Local Communities in St. Petersburg: Politicization of Claims to Contested Urban Spaces

Elena Tykanova, Anisya Khokhlova, St. Petersburg State University

The relation of weak and strong advocacy groups in big post-Soviet cities

This paper considers the opportunities of urban local communities in St. Petersburg, Russia, to claim their right to the city under the conditions of aggressive urban (re)development initiated by strong advocacy groups. It questions whether and to what extent local communities conceptualize their demands to influence decision-making in urban planning and development as “political” and in doing so – acquire collective identity. It also describes the role of political opportunity structures in such conceptualization. Our final research question is whether the politicization of protest initiatives is an effective tool that local communities use to defend their neighborhoods against outer threats. In our research project, we have investigated ten cases of negotiations and conflicts between weak and strong advocacy groups around residential areas subjected to redevelopment, spot construction, demolition, etc., but in this paper we shall only focus on four cases to tackle various responses of the locals to unwanted urban change.

When considering the processes of urban space contestation by strong (city authorities and developers) and weak (local communities) advocacy groups, it is necessary to take account of the context where the interaction of the conflicting parties is embedded. In big post-Soviet cities such as St. Petersburg struggles over urban territories often unfold under the conditions of total uncertainty caused by the coexistence of multiple property regimes, the constant adjustment of legislative frameworks, the insufficient transparency of decisions and actions performed by city authorities and investors, the legal ignorance of the citizens and the lacking tradition of civic participation.

Earlier empirical researches conducted in Russian cities have given some evidence that the majority of local communities that dispute the planning decisions of city authorities and business elites inherit the paternalist pattern of interactions with state institutions from the Soviet past which also contributes to the reproduction of general communication asymmetry between stronger and weaker parties. Those are the investigations of local protest initiatives in Russia carried out by C. Clément (Clément, Miryasova and Demidov 2010) and M. Zakirova (2008); the reflections on interactions between citizens and urban authorities in Soviet past (Bogdanova 2005) and post-Soviet present (Ryabev 2005); and the case-study of a local community in St. Petersburg protecting a public garden against felling (Glagarev 2011).
According to Boris Gladarev, “the individual activity [of the citizens] in the regime of planned action usually takes shape of thoroughly studying local and legal literature and sometimes develops into writing “letters to the state” that are sent to various public institutions or certain officials and other decision-makers personally. Let us concentrate on this practice because it is utterly widespread among the citizens despite its inefficiency. <…> The empirical materials on the activities of urban local initiatives collected in 2008-2009 convincingly demonstrate the steadiness of the practices of filing complaints and developing patron-client relationships with the officialdom” (Gladarev 2011: 164-165).

Indeed, our empirical materials often show the political passivity of local communities’ representatives who generally reproduce the pattern of soviet paternalism: they expect support and protection from high-ranking politicians, inconsistently react to top-town initiatives and do not interpret outer threats as “political”, but rather understand them in terms of local demands.

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the abovementioned researchers do not take into consideration the fact that in recent years the participants of local protest against city planning and development initiatives imposed by strong advocacy groups do not start with writing complaints but rather turn to available legal means of struggle over the contested territory by giving notices of claim to the court, sending requests to district administration and other institutions and finally attempting to establish self-government institutions at the local level – condominium partnerships. It is only when their demands are not met in the course of legal strife that the citizens have to choose the most effective means of further struggle possible and decide whether to reproduce the traditional pattern of paternalism or follow the way of self-organization and eventually politicize their claims.

**Politicization of local communities’ activities in urban space contestation: theoretical framework**

To comprehend the readiness of the city-dwellers to conceptualize their concerns and claims as political and test their opportunities to do so, we use the following theoretical frame. First, we turn to the theory of political opportunity structure that reveals the features of political situation conditioning the opportunities and limitations of the protest initiatives of civic movements (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1989; McAdam 1982; Lipsky 1968; Eisinger 1967). Second, we use urban regime theory to analyze the coalitions of city authorities and big businesses aimed at the realization of city-planning decisions. Finally, we refer to the theory of action modality in crisis (Hirschman 1970) to describe the spectrum of local communities’ responses to the (re)development initiatives threatening their urban spaces and the theory of collective rational
action (Olson 1971) to discover the factors determining the strategies of the locals aimed at protecting their common good – the neighborhood.

