

## СОЦИОЛОГИЯ ГОРОДА

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**Social effects of neoliberal policy  
in post-Soviet Saint Petersburg:  
Urban space contestation revisited***E. V. Tykanova*<sup>1</sup>, *A. M. Khokhlova*<sup>2</sup>

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Neoliberal city policy has become central for urban planning and (re)development in post-soviet St. Petersburg. Competing views on how urban space should be organized make citizens consolidate and buck the decisions of strong advocacy groups. This paper considers the contestation of urban space by urban dwellers and city elites in the early times of establishment and spread of neoliberal rhetoric and policy. It focuses on four cases of local communities struggling against spot construction, demolition, and renovation of historical areas (2005–2012). Empirically, the paper relies on a series of semi-structured interviews with local residents and activists as well as materials of semi-formalized observations at local gatherings and rallies. We use theories of urban political regimes to analyze the decisions on urban futures made by administrations and developers, and the theories of Lefebvre, Scott, and de Certeau providing insights into everyday grassroots resistance of citizens to structural pressures, domination and exploitation — to describe the responses of urbanites. Our data shows that these theories need to be adapted to the local context, where struggles over urban space unfolded under the conditions of total uncertainty including multiple property regimes, unstable legal frameworks, non-transparent decision-making by city authorities and investors, and rising tradition of civic participation. As a result, we question the scholarly convention about the paternalistic relations between urbanites and powerholders, and problematize the boundaries between the core concepts of urban theory: in particular, we demonstrate the relative nonbinary character of the opposition of spatial strategies vs. spatial tactics.

*Keywords:* contested urban spaces, neoliberal policy, urban political regime, post-Soviet cities, spatial strategies and spatial tactics.

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## Introduction

After the drastic social, political and economic transitions triggered by the collapse of the USSR and the dissolution of the Eastern bloc, the logic of urban spaces evaluation, disposal and control followed by regional and federal elites has also undergone radical change. The countries of Eastern and Central Europe have experienced the “rise of service-based economy, which imposes new functions and status on post-industrial inner cities” [1, p. 195], and leads to the development of neoliberal urbanism — a political and economic approach that posits the domination of the market interests of city elites over the public interests of urbanites. The pervasive doctrine of the free market grows increasingly legitimized and institutionalized, as adjusted for specific geographical and historical conditions [2, p. 101–102]. While urban territories were once assessed and categorized by decision-makers in terms of occupancy or vacancy, they are now predominantly thought of in terms of profitability or unprofitability, which goes in line with the rapidly spreading neoliberal discourse and practice. David Harvey [3] calls this, partly forced, economic and political logic of neoliberal urban development and the proactive performance of local administrations “urban entrepreneurialism”, pointing at its core features such as public-private partnership and mobilization of state powers to secure incoming capital investment, which results, in particular, in the mutual commercial interest of local authorities and companies active in real-estate markets.

In recent years, the logic of neoliberalization in big Russian cities has been fostered by the need to integrate in global economy and thus enter into stiff domestic and international competition of cities for foreign investment and tourist flows, and receive some policy favors from federal and regional governments (see, e. g., [4, p. 43]). As a result, the economic systems of such cities have grown increasingly capitalized, and their images — increasingly and artificially aestheticized [5]. The administrations and big businesses encourage cultural consumption and play up cultural and sports mega-events. This, in turn, generates new spatial inequalities, when spatial profits derived from the commercial use of territories are distributed to the disfavor of citizens [6–11].

This socio-spatial differentiation is (re)produced, in particular, by residential gentrification — the appropriation of urban territories by economic elites. Residential gentrification process is especially massive in the downtowns of big cities with expressed historical and architectural value such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan and others, that are transformed to accommodate massive business districts [7; 12–15]. However, it also expands over city periphery that is also subjected to commercial interests [16]. For example, Yury Luzhkov’s performance as the mayor of Moscow (1992–2010) has been often described as openly serving the interests of developer companies, which created dire threats to the historic area of the city and conditioned new residential segregation [4; 17; 18].

It is hardly surprising that the new entrepreneurial city strategy prioritizing the market-oriented interests of city managers, developers and, in some cases, even the Church [6; 7] is highly unpopular among the urbanites who remain not only excluded from the processes of decision-making when the development of the city is at stake but gradually lose the access to city spaces that were once symbolically theirs. Unsatisfied with the decisions and actions of the elites but lacking opportunities to influence these, the citizens are thus forced to consolidate and claim their “right to the city” [19]. In many cases, the unwelcomed urban (re)development triggers local self-organization of the residents who

are concerned with the interruption of their habitual use of urban territories and interested in the preservation of nonmarket forms of management and decision-making in socially important spheres, and who seek to limit the unhampered capital accumulation in city development and fight its negative consequences [2, p. 102].

