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Public Space in Europe and Russia: 'Europeanness' and Re-Interpretation of Urban Public Space

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Introduction

Following the protests in Russia in December 2011 and Spring 2012, interest in public space and how it is conceptualized has grown significantly. So too has interest in the existence of public spaces in cities. Before the protests, the term 'urban public space' was used rarely by a small number of specialists in urban planning and urban studies, but it did not exist in the public discourse. However, the unprecedented occupation of open spaces in Russian cities by protesters (both in the form of protest rallies and 'Occupy Wall Street'-like presence in squares and boulevards) has lead to the discussion of the concept itself, and discussion of the limitations on and opportunities for the use of the urban space by city dwellers: the issue of the quality of the urban public life, public gatherings and spaces for them was raised by the media and the city-dwellers.

The conflicting rights to use public spaces for different purposes during the protests (the protesters were often blamed of violating others' rights to use the public spaces 'peacefully') also contributed to the discussion. After protests which involved occupation of open spaces, the idea of "public space" has been discussed as both a space for free self-expression and a space that is subject to certain restrictions as to how it can be used because of the presence of the others. As a result of the protests and the reaction of the government, the opportunities to organize action in public spaces was significantly limited by a new legislative initiative approved by the State Duma (Parliament) in June 2012: according to this new law, the organizers of unapproved gatherings of people in public spaces will have to pay heavy fines and even go to jail. Thus, public space is viewed as both a space of opportunities (there are several projects in the field of urban planning in Moscow and St. Petersburg to develop urban public space) and as a source of threat – both to 'average citizens' (who, in this discourse, do not participate in protests and prefer 'stability' to 'revolution') and also to the government.

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

historic centre of Russia's "cultural capital" (which is the unofficial title of St. Petersburg).

The hypothesis of this paper is that the current debate about 'open space' shows the conflict between the old concept and a new concept of urban space which is now emerging in modern Russia. The old concept of open urban space sees it as a 'postcard' that should represent not the living city and its people, but the official and 'nice' views. This one is closely related to the soviet idea of open urban space as a stage for rallies and demonstrations organized by the Communist Party, a space which was under the permanent control of officials and which did not 'belong' to the city inhabitants. The concept which has been emerging in the last decade is related to the humanist concept of 'city for the people'. Although it is not referred to as 'public space', the idea of public places for interaction does occasionally appear in the media, and it is often expressed by the citizens. The latter development can be also seen as a process 'Europeanization' or 'westernization', since there are lots of bottom-up projects aiming at the improvement of public space inspired by similar projects implemented in European and American cities.

European Cities and Public Space

The notion of public space is extensively discussed by writers in Western Europe. However, in the recent literature there are almost no texts discussing the notion itself – the 'public space' or 'public places' seems to be regarded as an accepted and 'clear' term in urban studies. Furthermore, there is almost no distinction between the 'Northern American' and 'European' tradition of studying urban public space: the studies of north American examples and European cities are categorised as research into 'western cities' and, in my opinion, all European writers on these subjects tend to use more or less the same research techniques and schemes of explanation.

The main frameworks of writing on urban public space can be divided into several groups. The first and largest category of research discusses the connection between public space and democracy, thus accepting a more general understanding of public space (in the Habermasian tradition) as a space of public discussion, formation of opinions and exchange of ideas, etc. This understanding of public space has produced a number of studies on the role of public space and its development in the processes of the democratic transition in Eastern Europe, in the post-socialist countries (Bernhard 1993, Kofman 1995). These studies investigate the different characteristics of "socialist" public space and how it was conceptualized after the communist parties in these countries lost their monopoly of power: there are two different configurations of the public space which are defined by the structural, social and political circumstances. However, these changes in configuration are seen as evolutionary – there is thought to be a transition from one to the other.

A very important focus in studies of this type is the issue of European citizenship and common public space in Europe (Kofman 1995); and these questions find their expression in the organization of the urban environment as well. However, the discussion of (urban) citizenship is not limited to European writers (Holston and Appadurai 1996, Calhoun 1998).

The transformation of public space in a more 'localized' urban sense has also been studied in post-socialist contexts. Studies have focused on the transformation of property rights, meanings given to the space and all possible aspects of the post-socialist transformation as reflected in urban space (Bodnar 1998, Andrusz 2007, The Post-Socialist City 2007). These studies can also be put into a second category of research: there are multiple texts focusing on 'post-socialist', 'post-industrial' (Burgers 2006) or 'post-colonial' urban public space. This category is very close to the first one since it also supposes some evolution of urban forms following the political transformation.

The political dimension of urban public space is also a focus for diverse studies in the field of urban governance (Healey 2004) as well as urban planning (Gospodini 2002, Jacob and Hellestrom 2006, Carmona et al 2003). Interesting parallels to the current situation in Russian cities can be drawn with the studies from the post-socialist context, e.g. in a study of Beorgad in 1996-1997 the protests against Milosevic were analyzed in a broader framework of formation of identities, discussing the spatial metaphors of 'city' and 'Europe' (Jansen 2001). The similarities of protest practices in the public spaces described by Jansen and those observed recently in Russian cities brings us to the hypothesis that the specific characteristics of public urban space can produce similar practices and behavior. Here, by urban public space I mean not only the physical space, but also the practices of use of the space, and the acceptable and prohibited forms of behavior as well as the political and social constraints controlling its use.