According to Charles Tilly, political opportunity structure is the result of four interconnected processes that, being combined in different modes, dramatically change the opportunities of political protest. Those are the mechanism of public decision-making, economic and demographic changes and finally the cumulative history of tensions and conflicts that jointly determine the new repertoire of civic protest (Tilly 1995: 364). Sidney Tarrow reduces the set of political opportunity structure characteristics to those parameters that can really serve as resources, i.e. can be used by social movements to achieve their goals and mobilize support (Tarrow 1989). Tarrow marks out three groups of political opportunity structure indicators which are the openness of political system, the stability of political forces alignment and the presence of influential allies that support the movement within the political system. Peter Eisinger (1973) contrasts “open” and “closed” structures of political opportunity depending on their accessibility. Some political opportunity structure researchers summarize the differences in the extent of the institutional accessibility of political systems and distinguish between the so-called “strong” and “weak” states. Strong states are those where the access of citizens to institutional structures is strictly limited whereas government bodies in weak states are open for the citizens which reduces their opportunities to follow the chosen logic (Birnbaum 1985; Koopmans and Kriesi 1995). Jon Elster adds that it is necessary to distinguish between the objective political opportunities of the actors and their beliefs because people sometimes do not even suspect they have resources or, on the contrary, overestimate their abilities (Elster 1989: 20).

The Russian researchers of grassroots activities and urban movements in post-Soviet listed above generally tend to disregard the political opportunity structure including the interconnections of political structures, urban political regimes and the repertoires of protest instruments used by civic movements. They simply contrast the interests of the authorities and the population depicting the former as the sole decision-maker indifferent to the needs of the citizens and concentrated exclusively on profit-making.

Meanwhile, the exclusive opportunity of city authorities to distribute the resources of urban space does not necessarily mean that the administration can draw dividends from its usage single-handedly. C. Stone, the researcher of urban political regimes, argues that where local authorities have limited potential of deriving financial profits and independently solving city problems but are capable of fund raising (Stone 1988) coalitional political regimes are likely to emerge that combine the institutional resources of authorities and the investment guarantees of big businesses (Stone 1989).
It is often assumed (Tev 2006) that in St. Petersburg the coalitions of authorities and big companies (in particular development corporations) can take shape of growth machines (Molotch 1976; Logan and Molotch 1987) aimed at the strategic economic development of the city. According to Molotch, growth machines constitute the symbiosis of political and business elites that make mutual profits through effective use of urban territories and prompt decision-making followed by the rhetoric of “urban development” in public discourse (Logan and Molotch 1987). However, the activities of growth machines rarely lead to the citizens’ growth in prosperity: “Economic development of cities is by no means identical with public benefits increase (Trubina 2011: 310). The strategies of growth machines designed to derive profits through investments in urban territories fully reflect the trends of late capitalism and neoliberal urban economy.

The political regime of growth machines that has developed in St. Petersburg reduces the possibilities of the citizens to contest urban spaces in court because adjudgements are often taken on the basis of existing ordinances signed by top officials of city administration: vice-governors, heads of committees and directly by the governor and therefore are subjected to the interests of these politicians and their allies.

Thus, representatives of local communities are forced to act under the conditions of legal uncertainty whereas city administration has the resources to arbitrarily grant or refuse the political rights of the citizens. The structural opportunities of the city-dwellers to realize and present their concerns and claims as political are therefore dramatically limited, which also restricts the possibilities for political maneuvers in urban space contestation.

If top-down decisions on urban development threaten the urban spaces identified as “theirs”, the representatives of local communities consider the situation as crisis and implement various strategies of coping with the problem. In the terms of A.O. Hirschman’s theory (Hirschman 1970), these strategies fall under such “participation frames” as exit and voice. Exit means withdrawal from the unsatisfying situation or relationship by changing the delegate subject of decision-making whereas voice consists in declaring discontent in the face of the authorities, mass media, human rights activist organizations and broader publics. However, there exists also a popular “nonparticipation frame” – the option of loyalty that presupposes the citizens’ passive acceptance of any top-down initiatives even if they lead to the deterioration of external conditions (Ibid).