This happened, for instance, during the massive reconstruction of Ostozhenka area in Moscow [17; 20; 21], and during the realization of commercial development projects at Taganka and Manezh Square [6] in central Moscow, and in north-eastern Moscow suburb Izmailovo [23]. The residents also square off against (re)development initiatives in central and peripheral areas of St. Petersburg [16; 24–26], Astrakhan [27], Perm [28], and other cities.

In their indignation, the residents are often supported by organizations and movements aimed to protect the built-up environments of historical and architectural value [21; 29; 30]. When such alliances emerge, their ambitions may not limit to the solution of local problems but rather reach the city-wide scale so that heated debates around major projects, for example the construction of the Moscow International Business Centre also known as “Moscow City”, or of the skyscraper to accommodate Russian gas monopoly Gazprom Okhta/Lakhta-Center in St. Petersburg, unfold [31; 32].

In this paper, we reconstruct and revise the processes of urban spaces contestation in which the local communities of St. Petersburg were involved back in 2005–2012, the time when the neoliberal orientations of political and economic elites first became salient, and their efforts to feel their way into commercially beneficial use of urban territories resulted in massive clamor. Basing on the materials of our empirical study that sheds light on territorial conflicts at the time of rapid formation and institutionalization of neoliberal agenda in Petersburg, we discuss the particularities of the social and economic context of the post-Soviet neoliberal city in which the claims and actions of citizens protesting against the (re)development projects of political and economic elites are embedded, and consider the instruments of struggle that the parties of conflicts around urban spaces resort to. We also show what theoretical frames developed in urban studies are most relevant for the investigation of such urban spaces contestation and discuss their possibilities and constraints for the analysis of complex and divergent day-to-day realities of recent St. Petersburg.

## Theorizing the contestation of urban space

To analyze the conflictual relations of actors involved in the processes of urban space contestation, we shall use the theories that pay attention to different dimensions of the triad “the urbanites — the state — the urban space” such as the Neo-Marxist approach that explains the social and economic transformations of urban spaces in capitalist societies and considers the resulting conflicts between interest groups holding different class positions, and the theories of urban political regimes that describe the configurations of political and economic elites in cities and trace their influence on the transformation of urban space.

The theory developed by Marxist urbanist H. Lefebvre lies in the core of scholarly reflections on the tension between authorities and city dwellers. To analyze the production of urban space, Lefebvre distinguishes between three modes: everyday spatial practices and perceptions, representations of space, and representational spaces [19]. He argues

that a new type of social order necessarily brings along a new form of city space that, in turn, demands the emergence of a specific configuration of spatial practices. Such practices are always economically, socially and culturally determined. Resulting from capitals (re)distribution, they embrace the physical and experiential use and deciphering of city space [19, p. 33–38].

Representations of space are discourses on the principles of city space development and regulation generated by planners, architects, and other experts as well as other actors who have the prerogative to produce and transform urban space [19, p. 32–33]. Often taking the shape of theories, plans, models and maps, such representations foresee and register the material processes of spatial transformation (redevelopment, gentrification, etc.) [33, p. 128]. For instance, in recent years St. Petersburg has experienced dramatic changes resulting from rapid capitalization of urban territories and touching upon the representations of space. New image-building trends aimed to increase the attractiveness of the city for tourists through its aestheticization and thus turn the city into the space of flourishing cultural consumption have been developing. This course of city elites towards the increase of tourist flows and the provision of necessary infrastructure is graphically presented in the utterances of the former Governor of St. Petersburg, Valentina Matviyenko: “In 2005, the Government of St. Petersburg adopted the five-year program aimed to develop Petersburg as an upcoming tourist center. Over this year, the government funding of tourism industry has increased twentyfold. Eight new hotels have been opened, and nineteen hotels more are now under construction. We really count on having up to 5 000 000 foreign tourists by year 2010, which will enable considerable increase of the budget income of the city” [34]. As a result, the city center became the major locus of consumption subjected to the strategies of “improvement” and “revitalization”, the way the Governor and her team saw them. However, as in many other cities of the world [35], these strategies were targeted at the representatives of middle and upper-middle class, which led to the extrusion of poorer locals.

