that the outcomes of the administrative reforms might be overlooked in larger settlements, perhaps, due to the life complexity and overburdened daily routine.

The social status “being retired” (pensioner) also comes through as negative and significant at the 15% level (borderline significance) indicating that people who are not actively engaging in the labour force, social, and economic life tend to feel less changes brought about by the administrative reform.

Other variables, including the place of residence (urban vs. rural) and social status, did not show significant effects at 5% level.

In addition, the pseudo R-squared (0.417) indicates the model explains the significant proportion of the variability in whether consequences of the administrative changes in Stavropol Region were perceived and reported. The R-squared demonstrates rather good predictability of the model and relevance of its main results.

All of that suggests that younger and more economically and socially active people from smaller towns as well as rural areas tend to experience the outcomes of the administrative institutional reforms with more intensity and perception highlighting the effectiveness of the “bottom-up” approach of the institutional changes.

Conclusions and implications

Our results confirm that institutional transformations of Russian local self-government can provide valuable lessons for sustainable regional economic development. Our analysis of the administrative and territorial reform in Stavropol Region shows that it has led to the profound effects on residents. The effects of the reform vary by demographic group. It particularly has the most impact on people aged between 36 and 60 years, and people living in smaller towns and villages. Although there were no gender-specific differences, municipal workers seem to be somewhat more aware of the changes as they are involved in administration, while retired individuals are less aware entrenched in public institutions. Urban rather than large-town inhabitants were less likely to report obvious changes, indicating that the reforms had a much more concrete effect on rural communities presumably because of the redistribution of services and restructuring of local councils. Therefore, our results indicate that age and size of town are relevant factors affecting opinions, and they can be strategically focused in administrative and municipal reforms implementations in the Russian Federation in the future.

Nevertheless, some limitations of this study may be indicated. Respondents may not reflect the wider population of the Stavropol Region, especially those who are less politically engaged or less able to participate. In addition, the questions asked are subjective, and the answers provided may not correlate with objective measures of whether reform has been effective. The analysis also primarily addressed demographic and locational factors, perhaps missing other influences like political affiliations, education level or economic status.

It has to be noted that our findings, from a policy perspective, demonstrate the need for targeted interventions to tackle the needs among the populations in rural and smaller-town populations, where perceived impact of reforms is highest. Better communication and support on those fronts will help ensure all the reforms have the best possible outcomes. Also, getting local residents, particularly underrepresented groups, engaged in the development and application of reforms can make them better and more relevant. In addition, policymakers should also develop strong systems to monitor and evaluate the long-term socio-economic impacts of such reforms, including change in public services delivery, local infrastructure development and local governance efficiency.

Additionally, our results can be discussed in the light of the institutional economics approach, especially in relation to some of its key provisions. The administrative reforms aim to streamline bureaucratic processes in order to improve performance. Hence, our findings illustrate how social and geographic contexts shape the differential impacts, underscoring the need for adaptive governance strategies. Institutional economics also emphasizes the role of trust and social capital in the successful implementation of such reforms, meaning that it depends on engaged stakeholders and a transparent decision-making process. It appears that North’s concept of adaptive efficiency holds true for the administrative reform’s outcomes leading to the sustainable and resilient economic systems in the Stavropol Region. Furthermore, the mixed outcomes of these reforms highlight the contentious relationship between formal institutions like municipal structures and informal practices within communities. Among this is highlighting the need for institutional transformations to be aligned with local customs and practices for sustainable development. The implications of this study link to broader principles of institutional economics, namely, that successful transitions must balance top-down reforms and bottom-up participation. Using this framework, policymakers could improve the design and implementation of more inclusive and resilient local economies interventions.

When it comes to future research pathways, it appears that some objective indicators such as economic growth metrics and service delivery data should be used alongside subjective survey responses and infrastructure quality. Longitudinal studies that look over time at perceptions and outcomes would help the researchers to understand how the effects of such profound institutional transformation evolve in the long run. The comparative analyses of other Russian pilot regions that are undergoing similar admin-

istrative reforms would also help draw lessons and identify best practices for sustainable regional development. Another useful approach would be to consider how reforms intersect with extended economic opportunities, community cohesion and the quality of life for local residents and citizens.

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