The possibilities of citizens to exit vary depending on the type of contested space. If the representatives of local communities attempt to guard the territory of their yard or block against undesired urban development activities, they have an immediate opportunity to use exit modality by establishing self-government institutions at the local level – condominium partnerships. Such partnerships constitute an alternative to the state ownership of residential houses and adjacent
grounds. However, if some public space such as an urban square or garden demands protection, exit becomes utterly problematical if not impossible because local communities cannot choose the organizations responsible for managing the contested space. According to Hirschman, if exit is unachievable, voice remains the only option capable of influencing the decisions of strong advocacy groups.

Unlike Hirschman’s approach, the theory developed by social economist Mancur Olson focuses on such dimensions of action as collectivity and the type of common good that the group struggles for. This is especially important for us since our subject of inquiry is a local community that always consists of several members promoting their shared interests. According to Olson, the interests of group members who plan to perform a collective action are based on their striving to benefit from the collective good and the ratio of efforts invested in the common cause.

Olson makes an important remark about the interrelation of collectivist and egoistical behavior patterns in a group as well as the stability of groups made up of members who prioritize individual goals over collective ones: if members of a large group rationally attempt to maximize their individual welfare, they make no efforts to achieve shared collective goals unless they experience external pressure or are offered personal motives for such action that do not coincide with the general interests of the group – the motives that can be implemented only provided that the members of the group take over some of the costs to achieve the common goal (Olson 1971: 4). However, local communities, at least in the context of defending their “right to the city” (Lefebvre 2002) and protecting their space against urban development initiatives imposed by strong advocacy groups, should involve the largest possible number of participants in collective action. It is important to note that the groups whose members are engaged in neighborhood relations are often heterogeneous, and therefore different actors within them have different goals, interests, behavior strategies and so forth. Therefore, important factors, such as heterogeneity and the need to attract the largest number of group members possible in the case of particularly heated conflicts, can impede the self-organization of local communities. In large heterogeneous groups, the situation is likely to emerge when most members who are in need of collective action face the free rider dilemma. Many representatives of local communities prefer to stay out of the protest, but as soon as the demanded public good is obtained (due to the efforts of innumerous activists), nobody can be excluded from access to it.

Both Hirschman and Olson concentrate on pragmatic, rational actions of individuals who pursue their private interests. However, our empirical findings show that local activists sometimes do not limit their efforts to rationally solving NIMBY problems but are ready to embed their cases in the broader context of other city protection initiatives and movements and support other local communities in their struggle against aggressive urban (re)development.
Transgressing rational motives sometimes constitutes an important condition for the local communities to apply political tools of struggle and politicize the discourse on how the contested urban space should be organized.

_Politicization of actions and discourses vs. rational solution of local problems: case-study of urban space contestation in St. Petersburg_

In order to check whether local communities follow the paternalist pattern in their interactions with state institutions and to assess their ability and readiness to politicize their claims in the struggles over urban space, we shall now turn to the results of our field research project designed as a number of case-studies. Applying a set of qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation and qualitative analysis of texts, we look at different situations where alternative views on how the contested urban space should be organized made the representatives of local communities consolidate and buck against the decisions of the authorities. To construct the continuum of the mechanisms of urban space contestation available for local communities depending on the degree of politicization of their claims and actions, we shall focus on four out of ten investigated cases and range them from more politicized to less politicized ones. The selected cases include the strife of garage owners against the destruction of a large-scale garage cooperative “Parnas” located at the city periphery; the struggle of the local community against the construction of commercial buildings at Muzhestva Square; the protection of Yurgens’ house – a historically valuable mansion erected in the middle of the XIX century – and finally the fight of Sergievskiy housing estate dwellers against its total demolition.