Finally, the representational spaces shared by inhabitants and users are the ways in which spaces are lived, thought of and imagined to become symbolically changed and (re)appropriated. Representatives of various social and cultural groups produce and share different spatial codes some of which (discarded codes, revolutionary codes) have the potential of bringing urban spaces back under the control of the urbanites [19, p. 33]. These are, e. g., the codes that the local communities of St. Petersburg referred to when bucking against the decisions of stronger advocacy groups: urban territories as *homes*, urban territories as *treasures*, urban territories as *sites of memory and nostalgia*, etc.

As Lefebvre shows, these three modes are dialectically interconnected and mutually contesting, since urban governments and planners seeking to boost their profits by turning the city into pure resource hardly take into account the interests and needs of the citizens. Setha Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuniga [36, p. 19] argue that such neglect facilitates the social construction of urban space in the course of which the urbanites’ social exchanges, memories, images and daily use of urban material settings transform spaces and give them meaning. This is also where local activism and social movements aimed to protect urban space originate from [36, p. 21–22]. Thus, urban space becomes a contested space where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion, and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined by different control of resources and access to power [36, p. 18].

Lefebvre argues that the only way to alter the status quo and bring city spaces out of the total control of capitalism and the state is the mass uprising of city dwellers [19]. On the contrary, M. de Certeau believes that the urbanites can oppose the decisions and actions of stronger groups not only by organizing massive open protest but also by resorting to “the art of the weak” — implicit on-site tactics of resistance, maneuvers meant to immediately solve specific momentary problems [37]. Such tactics become essential when the weaker groups feel the need to respond and/or resist, but the power imbalance is so strong that open opposition and explicit violation of rules inevitably lead to losses or defeat [38]. Thus, the flexible and responsive spatial tactics of the dwellers (walking, naming, remembering, and narrating) are analytically opposed to the spatial strategies of the authorities and other strong groups who seek to override some territory to supervise and control it [37, p. 52].

James Scott [39] provides an alternative interpretation of the actions of the weak who are forced to protect their territory in his analysis of rural class conflicts in Malaysia. He describes their struggle as a set of diverse unorganized resistance practices (guerrilla warfare) in which the oppressed make use of the local knowledge of their territory that is inaccessible for the dominating ones. He also emphasizes that grassroots resistance to (spatial) oppression is oftentimes implicit and quite, deeply embedded in locals' everyday lives and even invisible for the powerholders: it can take the shape of false compliance, feigned ignorance, slander and further discursive practices (humor, folklore, etc.) aimed at the symbolic privatization of the contested property and at executing agency to overcome disempowerment and helplessness. Although Scott's primary focus is on agrarian societies, his findings are also insightful for urban contexts.

In our analysis of post-Soviet Petersburg, we use Lefebvrian trine of everyday spatial practices and perceptions, representations of space, and representational spaces to grasp the complexity of claims to and conflicts over urban territories but assume that, instead of mass rebellion as foreseen by Lefebvre, here, the urbanites most likely resorted to implicit tactical actions, since they were doomed to remain in the position of the weak, with their very scarce resources and the many pressures from the city elites that will be described below.

## Urban regime theory

Unequal access to contested urban spaces makes an important issue for the researches of urban politics, and especially of urban governance. For instance, in his urban regime theory Clarence Stone [40] concentrates on the access to institutional resources that enables governing decisions in cities. He shows that in situations when local authorities are limited in their opportunities to absorb financial interests and independently solve urban problems but on the other hand are capable of mobilizing capital, chances are high for coalitional political regimes to emerge that would combine institutional resources of the political elites with economic resources and investment opportunities of big businesses [41]. Any urban regime depends on the particular goals of the coalition that ensure the stability of cooperation [41]. The most continuous and stable cooperation is to be expected from alliances of strong political elites and businesses in big cities that have unique historical background, appealing architectural look or recognizable urban culture, which provides advantages in the fierce competition between cities [42].

