'Angry urbanites': urban space and mobilization in Russian cities after parliamentary and presidential elections 2011-2012.

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Abstract

In December 2011 Russia was surprised by an unprecedented activity: after the Parliamentary elections the main streets and squares of big cities were full of people protesting against the falsifications. Though the reason for the protest had a general significance, the commentators agreed that this was an 'urban protest' and its participants were often called 'angry urbanites' as opposed to the silent rural area and smaller towns. The paper will discuss the specific 'urban' features of the protests, place the Russian events of 2011-2012 in a wider context of Occupy-movements, and analyze the role of the 'right to the city' concept in the discourse and practice of the protesters.

The paper will address several questions arising from these observations: a) what is the role of particular urban environment in the development of the protest movement, what makes a place 'protest-sensitive' (why particular places are seen as more effective); b) what is the difference between the socialist, post-socialist, and the new Russian pattern of the urban public space, what makes the street protests (im)possible; c) was the Russian protest part of a global episode of contention, and how did the global 'occupy'-trends transform in the Russian context.

POSTSOCIALIST PUBIC SPACE

The important background for the understanding of the recent protest events is the Soviet model of the public space. The socialist legacy of the urban public space made it impossible for the citizens to identify with those spaces – they were seen as stages for the state power to show its strength during the mass rallies orchestrated and organized by the Communist party, while the grass-root activity was hidden and pushed away from the visibility of open spaces. After the fall of the Soviet Union Russian cities saw a few of street protests (precisely, only ones in 2005).

Most authors writing on the issue of public space in post-socialist cities inevitably accept the framework of social transformation, and consequently study the transition of the post-socialism to capitalism. The research was done on the transformation of property rights, meanings given to the space and all possible aspects of the post-socialist transformation as reflected in urban space (Andrusz, Harloe, & Szelényi, 2011; Bodnár, 2000; Stanilov, 2007). There are multiple texts focusing on 'post-socialist', 'post-industrial' (Burgers, 2000) or 'post-colonial' urban public space. The political dimension of urban public space has been touched upon, too, e.g. in the study of Belgrade in 1996-1997 and the protests against Milosevic: they were analyzed in a broader framework of formation of identities, discussing the spatial metaphors of 'city' and 'Europe' (Jansen, 2001). The similarities of protest practices in the public spaces described by Jansen and those observed recently in Russian cities brings us to the assumption that the specific characteristics of public urban space can produce similar practices and behavior.

Here, by *urban public space* I mean not only the physical space, but also the practices of use of the space, and the acceptable and prohibited forms of behavior as well as the political and social constraints controlling its use. The empirical case studies of public spaces from different urban and national contexts show that the models of public space are very different in different societies – depending on the local public culture, political and social circumstances, etc. Therefore it makes sense to talk about different public "regimes", orders in different contexts. It would be wrong to judge and evaluate these according to a single set of criteria, but rather I would suggest that there is a need for careful study with the goal of defining the social and political circumstances that which define the specificities of each case.

In the academic papers the "publicness" of a space gets mostly measured on the scale of its accessibility, inclusiveness, freedom of expression. The "publicness" can be threatened by increasing control (up to repression), commercialization, and fear. This can be easily applied to socialist, post-socialist, and western capitalist societies. The popular way to show public spaces in western capitalist cities is to address the limitations of access resulting the growing social inequalities and attempts of the well-off publics to 'segregate' themselves from the

undesirables (Low, 1997; Mitchell, 1995). The socialist cities were free from the negative effects of capitalism; however, the public space was totally controlled by the state (Engel, 2007; Stanilov, 2007). The post-socialist societies are destined to face both the new challenges of capitalist inequalities and the legacies of the totalitarian/ authoritarian past. However, such attempts to measure different cultural and historical realities with one scale are not sensitive to different regimes, patterns, and interpretations of 'public' space. The post-socialist examples can help researchers establishing a more sensitive tool for analyzing and understanding the role of 'public spaces' in different contexts.

The Soviet idea of public space was incorporated in many of the planning concepts implemented in Soviet times: all the urban space was 'public' (in the sense that it belonged to the state) by default, however, only sanctioned activities were allowed in this space. The formal status of the 'common space' did not correspond with the actual functionality and use of most of these spaces: central squares and streets were intended for demonstrations and rallies initiated and choreographed by the state. A "public place" according to this concept was supposed to be a place of collective actions controlled by the authorities (Engel, 2007). Uncontrolled gatherings of people in central open spaces were undesirable, and the everyday social interactions of city dwellers were pushed into the private or "no-one's" domain – into places such as kitchens, garages, backyards and waste areas (Zhelnina 2011), thus establishing some alternative to the state-dominated public life.