_**Garage wars, 2009-2012**_

In 2009, a big construction company “Glavstroy St. Petersburg” grew interested in the territories of the industrial area “Parnas” where four garage cooperatives with the total number of approximately 8500 stalls were located. Fully ignoring the interests of weak advocacy groups, the authorities reconsidered the history of garage construction in the USSR, declared cooperative garages to be temporary constructions and confiscated the urban territories occupied by them for further usage by the investor company. The city administration offered to provide former garage owners with several spots to organize open air car parks – but all the necessary works had to be conducted at the expense of the aggrieved party. Each of the garage owners was expected to purchase a place in the parking that could cost several times higher than his/her vehicle. Moreover, the authorities refused to pay any remuneration for the demolished garage stalls which certainly left the garage owners dissatisfied.
Some of the garage owners tried to use *exit* strategy through the privatization of the land parcels occupied by the stalls. However, this option that had been fully available just several years earlier got rapidly blocked by the authorities. Some owners also made efforts to quickly sell their garages thus attempting to realize an alternative strategy of *exit*. However, their desperate endeavors did not work because they failed to find the purchasers. Therefore, initiative garage owners had no choice but to act within *protest* mode in order to protect their stalls against demolition or assert their rights for compensation amounting to the market value of the garages.

The case of garage wars demonstrates the highest degree of politicization both in the local activists’ claims and their means of struggle. For instance, the leaders of the initiative group fighting against garages demolition got to know each other not in the contested grounds of the cooperative parking lot “Parnas” but at the city-wide protest rally against the construction of the high-rise Okhta Center building and other urban planning problems. Simultaneously, this rally was directed against the political leaders associated with aggressive urban development such as the then Governor Valentina Matviyenko, President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Thus, urban public space turned into the arena for the consolidation of garage resistance movement. In the course of the rally, the decision was taken to establish a civic movement called “The Garage” which was later transformed into a politically active pressure group – the trade union of garage owners “Rubezh” that united several hundreds of citizens who suffered from the demolition.

![Deputy chair of trade union “Rubezh” at the meeting against the construction of Okhta Center. The poster says “Maize is no vegetable of ours!”](image)

Therefore, already at the early stages of urban space contestation the leaders of garage cooperative defense embedded their direct local goals of demolition prevention in the city-wide

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1 In informal discourses the high-rise building of Okhta Center was often compared to a maize cob.
context of struggle against high-rise construction, infill construction and for the satisfaction of the hoodwinked investors’ requirements. It should be stressed that initiative garage owners saw the situation as directly dependent on the political will of city authorities and actively clamored against the head of the city and the major urban functionaries. For example, the leaders of the trade union tried to use political leverage in their struggle against the sitting Governor Valentina Matviyenko who was then going to take the position of the Federation Council speaker by putting forward their own candidate for municipal district deputy who could be regarded as Matviyenko’s competitor. Simultaneously, the garage owners resorted to various spatial tactics: e.g. at nighttime they hung out a banner that depicted the Governor as a pig in a busy thoroughfare. One of the major means of struggle against the general political situation in the city which notably led to garages demolition not followed by any compensation were numerous (projects of) spatial tactics and guerilla strategies aimed to intimidate the officials: “It is necessary to explain people that treachery – and what the government did was a real treachery of national interests – is fraught with serious consequences. I have found the means of doing it. First we find out where the person lives. Then we hang out a photo. At nighttime we hand this photo at the front door and the caption says in black and white: “This person has done this and that. This is our vote of nonconfidence”... Well, certainly this person has a car. So we leave this note on the car trunk. This person has an apartment. While he’s at work we can approach stealthily and fill up the keyhole with makroflex\(^2\). And let us look at how he tries to open it. And this is what should be done several times” (informant 1.1, male).

Another striking demonstration of the leaders of “Rubezh” trade union to perceive their interests in garages protection as part of city-wide problems is their practice of networking both with other garage cooperatives members and with initiative groups designed to defend different types of urban space, e.g. the protectors of the public garden in Ivan Fomin street, or politically active organizations (anarchists, the Tigers\(^3\), etc.). These networks were used both for the exchange of experiences and ideas and for the organization of large-scale political protest.