This is particularly true for post-Soviet St. Petersburg that seeks to replenish city budget by developing tourist industry and attracting new investors. Here, increasing commercialization of urban space induced by city elites is represented in and legitimized by the civilizing discourses of Europeanization: it is declared that the space of Petersburg should not be museumified but rather subjected to modernization and progressive commercial development, the way it happens elsewhere in Europe. In Petersburg, the coalitions of political and business elites (particularly development corporations) tend to assume the form of “growth machines” as described by Harvey Molotch [43]. According to Molotch, growth machines emerge from 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 [44]. Often ignoring the interests and demands of the urbanites, the strategies of growth machines conform to the trends intrinsic for the neoliberal course of urban economy and visible in such large-scale projects as Gazprom Arena, New Holland Island, Expo, Severnaya Dolina housing estate, and Baltic Perl housing estate. According to David Harvey, one of these trends is the spatial-temporal fix when urban space becomes subject to specific territorialization of capital (geographic expansion of investments in urban territories) that allows business elites to deposit accumulated capital surplus in a growing number of new urban settings and thus avoid financial crises [45]. This idea is consonant to Edward Soja’s argument, according to which geographical movement of capital makes the core of late-capitalist neoliberal economy: being produced in one location, such capital is fixed and realized in other locations. This leads to uneven distribution of capital in urban spaces, the decrease of the proportion of industrial sectors in city economies in favor of the intensifying circulation of capital in real estate operations, and — in the long run — to increasing social inequality, since capital is now invested in the production of “expensive” and “safe” spaces not accessible for poorer population [46]. As these processes unfold, city administrations and investors face the problem of vacant territories deficiency. New vacant spots are thus often procured through accumulation by dispossession, the centralization of economic resources and power in the hands of the elites by dispossessing the public(s) of their wealth and/or land within the framework of neoliberal policies, e. g. when urban territories pass from public to private ownership or are handed over to new owners [45], which triggers the gentrification of both city centers and urban peripheries [47].

In Russia, the growth machines acquire specific characteristics due to the unstable and problematic status of land ownership [48] under the transition from socialist planned economy to post-socialist capitalist economy, non-transparent schemes of public procurement and tendering, lacking public discussion around amendments to the General Plan and other city planning documents, as well as the activities of both the local and national economic and political elites who initiate urban (re)development and benefit from it [49]. The strong advocacy groups in big Russian cities are reported to use both legal and nonlegal instruments to wear down the reactive resistance of the urbanites [50].

All the participants of the contestation, be that the locals, the activists or the political and economic elites, actively shape the “image of the enemy”, which is often represented as a coalition of opponents who benefit from their agreement. It is worth noting that the construction of such images of the adverse coalitions is not necessarily based on their actual existence: it may be part of the symbolic fight over the urban space unfolding under

the conditions of unequal access of conflict parties to the decision-making regarding the urban territories [51].

Indeed, in St. Petersburg such strategies of city administration in association with big businesses have been often discursively confirmed by public calls and pronouncements of high-level officials. For instance, in her Annual Letter and Report — 2006, the then Governor of the city Valentina Matviyenko repeatedly emphasized the need to master new urban territories including the construction of new elite housing estates in former industrial zones: “The speed of construction calls for dealing with an increasing number of new lands including depressed zones. This important resource of urban development has remained unclaimed since Soviet times... For example, we are planning the integrated development of Severnaya Dolina micro-district” [52].

The processes of accumulation by dispossession can make a powerful trigger of conflicts between the elites who follow the notions of the exchange value of urban territories, and the weaker groups who often refer to the use value of these territories based on memory and habit as well as the people’s time, physical and other investments [44, p. 32]. Thus, the propertied model of urban spaces disposal imposed by city administration and big investors and based on the “right to exclude” is constantly contested by the urbanites who claim their “right not to be excluded” [53, p. 316].

### **Paternalism in post-Soviet cities**

Describing the particularities of the urbanites’ response to unpopular (re)development decisions and actions in big post-Soviet cities, many Russian scholars point at the passivity of citizens and the willingness of innumerable local activists to maintain patron–client relationships with the state. The reproduction of such asymmetric relations between governmental bodies and urban local communities is found both in Soviet [54] and post-Soviet [55] past and present and thoroughly described in the researches of local protest initiatives [24; 56; 57]. Boris Gladarev [24, p. 164–165] especially emphasizes the inclination of the citizens to address state institutions with complaints and requests in case of emergency expecting the latter to provide protection and assistance.

In other words, the majority of Russian social scientists reveal the translation of the old Soviet patterns of interaction between citizens and elites in contemporary urban regimes thus denying that weak groups can take an active position in urban space contestation and strategically struggle for the abolition or amendment of governing decisions.

### **Research design**

To test the heuristic potential of the analytical tools described above, we turn to the results of our independent research empirically designed as a multiple case study (twelve cases in total). Combining several methods of qualitative research including semi-structured interviews with urban activists and locals, participant observation at meetings, rallies and other events, as well as qualitative analysis of texts (e. g. online discussions of the urbanites and public responses of the administrations and businesses), we discuss various situations unfolding between 2005 and 2012 where alternative views on how the contested urban space should be organized made local communities consolidate and resist top-down (re)development initiatives. The investigated cases can be tentatively divided

into two categories depending on the type of outer threat that the contested urban territory was exposed to. The first category includes cases of (actual or prospective) demolition whereas the second one embraces the situations of spot construction. In this article, we shall focus on four out of these cases.