This has led to a strict division of life in soviet cities into 'public' and 'private' domains, which is analyzed by historians and anthropologists (Boym, 1994; Nielsen, 1998). The Norwegian anthropologist, F.S. Nielsen, has found a spatial metaphor for this duality: *prospekt* (avenue) as a place which represents civilization, is well-conditioned and cared for, and *dvor* (backyard) as a place where people actually live and interact; but the dvor is not an open space – it is rather a place hidden from the outsider, an "ungoverned domain" (Nielsen, 2004: 55). The general split of life into private and public spread onto city space as well. The open spaces of the city did not function as public places, where interactions between strangers and diversity are possible.

After the fall of the soviet system, the private-public balance started changing: the role of the open spaces and backyards had to be reinterpreted again. These changes were caused by global forces and the switch from a planned economy to a market economy. City restructuring was amplified by the new economic and political conditions, but also the peculiarities of local policies and city image-making contributed to the heterogeneous reinterpretation of the public spaces and city identity in different cities.

Boris Gladarev in his chapter on the heritage protection movement in St. Petersburg in a book "From common to public» also mentions the split of public, private, and 'kitchen talk' regimes in the soviet period. To him the 'public' regime is only possible when the rules of communication and the relevant language are at the citizens' disposal (Gladarev 2011). The communication in public is thus a specific, bodily and linguistic skill of 'proper' behavior. This skill was diminished by the soviet state and ideology: since the freedom of speech didn't exist, the meaningful communication was pushed into the 'kitchens' and private, verified spheres. The 'public' sphere was bureaucratized, and offered a reduced set of public roles to the citizens. 'Glasnost' and Perestroika made the meaningful public communication formally possible, bur extremely difficult in practice, since the set of rules and codes of communication in public had to be established and learned again. "The public order suggests self-restriction and control over affects; it is supported by the publicly accepted rules of distinction between 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' behavior" (Gladarev 2011). Public sphere requires compromise and tolerance, at least politeness in the situation of communication – which doesn't always work in the contemporary Russia: the 'disliked' opinions and behaviors can be strictly rejected, the 'acceptable' – praised as the only ones possible. The 'polite' middle is lacking in public discussion.

Artemy Magun in his article "Negativity in Communism", however, sees the different aspect of the soviet model of public space as "a space of anarchic freedom, and the complete alienation was a guarantee of non-appropriation" (Magun 2011). And yet people were forced to be together, in the crowded communal apartments changing the private/ public boundaries, in meaningless rallies, and other public gatherings. It has lead to the specific public regime which still influences public culture of the post-socialist period: "The

inattention and aggression in Russian streets and apartment buildings may simply mean that Russian citizens take other people for granted, as a foreground. It is a complete opposite from the Western European normal behavior vis-à-vis strangers, where an encounter produces a shock of almost a disbelief, and the exaggerated rituals of politeness meant to hide the embarrassment of the encounter itself" (ibid.).

Though the papers by Gladarev and Magun may have different vision of the public space (as absent and as empty), they have in common the interpretation of socialist (and post-socialist) public regime as something that doesn't function as it 'should'. And though it's rather hard to find in the academic literature papers not criticizing the state of public space, the post-socialist analyses show a very interesting deviation which negatively influences the process of democratization and civic participation.

The situation described by Boris Gladarev refers to the difficulties of verbal communication in the *public sphere*, the sphere of exchange and formation of opinions, positions, and ideas. This also applies to the *urban public space* – the presence of diverse others needs to be tolerated, the public politeness and compromises need to be learned (Zhelnina 2011) by citizens, but this 'learning' may encounter certain obstacles from the conservative state.

The official discourse tends to avoid the notion of 'public space' or to interpret it as a space that requires monitoring. For example, in official documents (such as the Strategic Plan of St. Petersburg) the term 'public space' is replaced by the neutral term 'open urban space' which has less social connotations, as the word "open" (otkritoe in Russian) refers to a space with no roof, rather than a space for social activities. Such an interpretation of urban space not only relates to the possible protests in squares and streets, but also to the citizens' presence there in general. There was already increasing discussion about what the public spaces of St. Petersburg should be like before the political demonstrations took over the space. In this earlier stage, the discussion focused rather on the rules of behavior in public and on the actions which should be considered acceptable or undesirable in public spaces. On one hand, the squares and parks are crowded when there is good weather with people lying on the grass, eating, and chatting; on the other hand, this picture is often presented by both

city officials and some citizens as unacceptable, especially for the historic centre of Russia's "cultural capital" (which is the unofficial title of St. Petersburg). The discussions show the difficult beginnings of the public regime, when the rules and acceptable behaviors are not yet decided on.