The majority of studies agree that of urban public space is facing a crisis, and that this is caused by the increasing privatization and commodification of the space, growing fear of Others, etc. (Mitchell 1995, Aurigi and Graham 1997, Allen 2006). The 'reconstruction' of the tradition of writing on public space shows a very evolutionary picture – urban public spaces (in Europe and North America) were open and democratic, but now they are threatened by the growing fears and encroaching private ownership and interests. However, the empirical case studies of public spaces from different urban and national contexts show that the models of public space are very different in different societies – depending on the local public culture, political and social circumstances, etc. Therefore it makes sense to talk about different public "regimes" in different contexts. It would be wrong to judge and evaluate these according to a single set of criteria, but rather I would suggest that there is a need for careful study with the goal of defining the social and political circumstances that which define the specificities of each case.

The 'post-protest' understanding of the urban public space in Russian media is close to the understanding accepted in the discussion taking place in other countries and often brings in examples from western countries (how the space is organized in western cities): what I mean here, first of all, is the idea that

open spaces should be accessible to people, that people can use these spaces for diverse activities including seeing other people and being seen by them. The Soviet idea of public space was somewhat different and was incorporated in many of the planning concepts implemented in Soviet times: all the urban space was 'public' (in the sense that it belonged to the state) by default, however, only sanctioned activities were allowed in this space. The formal status of the 'common space' did not correspond with the actual functionality and use of most of these spaces: central squares and streets were intended for demonstrations and rallies initiated and choreographed by the state. A "public place" according to this concept was supposed to be a place of collective actions controlled by the authorities (Engel 2006: 167). Uncontrolled gatherings of people in central open spaces were undesirable, and the everyday social interactions of city dwellers were pushed into the private domain – into places such as kitchens, garages and backyards (Zhelnina, 2011).

This has led to a very strict division of life in soviet cities into 'public' and 'private' domains, which is analyzed by historians and anthropologists (Boym 1994, Nielsen 2004). The Norwegian anthropologist, F.S. Nielsen, has found a spatial metaphor for this duality: prospekt (avenue) as a place which represents civilization, is well-conditioned and cared for, and dvor (backyard) as a place where people actually live and interact; but the dvor is not an open space – it is rather a place hidden from the outsider, an "ungoverned domain" (Nielsen 2004: 55). The general split of life into private and public spread onto city space as well. The open spaces of the city did not function as public places, where interactions between strangers and diversity are possible. For this reason I often use the term 'open space' instead of 'public place' when referring to the publicly accessible areas in St. Petersburg: this designation and the spaces I apply it do not always fit the definition given in the academic literature.

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

Background of Change in St. Petersburg: Europeanization

In the post-soviet era St. Petersburg, as with many other Russian post-soviet cities, had to develop a new management system and strategy. Under new regulations of registration of places of residence, the "*propiska*" system was cancelled: the system that attached people to one place of residence and which made it impossible to move and migrate freely around the country. The new law of 1993 "On the right of the citizens of the Russian Federation to freedom of

movement, choice of place of residence in the Russian Federation" caused a significant growth of the migration flows that transformed the population structure of the big cities. It was accompanied by the intensification of social problems – unemployment, fall in the quality of life, marginalization of the population – all these were symptoms of a general crisis in the industrial and employment systems.

The early 1990s in St. Petersburg were characterized by attempts on the part of the city administration to cope with these general systemic problems: their solutions involved privatization, a search for strategic partners and resources for the funding the city budget. The politics of the first mayor of the new St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, who occupied this position in 1991-1996, was oriented towards the inclusion of the city into international business networks. The goal being to secure the city's financial independence from the federal centre.

After the cancellation of the centralised planning system at the core of the planned economy, the national government lost its position as the only subject of decision-making regarding the process of city development. The important feature of this period is the appearance of a new agent – the investor. The big financial groups from different spheres of business that were ready to invest in the development of urban territories, investing the capitals in the particular district, started influencing the landscape of St. Petersburg significantly. The problem of privatization of public spaces first appeared in the post-soviet city: after several decades of being regarded as 'no one's land' and 'a view', the centre of St. Petersburg became a huge uncontrolled market space – many kiosks, small shops and street trade occupied all available spaces. In other cases such privatization could be observed as a reduction of the public space in the capitalist city (Stanilov 2007: 272). However, in Leningrad-St. Petersburg, this logic is not completely applicable: there was no public space in the form of lively interactive places in the central squares and streets, the space was not used as a true public space, but only imagined and interpreted as a common symbol. In the 1990s, however, people started using it – by taking part in street retail and the accompanying processes.

It is possible to say that, in the late 1990s – early 2000s, the first centralized attempts to create public places were made, although these were not completely deliberate and consistent. They were a result of the reconstructions and renovations of the central spaces and building works that were undertaken as part of the preparations for the 300th Anniversary of the founding of the city, under Vladimir Yakovlev's government (1996-2003). The renovation and creation of pedestrian zones and public places became a part of the 'Europeanization' of the city – this was both an economic strategy and also a new ideology of urban space and how it should be transformed at the turn of the century.