\(^2\) Polyurethane foam.
\(^3\) Tiger (ТИГР) – short for the Fellowship of Proactive Citizens of Russia (Товарищество Инициативных Граждан России) – a Russian opposition pressure group that was established in 2008 to resist government implementation of higher car import taxes.
Among the resources the mobilization of which promoted the self-organization of garage owners’ community and furthered the politicization of its claims was the presence of:

- A strong leader and his several companions-in-arms who were ready to invest their time, money and energy to establish and maintain the union;
- The leader’s professional experience of collective action organization and management;
- Several experts from among the leaders, who were well informed about current legislation, had the skills of website development, etc.;
- The shared outer threat that could overtake any garage owner in the nearest future and therefore served as a powerful factor of the community self-organization and the development of political protest that united garage owners with other aggrieved and disadvantaged groups.

However, there were also conditions that impeded the mobilization of the community’s resources and the further “political career” of the movement such as:

- The largeness of the group (around 8500 garage stalls in cooperative “Parnas”): the majority of cooperative members chose loyalty mode and remained passive in the course of the conflict although declared support of the activists;
- Different political commitments of the protest movement leaders that were only temporarily united against the common challenge of their rights protection.

The contestation of Muzhestva Square

The struggle of the local community over Muzhestva Square located in urban periphery,
in one of the city’s bedroom communities, progressed in two stages. At the first stage the locals protested against the construction of “BlinDonald’s” bistro in the memorial public garden (2005) whereas at the second stage they clamored against the erection of a large shopping center at the square, under the windows of a dwelling house (2007). It is significant that here the defenders of the square could not follow the pattern of exit. Contemporary Russian legislation makes no provision for changing the delegate subject of decision-making regarding such an urban public space as a square. Therefore, voice remained the only option enabling the citizens to have some influence on urban development decision-making.

Muzhestva Square, a spot of standardized construction, lies outside the historic center of St. Petersburg. However, in a remarkable manner, appeals to the memorial value of this urban space and the heroic history of the Second World War served for the protesting residents as a powerful legitimization tool. For instance, historical events memorable for the city and the commemorative significance of Muzhestva square became the central arguments against the construction of a fast-food restaurant that were referred to in the addresses to the then Governor of St. Petersburg Valentina Matviyenko and the Russian President Vladimir Putin written by the residents of Vyborgsky district, which can be generally seen as the reproduction of patron-client logic in the relations of citizens and authorities: “It is not the desire to see standard constructions of glass and metal with snack-bars and pubs that attracts tourists from the whole world but rather the historic past of the heroic city Leningrad that survived the 900 days long blockade (a feat that the world history had not known before), and held out and won along with the unique historic appearance of the city. The restaurant at Muzhestva Square will disfigure and vulgarize the space that is saturated with cultural and historic associations dear for all those who love our city” (from the address of the citizens to Valentina Matviyenko: http://pl-mugestva.ucoz.ru/blog/).

However, the repertoire of interactions between Muzhestva Square defenders and authorities embraced not only letters of the former to major city and federal officials but also the local activists’ partnership proposals. For instance, the representatives of the local community attempted to claim their right to decision-making concerning the architectural appearance of the square by announcing an open competition of architectural projects or offering the students of an artistic university to think over the concept of the contested space. The defenders of the square also insisted on their right to voice their opinions in the selection of the projects and requested cooperation from the city administration that simply ignored these claims: “On behalf of the dwellers who signed the Address to the authorities we have lodged the claim to establish an open competition to develop the concept of the memorial design for the whole square with its subsequent public discussion” (http://pl-mugestva.ucoz.ru/news/2006-02-15-2).
Thus, the expectations of the local activists about their opportunities to participate in the debate on the fate of Muzhestva square did not correspond with the political opportunity structure that did not presuppose any partnership of the citizens and urban authorities. Meanwhile, the abilities of the citizens to voice discontent were also limited because protest activities for the defense of Muzhestva Square took place at the time where the practice of mass public rallies against incumbent authorities did not exist yet.

An important feature of Muzhestva Square contestation is that the local community had been self-organized even before this urban space was endangered: the community-based organization “Muzhestva Square” had been involved in the arrangement of commemorative meetings at the square with the participation of veterans. This allowed the community to quickly establish network relations with other initiative groups all over the city. Therefore in this case the usage of political methods such as demonstrating the numerical strength of the city dwellers who supported the grassroots movement did not take the shape of initiative groups consolidation at some city-wide rally (as it happened to garage owners) but was rather transferred directly to Muzhestva Square. The square itself turned into the scene that united the citizens around commemorative practices and the values of urban history and memory that were potentially familiar, comprehensible and significant for the general public. For example, representatives of initiative groups from almost all districts of St. Petersburg were present at the rally at Muzhestva Square in May 2007 and spoke in support of the local community’s claims.