Two of the selected cases belong to the *demolition* category. These are (1) the expected demolition of Yurgens House — a historically valuable mansion erected in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century — to construct a commercial multistorey building (here, in 2010 the residents of the neighboring estates engaged in self-organization to save the heritage asset and protect the nearby houses from possible damage) (nine semi-structured interviews, three observation protocols); and (2) the massive demolition of garage stalls in Parnas cooperative in 2011–2012 aimed to clear the land for a large-scale housing estate (this demolition caused heated protests among garage owners) (14 semi-structured interviews). As to the *spot construction* category, here we concentrate on (1) the lasting struggle of the locals against the construction of a bistro and a shopping mall at Muzhestva Square in 2005–2007 where the citizens would repeatedly refer to the values or history and memory of WW2 to delegitimize the construction (retrospective analysis of the website of the activists: [58]); and (2) the felling of greenery in the inner yard of house 40 in Komendantskiy avenue to accommodate a new house (2009) in the course of which the building contractor destroyed the public garden created at the expenses of the neighborhood by hand of some locals, which certainly catalyzed the resistance of the citizens (10 semi-structured interviews, 3 observation protocols).

Within each category, cases were selected to meet the requirement of maximal variability. Among other criteria, they varied by the location of contested urban space (e. g. Yurgens House is very central whereas garage cooperatives were situated on the city periphery); the type of contested urban space (e. g. the lived space of the locals like in Komendantskiy avenue, a neighboring sample of architecture as in the struggle over Yurgens House, the public place of Muzhestva square, or the semi-private place traditionally used to keep and repair cars); the scale and composition of the local community involved in contestation (from innumerable active residents of the neighboring houses to over 8500 garage owners, highly diverse in social status and cultural background, who have suffered from the demolition); the duration of contestation (compare, e.g., a relatively brief conflict around Muzhestva square with the long-lasting struggle for garages that started as early as in 2008 but still remains unsolved); the decisions of strong advocacy groups (the conflicts around Yurgens House and Muzhestva square ended with the satisfaction of the urbanites' requirements, whereas the claims of garage owners were rejected and the building contractor in Komendantskiy avenue finally came to a compromise with the local community by promising to compensate the felling through the improvement of the area). Finally and most importantly, the reason to choose the relatively old conflicts dating back to 2005–2012 is that they spiked when Valentina Matviyenko, an explicit adherent of neoliberal paradigm in urban development, held the position of the Governor of St. Petersburg. Striving to improve the investment climate in the city, Matviyenko initiated and/or supported large projects in housing and infrastructure many of which were severely criticized as threatening the architectural heritage of the city and worsening the living conditions of the locals. The defensive rhetoric of Matviyenko's administration, that of progressive and profitable city development, clearly set the neoliberal agenda in St. Petersburg that was inherited and maintained by later Governors. Thus, these cases seem most insightful to trace the evolvment and institutionalization of the logic of neoliberalization in St. Petersburg.



## Spatial strategies vs. spatial tactics: some empirical findings

Although the resources of resistance available for the dwellers of a big Russian city such as St. Petersburg are very limited due to the highly asymmetric character of communication between the elites and the population induced by the new neoliberal course, the underdeveloped tradition of civic participation and the nontransparency of decision-making processes at different levels of governmental hierarchy, the urbanites are far from reducing their responses to unpopular projects only to spontaneous tactical, and often illegal, actions, as the prominent urban scholars such as Lefebvre or de Certeau would suggest. On the contrary, in all cases under investigation the local communities started their struggle by attempting to legally assert their right to the city (applied to court and public prosecutor's office, sent inquiries and complaints to city administration, gathered signatures against (re)development projects), and only on failure made efforts to attract public attention to the contestation, engaged in networks with other activist groups and historic preservation movements of the city and benefited from the local knowledge in their guerrilla struggle. At that, the responses of city dwellers often took shape of collective planned action.