The debate about 'open space' shows the conflict between the old concept and a new concept of urban space which is now emerging in modern Russia. The old concept of open urban space sees it as a 'postcard' that should represent not the living city and its people, but the official and 'nice' views. This one is closely related to the soviet idea of open urban space as a stage for rallies and demonstrations organized by the Communist Party, a space which was under the permanent control of officials and which did not 'belong' to the city inhabitants. The concept which has been emerging in the last decade is related to the humanist concept of 'city for the people'. Although it is not referred to as 'public space', the idea of public places for interaction does occasionally appear in the media, and it is often expressed by the citizens. The latter development can be also seen as a process 'Europeanization' or 'westernization', since there are lots of bottom-up projects aiming at the improvement of public space inspired by similar projects implemented in European and American cities. The protests of 2011-12 have contributed to the development of the new interpretation of public and urban public space and the appearance of this term in the discourse. The 'post-protest' understanding of the urban public space in Russian media is close to the understanding accepted in the discussion taking place in other countries and often brings in examples from western countries (how the space is organized in western cities): what I mean here, first of all, is the idea that open spaces should be accessible to people, that people can use these spaces for diverse activities including seeing other people and being seen by them.

OCCUPYAND EXPERIENCE OF BEING IN PUBLIC / HYDE-PARK PLAN

The events of 2011 and 2012 were not usual and broke the typical pattern of the urban public space: the protesters organized public gatherings on central squares of the cities that were not 'approved' by the administration, and they used new forms of public protest, such as occupations of the public areas (similar to the Occupy Wall Street format). For many

informants these events were their first experience of being in public, and belonging to the city: they were mesmerized by the urban experience. While protesters tried to take the symbolically important central squares of cities, the city administration wouldn't approve rallies in the cities' core and tried to move them to the symbolic margins of the urban space – to make the actions less visible and accessible. The numbers of people protesting were different in the central and peripheral cities: but only the protests and occupations in Moscow, and in particular areas in Moscow, were seen as a possibly effective event; lots of people from other cities went to Moscow to protest.

A worldwide wave of street protests of recent years, new features of street politics, and the difficulties of interpreting the outcomes of the street actions have given a new inspiration for the writers on public space. People appeared and stayed in the places where they weren't supposed nor allowed to be, thus bringing the urban space to the political agenda. David Harvey, Richard Sennett, and other gurus of urbanism have commented on the Occupy movement as a key event for understanding the contemporary developments of urban space, democracy, and political participation. The political component of the Occupy-like movements is more or less evident; the theorists of urbanism draw attention to the spatial dimension of the protest events, bringing the issue of public space and right to the city on the top of the agenda. To David Harvey the Occupy is a manifestation of one of the essential contradictions of the capitalist city: the urban dwellers' access to decision making is limited, thus their right to the city is violated. Harvey emphasizes the role of urban public space as an ultimate means of political communication: "It shows us that the collective power of bodies in public space is still the most effective instrument of opposition when all other means of access are blocked" (Harvey 2011). For Richard Sennett the Occupy movement exposed the core questions of the urban public space: "The Occupy movements dramatised questions about public space — who owns it? who can use it?" (Sennett 2012). Sennett raises the question of the ambivalence of the urban space, as he addresses the new way of the occupier's being in public: not just passing by, but also dwelling there, fulfilling all everyday needs, as well as taking control over the space, cleaning and maintaining it. This tangle of political claims and dwelling, as well as the international presence of this new format of being in the public space, brings us back to the discussion of the right to the city

concept and its role for contemporary civic participation, but also gives us a new inspiration to revisit the whole concept of urban public space.