Meanwhile, giving her public address in televised comments “Dialogue with the City”, the Governor Valentina Matviyenko declared that residence in Muzhestva Square neighborhood and therefore belonging to the local community were an indispensable condition of protest authenticity in the eyes of the governmental bodies who were only ready to take account of the locals’ claims. She accused activists from other city districts of having mercenary motives and argued that they were just willing to trigger social instability per se and therefore increase their

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political capital: “Well, I am saying that if the mass discontent of the dwellers really takes place then we certainly cannot simply ride roughshod over the people – even if there are possibilities to continue construction from the perspective of architectural regulations and legal procedures. But it is only possible upon the sole condition – if those are indeed the objections coming from the neighborhood and not from different designer actions that move from one district to another and hereby enjoy application” (http://pl-mugestva.ucoz.ru/news/2007-04-09-86).

To summarize the above-mentioned details of the contestation, it can be concluded that the social conditions that promoted the self-organization and partial politicization of protest at Muzhestva Square included the historical value of the heroic defense of Leningrad in WW2 relevant for many citizens and therefore the significance of Muzhestva Square as the space of commemoration as well as the community’s previous experience of self-organization. On the other hand, there were important barriers for the politicization of discourses and strategies of action produced by the activists such as their insufficient experience of political expression and the lacking tradition of promoting local claims city-wide through large-scale rallies and protest actions.

*The defense of Yurgens’ house*

In 2010 the representatives of developer company “Co Ltd Luxor” bought all the apartments in Yurgens’ house and planned to condemn the building which would have allowed the owner to demolish the building and construct a luxurious six-story business center instead of an old three-story house.

![Picture 4.Yurgens’ house, Zhukovskogo street 19](http://www.citywalls.ru/photo32123.html)

Generally, although Yurgens’ house is not an architectural monument of federal importance, it is still valuable as a typical example of XIX century architecture. Moreover, it is

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located in the very center of Petersburg where, except for the rare cases of irreversible damage, the demolition of old buildings is prohibited. The type of contested space did not allow the city dwellers to resort to exit strategies and change the delegate subject of decision-making concerning the future of the house because they did not have any property rights to the building.

Members of the local community that protected Yurgens’ house originally applied legitimate protest tools. They addressed various stakeholders such as the municipality, the management company, and city administration, wrote collective letters to the city Governor Valentina Matviyenko, and sent requests to the district administration. However, these actions proved themselves ineffective. This situation forced the local community members to fall back upon a political lobbyist – the deputy of the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg, communist Sergey Malkov – and start active long-term public protests within the regime of public justification.

Initially, the residents acted according to the logic of NIMBY movements (Hermansson 2007): they independently protested against the demolition of Yurgens’ house and did not address other initiative groups or city-protecting movements. However, having soon received evidence that the legal contestation efforts were ineffective, the local activists opted for the strategy of consolidation with city-protecting movements such as “The Civil Initiatives Movement” and “The Living City”, “The Autonomous Action” and “The Organization for Historic Buildings Conservation”. In some cases, part of the local community even expressed willingness to shift responsibility for the struggle against demolition on “The Living City” – the most active civic movement designed to protect buildings recognized as cultural heritage. However, these attempts aroused disapproval among the rest of the residents and the representatives of other initiative groups:

“Participant 1: So what we expect from this meeting and from “The Living City” movement is the only result – to get help and support.

Participant 2: We should consolidate rather than passively wait for help from somebody, don’t you see?

Participant 3: Anyone can be in trouble just like us.

Participant 2: Yes, what should we wait for?” (field notes, public meeting in defense of Yurgens’ house, October 16, 2010, observation 2).