On the other hand, contrary to the conventional accounts of the actions of strong advocacy groups as purely strategic, in St. Petersburg, city and district administrations as well as investors often resorted to spatial practices at the stage of projects execution and sometimes pushed the boundaries of the legal framework too far. For example, in their attempts to protect the garage stalls subjected to demolition, the owners locked themselves up hoping that their physical presence would prevent the developer company from pulling down the boxes. However, the developer resorted to a retaliatory tactical action. As one of the protesters recollects, "We locked ourselves up in the garage stalls. It was a kind of self-defense for our part. But we had no such luck! A large vehicle arrived, and then something inconceivable happened! They started to kind of smoke us out by exhaust gases" (Interview 2.2, male, member of "Rubezh" trade union). According to the representatives of the trade union "Rubezh" established by garages defenders, strong advocacy groups systematically performed illegal tactical actions to wear down the resistance of garage owners: "Well, the garage stalls have lasted for 25 years and nothing has ever happened to them. And then suddenly the arsons and fires started" (Interview 2.4, male, member of "Rubezh" trade union).

Another graphic example of tactical action performed by the strong advocacy groups represented by city administration and the developer company is the attempt to prevent the protest of the residents by distracting them from the fact of the building of the construction fence in Komendantskii avenue: "It was the Day of the Senior Citizens, a holiday. And they [city and municipal authorities] provided a beautiful bus like the ones that usually transport international travelers. And they offered us to go for an excursion to Pavlovsk to see the palace and so forth. It was the first time in our lives that we were sent to such a wonderful excursion! And then we were brought to the concert hall and not to know what all... But as soon as everybody was gone, in the course of two hours thirty construction machines arrived, the tree-fellers and so forth" (Interview 4.4, female, activist, Komendantskii avenue). When the local activists occupied the construction site, the developer company had recourse to spatial tactics again: "A truck with composting toilets came, but instead it brought two welding sets! But people were no fools — they

would suspect that, and so we did not let the truck pass” (Interview 4.4, female, activist, Komendantskii avenue).

One reason for the business to resort to tactical actions lies in the fact that all parties of conflicts unfolding around urban territories in Petersburg were performing in the context of legal uncertainty, constant transformation of legislative frameworks, and the coexistence of multiple property regimes some of which were inherited from Soviet times and others — generated by the contemporary neoliberal line of policy and economic development. Another reason the local activists often pointed to in their interviews is the impunity of politicians and businessmen enjoying the mutually beneficial coalitions. However, the results of our empirical study demonstrate that the composition and effects of such coalitions are also not as unambiguous as it might have been expected.

### **(Imagined) growth machines?**

The empirical data collected in the course of our case study provide indirect evidence of the existence of coalitions between political and economic elites in St. Petersburg that sometimes take the shape of “growth machines” [43]. For example, in spite of the long and fierce resistance maintained by garage owners in Parnas cooperative (including political meetings, protest actions, numerous litigations at law, public utterances of the malcontents and even physical counterstand to the demolition), the big construction company “Glavstroy” enjoying resounding support from the city government had fully implemented its project of pulling down over 8500 garage stalls by 2012.

Another interesting example is the story of the public garden in Komendantskii avenue. Although the then Governor of the city Valentina Matviyenko finally called back the local building permit (which at the first glance contradicts the hypothesis on the coalition being created), the refusal of the Governor to follow the initial plan was surprisingly accepted by the developer company (whose director general held the position of advisor to the Governor in commercial construction issues) with understanding, and no trials followed. As the president of RBI group E. Tiktinskiy commented, “When we started the construction process and faced a problematic situation that is not typical for us [the resistance of the neighborhood], we sought advice of the Governor asking her to take the decision she would consider correct and fair” (interview with E. Tiktinskiy at [59]). Therefore, we assume that although the interests of the developer were probably affected by the Governor’s decision, the company got informal guarantees of further support from the governmental bodies by way of compensation.

However, in some cases the existence of coalitions uniting political elites and businesses is open to question. For example, both building permits regulating the construction of a shopping mall and a bistro at Muzhestva square were eventually withdrawn, which revolted the developer companies and gave rise to trials between the city administration as the final authority taking decisions on urban (re)development and the investors who incurred losses because of this cancellation. Publically elucidating her decision, the then Governor said: “I have charged the Civil Engineering Committee with the task to abandon the real estate development of this territory and select an alternative construction site for the investor to build the shopping mall because it is clear that the investor has expended much to prepare the necessary documentation, including the permission documentation, which has to be compensated. The new construction site will have nothing to do with Muzhestva square.

The developer is officially informed. In turn, the developer reported to the Civil Engineering Committee that it is going to sue both over the city administration and over those who (as the managers believe) impeded the permitted construction. Of course, now we don't know what decision the court will take" (The Governor Valentina Matvienko at [60]).

