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LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN ST. PETERSBURG:

POLITICIZATION OF CLAIMS TO CONTESTED URBAN SPACES

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Extended abstract

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.

Earlier empirical research (Gladarev 2011; Clément, Miryasova and Demidov 2010; Zakirova 2008; Ryabev 2005) has 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.

We have used this finding as the key hypothesis of our field research designed as a set of case-studies. To check it empirically, 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. However, in this paper we only focus on four cases to tackle various responses of the locals to unwanted urban change.

To analyze urban political regimes (Stone 1988; Molotch 1976) in which local attempts of space contestation are taken, we apply the theory of political opportunity structures (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1989; McAdam 1982; Lipsky 1968; Eisinger 1967). We also 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: *exit*, *voice* and *loyalty* 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.

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 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 make the representatives of local communities consolidate and buck against the decisions of the authorities.

Our empirical materials show that political opportunity structures in contemporary St. Petersburg are insufficiently developed which limits the possibilities of the urbanites to participate in debates on urban development. Moreover, 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. Therefore, the structural opportunities of the city-dwellers to conceptualize their concerns and claims as political are dramatically limited, which also restricts the possibilities for political maneuvers in urban space contestation.

Accordingly, local communities' representatives often remain politically passive and generally tend to 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. Still, some local activists not only attempt to defend their lived urban space in the logic of NIMBY activities but are even ready to embed their efforts in the broader context of other city protection initiatives and movements and support other local communities in their struggle against aggressive urban (re)development. This 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.

Indeed, these local activists voice their claims in political narratives and are fully aware of their right to the city to be political. They tend to (1) describe their problems and needs as structural rather than local; (2) create networks that provide the possibility to share experience with and find support from other initiative groups; (3) cooperate with city-protecting movements and sparse lobbyists in legislative bodies; (4) participate in city-wide indignation meetings; (5) professionalize and politicize the discourse of local communities.

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 range four research cases from more politicized to less politicized ones and look at the contexts where the interactions of the conflicting parties are embedded. The cases under comparison 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.

The comparative 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 (protest at Muzhestva Square).

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 (the protection of Yurgens' house).

As our empirical data show, the political opportunity structure that currently makes the context of urban space contestation in St. Petersburg is 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 is highly asymmetric and nontransparent and the attempts of the neighborhoods to promote more

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participatory approaches to tackling urban space are often ignored. Local activists have 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 gain from political lobbyists is irregular and unreliable. Nevertheless, with the development of tensions and conflicts history the local activists acquire more experience of political struggle and learn 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.

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