In the course of protecting the building against demolition, the local activists also made aware of the need for networking with other initiative groups (the defenders of public garden in Ivan Fomin Street, house 112 in Nevsky Avenue, farm Benoit, Muzhestva Square, Okhtinskaya Arc movement) to discuss practices and share experiences of self-organization and urban space contestation: “Friends, comrades, we must unite. Now, today the first data on the first two days
of the census were published. 6% of the population of the city have been already registered. Now, if those 6% of the city population came together, united, this would show the authorities that people are really concerned about what is happening in the city. And then, when they would have to think about how proceed the next time... The bell has already rung. And here, too, we can find a hint that if a large number of people gather together, it means that something is wrong, that there’s certain dissatisfaction with the actions of the authorities” (field notes, public meeting in defense of Yurgens’ house, October 16, 2010. Defender of public garden in Ivan Fomin Street).

It should be noted that the legitimations produced by city-protecting movements and the representatives of the local community who struggled for the conservation of the endangered house in Zhukovsky Street differed significantly. In particular, the participants of “The Civil Initiatives Movement” and “The Living City” movement rather referred to the historical value of the building subjectively significant for the city dwellers: “This is a low three-story building. Not so many buildings like this are left in the city. We know that these buildings have accompanied the history of St. Petersburg and it is not very easy to find this kind of buildings in original form... It is not necessary to know any urban planning rules and laws in order to understand that the city in its heart, in its historical part, should remain the way it is” (Field notes, public meeting in defense of Yurgens’ house, October 16, 2010. Darya Minutina, “The Living City” movement).

Meanwhile, the defenders of the mansion coming from the neighboring houses (Zhukovsky Street 17 and 21) predominantly did not appeal to the commemorative or historical value of the building, but rather adhered to rational, pragmatic reasons as they fully realized that the demolition of building 19Zhukovsky street and the consequent construction of a business center could cause damage for their own houses: “So they’re going to demolish the entire outbuilding facing the street as well as the courtyard wing and to build a six-storeyed business center at this spot, as we have been told. And, most importantly, to make an underground parking. This is the most dangerous thing... After all, the only thing that we have is the houses where we live. And they’re going to destroy them” (Ibid. Resident of House 17, Zhukovskogo street). This indicates the rational character of the local community’s collective action (Olson 1971).

The coalition of Yurgens’ house defenders embedded their problem in the context of other threats that aggressive urban (re)development generated in St. Petersburg. For example, the representatives of “The Living City” came to the meeting with posters containing information and visual material concerning the streets that were excluded from the security zones of the city and therefore found themselves at risk of demolition.
Therefore, it can be concluded that in the history of Yurgens’ house contestation the apolitical, pragmatically oriented discourses of the local activists collided with the discourses of the city-protecting movements focused on city-wide urban planning and (re)development problems, gradually professionalizing their protest activities and often promoting the political methods of problems solution.

In the long run, the major efforts of struggle for the contested building were taken over by city-protecting organizations. They managed to attract the vice-governor’ attention to the problem, and he suspended construction works threatening Yurgens’ house.

*The protection of Sergievskiy housing estate*

Sergievskiy housing estate is located in the historic area of St. Petersburg opposite the Summer Garden. Its boundaries are constituted by the Fontanka River Embankment, the Kutuzov Embankment, Tchaikovsky Street and Gagarin Street. An important feature of this urban place is its universally recognized historical value: some of the buildings have the status of heritage assets being erected upon the projects of outstanding architects.

![Picture 5. Playground in Sergievskiy housing estate](image)

In March 2008, after a big investor had purchased a house in Tchaikovsky Street, rumors spread among the residents of the housing estate that dwelling houses would be soon demolished and the tenants would be moved to other city districts. Initially, the citizens just became concerned over the possibility that because of piling in the course of the extensive repairs of the purchased house the neighboring buildings would crack and therefore would be declared dangerous structures so that the residents would be evicted. This anxiety grew into panic when the residents occasionally obtained access to the provisional regulations of the housing estate development. Indeed, this document settled the demolition of a number of houses as well as new construction. To protect this urban spot, the residents who were interested in the preservation of the housing estate established an initiative group. Activists who formed this group chose *exit* as
the major instrument of their urban space defense by aiming to change the state property to dwelling houses and the land around the periphery of the houses into an alternative proprietary form – condominium partnership.