The case of Yurgens House also demonstrates the absence of alliance between the construction company (Limited liability company Luksor) and the city administration. When the vice-governor Igor Metelskiy stepped in the conflict between the defenders of the heritage asset and the developer and drew the Commission on land utilization in the negotiations, public hearings were organized where weaker advocacy groups got a chance to voice their discontent. The developer was refused permission for demolition; instead, it was recommended to conduct sparing reconstruction of the building, which testifies that the political elites had no specific interests concerning the successful realization of this development project. Probably, the developer was too small to make a full-fledged participant of a growth machine.

However, the defenders of Yurgens House repeatedly expressed confidence that the coalition of political and business elites gaining from the effective use of profitable urban territories such as the very central spot occupied by the mansion still existed. This belief echoed in the public speeches of Legal Assembly deputy Sergey Malkov who lobbied the interests of the local community: "Today, when the recognition of old houses as dangerous structures is becoming one of the elements of construction business, your meeting is part of the struggle for the preservation of the historic center of the city. City authorities and investors have come up with a fancy name to disguise their true actions — 'the development of St. Petersburg'. But in fact, the word 'development' masks something that is absolutely opposite to real development — the destruction of the historic center for the sake of momentary profits" (Field notes, Public meeting in defense of the Yurgens House, October 16, 2010, S. A. Malkov's address to the defenders of Yurgens House).

Thus, in this case we do not observe any (in)direct empirical indicators of the "real" presence of growth machines and instead assume that the local activists constructed "imagined growth machines", i. e. produced and broadcasted the negative images of corrupted alliances between the businesses and the powerholders (for more reflections of how to empirically evidence and analytically "grasp" the existence of growth machines, see [50]). However, in accordance with Thomas theorem [61], if the citizens believed that the collusion took place, this certainty could not but influence their discursive practices and protest choices making many urbanites see the resistance as hopeless and doomed to failure and thus reducing their responses to false compliance or discursive tactics only.

## Paternalism revisited

The conventional notion of Russian local activists being involved in paternalistic relations with city and state authorities is also not always confirmed by our empirical findings. As shown above, the urbanites increasingly tended to start their resistance by active legal struggle for contested spaces thus ignoring or rejecting traditional patron-client relations with the state. Moreover, in their attempts to fight the policy-makers they sometimes also engaged in political communication. For instance, the garage owners put forward their own candidate for municipal district deputy as a competitor to Valentine Matviyenko: "We were told she would be participating in the elections in Alexandrovka district. So we

decided to run our own candidate to become her adversary. We got help from the party and found a good person to participate [in the elections]" (Interview 2.10, male, Deputy chair of "Rubezh" trade union). They also found lobbyists in the Legislative Assembly of the city who advocated the interests of garage owners.

However, in the vast majority of cases the legal and political initiatives of local activists remained unnoticed or rejected. As the Deputy chair of "Rubezh" trade union complained, "When the first law [on garages demolition] was discussed back in 2011, in autumn, I observed the whole discussion. All the amendments that Nilov [the lobbyist of garage owners in the Legislative Assembly] was trying to railroad were immediately brushed aside — even his comment that the law did not include any references to the Federal legislation" (Interview 2.10, male, Deputy chair of "Rubezh" trade union). The only exception here was probably the short-term moratorium on cooperative garages demolition declared by the new city Governor Georgiy Poltavchenko in answer to the written request sent by the members of "Rubezh" trade union. In other situations, the claims of local communities were blocked by the existing political opportunity structure [62–66] (on the political opportunity structure in contemporary St. Petersburg see [51]). Adjustments to federal and regional laws were 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 were subjected to the interests of these politicians and their allies. Thus, policy-makers often had the resources to arbitrarily grant or refuse the political rights of the citizens. As Oleg Nilov, the deputy of the Legislative Assembly who was one of the innumerable politicians who supported garage owners in their claims, critically commented, "I don't see why it happens like that. If there exists a city law why does the instruction of some functionary have any priority? The Government simply did not have the right to prolong its edict [on the demolition] in 2008. A mistake was made, and it has to be retracted" (the deputy Oleg Nilov at [67]).