The protests against the election results in Russia in 2011-2012 can be analysed also in the global context of Occupy's, though the format of dwelling in the public spaces was not the main form of protesting. Occupations happened in a few cities along with usual rallies and protest demonstrations, however, the unprecedented presence of citizens in the streets and the rough reaction of the authorities stimulated a discussion on the urban public space and the corresponding rights in the Russian-speaking discourse. Before the protests, the term 'urban public space' was used rarely by a small number of specialists in urban planning and urban studies, but it did not exist in the public discourse. However, the unprecedented occupation of open spaces in Russian cities by protesters has lead to the discussion of the concept itself, and discussion of the limitations on and opportunities for the use of the urban space by city dwellers: the issue of the quality of the urban public life, public gatherings and spaces for them was raised by the media and the city-dwellers. Though the OWS and the anti-election protests may have completely different ideological background and participants (OWS is anti-capitalist, and the movement "For Fair Elections" had no unified ideology apart from the wish to throw down Putin and his party, and among the participant diverse ideologies representing almost all parts of the political spectrum were present), the importance of the form and the role of the urban space in the both movements cannot be denied. As in the case of OWS in the West, the Russian public started asking the same questions: who owns the urban space, and who can use it?

The conflicting rights to use public spaces for different purposes during the protests (the protesters were often blamed of violating others' rights to use the public spaces 'peacefully') also contributed to the discussion. After protests which involved occupation of open spaces, the idea of "public space" has been discussed as both a space for free self-expression and a space that is subject to certain restrictions as to how it can be used because of the presence of the others. As a result of the protests and the reaction of the government, the opportunities to organize action in public spaces was significantly limited by a new legislative initiative approved by the State Duma (Parliament) in June 2012: according to this new law, the organizers of unapproved gatherings of people in public spaces will have to pay heavy

fines and even go to jail. Thus, public space is viewed as both a space of opportunities (there are several projects in the field of urban planning in Moscow and St. Petersburg to develop urban public space) and as a source of threat – both to 'average citizens' (who, in this discourse, do not participate in protests and prefer 'stability' to 'revolution') and also to the government.

Though the comparison between manifestations of the authoritarian, and capitalistic, but nevertheless more respectful to freedom of assembly, regimes may not seem obvious, it seems acceptable in the case of public space and its protest potential: in both cases the occupations of space are marked by the authorities as 'illegal' and become a spotlight of political confrontation. In this paper I will attempt to analyse the transforming role of the public space in contemporary Russian big cities, focusing mainly on its discursive representations, but also paying attention to diverse practices of being in public before and after the protest wave of 2011-2012. The analysis is limited mostly by the data from St. Petersburg. The understanding of the nature of the contested public space of the 2011-12 requires a broader outline of the concept of public space in Russian urban context.

The difficulties the protesters faced in their attempts to make their discontent visible by gathering in central urban places provoked the growth of interest and discussion regarding the public space of the cities. Though the connection between the discussion about public spaces in the post-soviet city described above in the article and the recent protests may not seem obvious, the link exists: after the protests, several important articles about 'Cities and Protest', 'Urban revolution in Russia' as well as 'Right to the city' appeared in the mass media (Trubina 2012; Kurennoy 2012; Zhelnina et al. 2012). The general interest in urban issues has also grown: the researchers within urban studies have suddenly become highly demanded specialists who are asked for expert comments in the media. The term 'public space' is starting to be used more in the media and social networks as a representation of the general problems of power inequality and political struggle.

The protesters organized public gatherings on central squares of the cities that were not 'approved' by the administration. The arrests and trials over the activists accused of participation in the 'not approved' public events caused an active discussion about citizens' right to use the space of the city, and about public life in general.

The media and the bloggers found out that the citizens are not free to access and use urban squares; and due to this fact the citizens' right for public expression is limited. The discussion about public space in Russian cities raised the question of what is the priority in using the urban space: the expression of the citizens' will, or the 'routine' practices (such as going out, shopping, walking in the city) that might be disturbed by the protest actions. Another subject for the discussion was the 'lack' of suitable places for big gatherings. The negotiation between the organizers of protest rallies and the city administration about the place for the rally was marked by conflict and emotional recriminations: while protesters tried to take the symbolically important central squares of cities (particularly Moscow and St. Petersburg), the city administration would not approve rallies in the cities' core and tried to move them to the symbolic margins of the urban space – to make the actions less visible and accessible. In cases where the citizens refused to obey to this and still gathered in the public spaces they had chosen, the police would start arrests of the participants.

There is however another important question that was put into the discussion: the quality of public life, the 'lack' of urban spaces for face-to-face communication which is replaced by online social networks. As one of the analytical articles puts it, the activists who came to the protest actions were a 'society of the anonymous revolutionaries' (Suvorov 2011) – people who had never met before and will never meet afterwards because the only public place they had had so far is the space of the Internet, and the urban public space is not yet perceived as a real communication opportunity. The protest actions can thus cause a significant reinterpretation of the role of the urban space as a space for public life, and further transformation of the public space concept.

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