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URBAN ENVIRONMENT OF TYUMEN IN THE 1990s

SUMMARY. The article is devoted to the evolution of the urban environment of Tyumen in the 1990s. Questions, connected with the condition of the improvement of public services, social infrastructure, public transport, the external image of the city are considered. It was found out that the transformation of the 1990s was accompanied by worsening of all the major problems in the condition of the urban environment, which maintained the traditional image, only partially affected by the process of modernization. To replace the familiar rhythm in economics and social sphere, a rapid inflation and unemployment came. It resulted in worsening of the demographic situation, a reduction in the urban population and scale of housing construction. The work is based on the archive materials, oral records, introduced into scientific sphere for the first time. This is one of the first attempts to explore an important scientific issue, the analysis of which is of interest for the historians and managers.

KEY WORDS. Urban environment, infrastructure, housing development.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 caused significant economic, social and political changes in all the post-Soviet regions. The standard of living and industrial production declined, and many enterprises were closed. As a result, the problems of social and urban infrastructure got worse.

The reorganizations that took place in the 1990s stand out in the history of Tyumen, which, as the “capital” of the Tyumen region, is a large administrative and research centre of the West-Siberian oil and gas complex. Political and socio-economic changes influenced every aspect of Tyumen life and made Yeltsin’s reforms quite risky. Galloping inflation and unemployment replaced the usual smooth rhythm of social and economic life, resulting in a demographic crisis and reduction of the urban population (~564,400 inhabitants in 1991; ~558,800 in 1993) [1]. On the other hand, the figures began to increase in 1994, although they were still 10-15 times lower than in the previous decades, and in 1999 the population decreased by two hundred people.

The city’s appearance was getting worse. A contemporary witnessed “endless mud, constantly overflowing waste containers, and lots of paper blown all around by the wind” in one of the dormitory suburbs. “You had to be pretty much a sportsman to jump your way out to the local food shop” [2].

One of the biggest difficulties of that time was housing. In the previous decades, housing development had increased significantly, and new residential areas appeared. Yet this sector was encountering problems. By 1991, there were 71,700 families in

line for better housing. This figure increased by 8300 families in one year, while only 5200 families got new apartments [3]. The poor quality of housing construction made the situation even worse. Many of those buildings were so-called “khrushchyovkas”, or barracks. Private housing usually had no sewerage system, no central heating or ground water diversion.

The situation got worse in the early 1990s, when many large organizations and enterprises closed, and departmental housing construction almost stopped. At the same time, municipal housing development slowed down.

The state of affairs in the social welfare service was getting worse as well. The newly-built districts lacked health care, educational and sport facilities. We have analyzed the complaints the people sent to the Tyumen Housing and Communal Service Board. According to the analysis, 25% of them complained about the heating supply, 18% about housing and yard maintenance, 15% about the water supply, etc. In 1991, the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR even included Tyumen in the list of “problem cities” [4]. But the government’s plan to remedy the deficiency of construction would not be fulfilled because of the deficit of financial and physical resources. “All we have done is to admit the problem,” said Gennady Raykov, the chairman of Tyumen City Council, “Over 100 000 people are still living below the normal living standard” [5].

One man recalls the life of an average Tyumen resident of the early 1990s: “Our family had rather worn-out clothes. Russian-manufactured clothes were gradually vanishing from the shops. Knitwear, outer clothing, tissues, bedclothes... all sorts of things disappeared. Empty food-shop shelves looked depressing. Duck was the only kind of meat still in stock. People crowded in lines for two sorts of cheap sausage. We did not understand nor support the measures the government was undertaking supposedly to make our life better. The distribution of vouchers, faceless and nameless — no one cared about your contribution to the state. The privatization rates were just terrifying — thousands of enterprises a year. There were also those kiosks, “metal monsters”, with rats scurrying among them” [6].

This text indicates a wide range of problems Tyumen encountered at that time, the most important of which were the urban environment and infrastructure, including a set of measures to be taken to maintain resident-friendly conditions.

In the 1990s, Tyumen was constantly short of money to solve such problems. It did not even have all the necessary waste disposal plants. “It is useless anyway,” a journalist wrote ironically a local newspaper, “People usually miss the litter-bin” [7].