It is only when the legal claims of the local activists proved themselves ineffective or simply impossible that the urbanites were forced to reckon only upon the goodwill of high-ranking politicians and officials such as the President of the Russian Federation or the city Governor thus falling under the traditional pattern of paternalism. Such emotionally loaded addresses to the decision-makers of high standing could sometimes even become quite successful sobeit the broad public attention was also provided (as the story of Muzhestva square defense convincingly proves). Whether to consider such addresses as strategic or tactical, though, remains an open question: on the one hand, their forced character as "gestures of desperation" and their purely symbolic agenda put them outside the scope of classical strategies; on the other hand, however, resorting to the high-ranking politicians to increase public outreach and probably even promote the interests of the urbanites can sometimes be not a manifestation of "learned helplessness" but rather a pretty rational instrumental effort. This reveals the nonbinary character of the opposition "strategies vs. tactics" and demonstrates the fluid context-specific character of their use.

## Conclusions

Having considered four cases of urban space contestation in contemporary St. Petersburg, we can conclude that the logic of conflictual interactions between strong and weak advocacy groups is highly dependent on the complex and controversial social, political and

historical context where traces of Soviet power relations and planning systems overlap with the newest principles and rhetoric of neoliberalism. The political opportunity structure in post-Soviet Petersburg obviously limited the possibilities of the citizens to participate in debates, let alone decision-making, on urban (re)development. The growth machines existing in the city defeated the purpose of contesting urban territories by juridical means: legal judgments were regulated via ordinances sanctioned by high-ranking officials who were often associated with growth machines. Even when the decisions were nominally taken to the advantage of the urbanites, in practice the law enforcement could intricately transform these decisions for the convenience of strong advocacy groups. However, because such manipulations took systemic character, the citizens progressively realized the need for strategic collective action (especially in the legal field), which turns counter to the conventions of classical urban theories that framed our research. They also rarely acted within the traditional paternalistic model because reckoning on the help of the authorities was considered naïve and misleading. On the other hand, strong advocacy groups did not disdain tactical (and sometimes even illegal) actions where applicable and generally performed rather inconsistently not only supporting the developers, but sometimes also disserving their interests when the threats of public discontent were too high. Therefore, the collusions between political and business elites sometimes remained an imaginary threat that still played an important role in local activists' solidarization and resistance. Finally, the analysis shows that it is often impossible to strictly distinguish between strategies and tactics because the same actions of urban stakeholders could shift between extemporaneousness, emotionality, little coordination and professionalization, rationality and pragmatism. For example, addresses to high-ranking politicians could be both manifestations of tactical paternalism and instruments of strategic outreach, while the social construction of imagined growth machines could be both the reason to reduce resistance to discursive tactics and a quite efficient mechanism of solidarization and strategic collective action legitimation. In the changeable and elusive contexts of post-Soviet neoliberalization, the relative, situation-based character of the theoretical language becomes especially evident.

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### Социальные эффекты неолиберальной политики в постсоветском Санкт-Петербурге: пересмотр концепций оспаривания городского пространства

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Неолиберальная городская политика стала основой городского планирования и (ре-) девелопмента в постсоветском Санкт-Петербурге. Конкурирующие представления о том, как должно быть организовано городское пространство, заставляют жителей консолидироваться и выступать против решений сильных групп интересов. В статье рассматриваются усилия горожан и городских элит по оспариванию городских территорий в период становления и распространения неолиберальной риторики и политики. В фокусе внимания оказываются четыре случая борьбы локальных сообществ против уплотнительной застройки, сносов и редевелопмента исторических кварталов (2005–2012). Эмпирическую базу исследования составляют полуструктурированные интервью с местными жителями и активистами, а также материалы полуформализо-



ванных наблюдений на собраниях и митингах. Мы используем теории городских политических режимов для анализа градостроительных инициатив и решений администраций и девелоперов и комбинируем их с теориями Лефевра, де Серто и Скота, осмысляющими повседневное низовое сопротивление граждан структурному давлению, доминированию и эксплуатации, для описания реакций горожан. Наши материалы показывают, что эти теории необходимо адаптировать к локальному петербургскому контексту, в котором борьба за городское пространство разворачивалась в условиях тотальной неопределенности, порожденной множественными режимами собственности, изменчивым законодательством, непрозрачностью решений городских властей и инвесторов и постепенным становлением традиций гражданского участия. В результате ставится под сомнение конвенциональная точка зрения о патерналистских отношениях, связывающих горожан с властями, а также проблематизируются границы между ключевыми понятиями городской теории: в частности, обнаруживается относительный, небинарный характер оппозиции между пространственными стратегиями и пространственными тактиками.

*Ключевые слова:* оспариваемые городские пространства, неолиберальная политика, городской политический режим, постсоветский город, пространственные стратегии и тактики.

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