It was this choice of exit and the consequent need for community self-organization that the discourse of the local activists and their actions remained virtually apolitical. Nevertheless, the members of the initiative group repeatedly demonized the politicians involved in decision-making concerning the future of Sergievskiy housing estate and discursively discredited their claims and actions. But these legitimations served as tools of community solidarization and further involvement of the maximum possible number of residents willing to joint exit strategy rather than instruments of politicization: “As we know from the experience of houses and housing estates that have been already destroyed by them together with Matviyenko, where Shtukova7 and Zaitsev8 appear – the houses turn into ruins and the dwellers are moved into neighborhoods with much worse living conditions” (Field notes, public meeting in defense of Sergievskiy housing estate, March 30, 2008, observation 6. Activist 1).

Conclusions

In this paper, we have considered various scenarios of the politicization of claims and actions produced by local communities’ representatives in their struggles for contested urban spaces. Such communities are traditionally depicted in Russian sociological research as politically passive and inclined to reproduce the conservative pattern of patron-client relations with regional and federal authorities. Indeed, our empirical materials often demonstrated the political indifference of local communities’ representatives who expected support and protection from high-ranking politicians, inconsistently reacted to top-town initiatives and did not interpret outer threats as “political”, but rather understood them in terms of local demands.

However, we have also discovered innumerous cases when local activists voiced their claims in political narratives and were fully aware of their right to the city to be political. These representatives of local communities tended to describe their problems and needs as structural rather than local; create networks that provided the possibility to share experience with and find support from other initiative groups; cooperate with city-protecting movements and sparse lobbyists in legislative bodies; participate in city-wide indignation meetings; and professionalize and politicize the discourse of local communities.

7 The head of administration, Central District, St. Petersburg.
8 The deputy head of administration, Central District, St. Petersburg.
The analysis shows that the availability of the legal problem-solution modes makes an important factor of the politicization of claims to contested urban spaces. Being able to legally exit from the unfavorable situation by changing the delegate subject of decision-making, local communities less likely present and promote their interests as political but rather place effort in the pragmatic achievement of their goals within the established institutional order (the defense of Sergievskiy housing estate). Meanwhile, when the possibilities of exit are blocked the citizens can dispute the decisions of strong advocacy groups only by voicing their discontent. However, even here the collision of two logics can happen when the attempts to place the local problems and challenges in the broader structural context of city-wide planning and (re)development issues contradicts the aspirations to pragmatically approach these local problems not going beyond NIMBY initiatives (the protection of Yurgens’ house).

Not the least of the factors determining the degree of politicization characteristic for the local activists’ claims and actions is also the availability of urban platform that turns into the arena of political discourses engaging broader publics. In such discourses, multiple local cases of struggle over urban space are interpreted as part of more general urban problems and the decisions of high-ranking political leaders both at the regional and federal level are seen as key reasons of conflict. When the defense of Muzhestva Square started, there was still no city-wide platform in St. Petersburg that could serve as a meeting place for diverse urban publics. Nevertheless, the square itself successfully turned into the space that consolidated initiative groups from all city districts. Meanwhile, the conflict around garages demolition that flared up much later was from the very beginning introduced in more general oppositional discourse and presented in the context of a city-wide rally and therefore soon took a turn for full-scale politicization and institutionalization of protest. However, in both cases, references to values that were potentially relevant for general urban public constituted a powerful discursive trigger of such politicization.

As the empirical data show, the political opportunity structure that made the context of urban space contestation was not favorable for the attempts of local communities to voice their discontent and influence urban planning decision-making through political maneuvering. The communication between strong and weak advocacy groups was highly asymmetric and nontransparent and the attempts of the neighborhoods to promote more participatory approaches to tackling urban space were ignored. Local activists had to struggle for their right to the city under the conditions of legal uncertainty and arbitrariness of strong urban growth machines. The support they sometimes gained from political lobbyists was irregular and unreliable. Nevertheless, with the development of tensions and conflicts history the local activists acquired more experience of political struggle and learned to share and augment this experience through
networking. However, taking into consideration the recent trends of vertical power structure development in Russia that demand more repressive control over public sphere, the chances are high that local initiative groups will rarely resort to political instruments of urban space contestation and their discourses will become decreasingly politicized.

References