The newspaper “Tyumenskiye Izvestiya” published the following description of Tyumen in 1996: “Mud is everywhere — it is on the roads, in public transport, in the shops and buildings. Always. It seems to be uncleanable. Respubliki Street has for a long time been repaired, reconstructed. Did it help? Where is the promised rain-water sewage system? It is still dirty, nothing changed. We do not need all that street-shampoo from abroad. What we need is simple ordinary cleanness, at least” [8].

In those times, infrastructure was a burning issue for the city’s administration. One of the new measures to control the situation was that Mayor Stepan Kirichuk

regularly visited the problem areas of the city. The newspaper “Tyumenskiy Kuryer” described one of these visits: “In two hours they have visited many problem places of the city — Voynovka, Babarynka, Tovarnoye shosse, Dambovskaya Street, etc. Stepan Kirichuk was pointing all around all the way. And everybody was turning their heads, seeing what they were blind to while in their offices: vast puddles with dead dogs floating in them, different kiosks, piles of rubbish in inappropriate places, disgusting fences, and uncovered sewage manholes, so attractive for the local children to explore” [9].

On the other hand, such visits were not always effective. The mayor’s scolding the officials, still in financial deficit, was not as useful as good sewerage systems or construction/repair work could be.

But there was some success — for example, public transport reorganization. Many buses and trolleybuses were in disrepair in the early 1990s. In the time of total industrial decline and galloping inflation, Tyumen could not afford new public transportation vehicles. “We need 704 vehicles to get Tyumen people to their work and back every day,” said a transport authority in 1994, “We have 435 only” [10].

Seeking a solution, Tyumen authorities began recruiting private and departmental transport to serve for public transportation. Thus, in 1997, residents were being transported by 240–250 municipal buses and 53 trolleybuses, and also by 100 departmental and 260 commercial buses (where the fares were higher, which people did not like much).

One of the measures aimed at the improvement of public transportation was monthly rewards for “Good public transportation service”, whereby the best bus and trolleybus drivers were designated, and the technical condition of the vehicles estimated. “Tyumenskiye Izvestiya” wrote: “Many buses and trolleybuses have changed — seats have been repaired, public transport use instructions (including a list of privileged social groups) have been provided. And the appearance of vehicles was improved as well. Passengers may have noticed it” [11].

Public transportation personnel was often rewarded financially. For example, in 1997 the best transport company received 100 million rubles, and each of the best drivers got 5 million rubles. Estimating their work, a special commission took into account the number of passages the driver carried, traffic violation, the presence of information plates in the vehicles, passengers’ thanks and complaints, etc.

The subsoil law, passed in 1993, played an important role in the development of the city: Tyumen region started to receive a share in reselling of the local oil and gas. It helped the city build several medical institutions and start to renew the bus park. Private investment opened the International Trade Centre, the “Passage” shopping centre, the “Quality Hotel”, etc.

The acquisition of approximately a hundred special-purpose machines in 1996 also contributed a lot to infrastructure development [12]. Metal kiosks were replaced by light modern pavillions, bus stops were renewed, some central streets were reasphalted, buildings facades and surroundings were repaired, flowers and trees were planted. But these changes were mostly sporadic and did not really improve the

standard of living of Tyumen people. As Kirichuk admitted in 1998, “we have not achieved the main goal — improving the standard of living and the quality of life of our people” [13].

The default in August 1998 made the financial standing of an average Tyumen resident even worse. According to a poll, only 3.5% of the Tyumen population could afford luxuries like a car or a dacha in 1997, then only 0.49% in 1998, which is seven times less. 12.8% could afford durable products (TV, refrigerator, washing machine) in 1997, but in 1998 only 5.7% (2.2 times less). In 1998, 22.4% of people in Tyumen did not even have enough money for food [14].

Serious problems in the sectors of housing development, public services, and infrastructure remained for some time, and sometimes they even got worse. Thus, the transformations of the 1990s were followed by a worsening of the main problems of city infrastructure, which was only slightly changed by the process of modernization.

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