By the late 1990s, the city infrastructure was in a very poor condition: transportation, and housing were near to collapse, and the historic city center which had been included in the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1991 was falling into decay and gradually losing its 'postcard look'. The need to pay attention to

the city's economy and services became part of the election programme of Vladimir Yakovlev, who became governor by emphasizing his interest in the "*routine work on improvement of the city*" (Pochemu proigral Anatolij Sobchak 1996). The improvement ('*blagoustroistvo*') of the whole city space is indeed the main feature of the Yakovlev government. In 1996-97 the Strategic plan for city development was elaborated, which includes the main principles of the city policies (Strategicheskij plan 1998). Among them are improvement of the quality of life and creating the attractiveness of the city for investors.

Attracting the investments is viewed as one of the key conditions for the transition of St. Petersburg onto a stable, sustainable path development. To reach the goal "favourable economic conditions" had to be created, the city space had to be brought up to certain standards, have better infrastructure, and provide the possible investors with an easy and transparent real estate market. In general the late 1990s are characterized by realization of big projects in the sphere of improvement of urban infrastructure.

The most active reconstructions were performed on the threshold of the 300th Anniversary of St. Petersburg in 2003; and this occasion indeed became a turning point for the city. Officially the preparations started in 1999, and over several years there were many big projects of reconstruction and new construction was also carried out. The construction of the new image of St. Petersburg accompanied the reconstruction of the physical space. The work on the image of the city as the 'most European city in Russia', as the 'cultural capital' was part of the advertising campaign meant to attract international investment to the city – following the task to 'promote the city on the international level' formulated in the Strategic plan (Strategicheskij plan 1998: 73).

The preparations for the Anniversary were financially supported by the federal budget. The 300th anniversary of St. Petersburg was positioned as an event of international scale. Among the biggest projects undertaken during the preparations forthe Anniversary were the modernization of the 'Pulkovo'-airport, construction of the new Ladozhsky railway station, restoration of the main sights in the city, and modernization of the road and transport system (building of the circular highway, etc.). Among the projects were also numerous improvements of the open urban places, and reconstructions of parks, streets, squares and yards.

The reconstruction of the physical space was accompanied by work on the new image of the city , the concept of the city's 'Europeanness' ('*evropeiskost*') was meant to be the distinctive feature of St. Petersburg compared with other Russian cities. The Strategic plan includes the idea of incorporating the city into the European context as a guideline for the city strategy: first of all, this meant the integration of Saint Petersburg into the European economy, serving as a junction point for the international trade between Russia and the EU (Strategicheskij plan 1998: 46-48).

However, the 'Europeanness' of Saint Petersburg is not merely an economic strategy: it is also a guideline for the everyday life of the city-dwellers. The next governor of St. Petersburg, Valentina Matvienko, in her pre-election

speeches referred to the idea that St. Petersburg should become a city with 'European standards of living" . This idea was also included in the General Plan of the city (2005, edited in 2008):

> "In the basis of the town-planning transformations that are outlined in the Concept of the General Plan of St. Petersburg lies the idea of the 'Open European city'. St. Petersburg must take an appropriate place in the constellation of the great cities of Europe. The new General plan of St. Petersburg is oriented towards achievement of the European standard of the urban environment quality" (Konceptsija General'nogo plana…).

The idea of St. Petersburg as a European city is shared by the authorities and the inhabitants. The concept of the 'cultural capital' had as its goal to "elaborate a positive image of the city, attract tourists and use the 300th Anniversary as an occasion for receiving donations and credits from the federal center and abroad" (Tchouikina 2003: 61). Moreover, the 'Europeanness' becomes the standard to compare with the realities of the post-soviet St. Petersburg: "Europe" is invisibly present in all the activities related to urban transformations. The often-used word 'improvement' ('*blagoustroistovo*') as well as all the innovations in town planning – pedestrian streets, ball-shaped fountains, modern sculpture – remind people of the 'European standard'" (Tchouikina 2003: 61). However the Europeanization of St. Petersburg was superficial – or, as the journalist Arkadij Ippolitov metaphorically puts it, it was "Europe on bullshit" (Ippolitov 2007).

Public vs. Open Space

The development of the public places of St. Petersburg is a good example of such a discrepancy between, on the one hand the 'European image' of the city and on the other the changing interpretation of public space. As mentioned above, the space of the soviet Leningrad was split in two parts – the official 'view' and the everyday life inside the neighbourhoods.. This situation changed as a result of the described 'Europeanization' policies and the general logic of post-soviet city development, but the soviet and the updated ('Europeanized') interpretations coexist in the modern discourse and use of public spaces, showing the still existing conflict of the transforming identities.

First of all, it is important, that, in the official documents, public places are usually referred to as 'open urban spaces' words which in Russian have few social connotations, meaning rather the space with no roof than a space of social activities.

The notion of the urban public space in St. Petersburg is mentioned and conceptualized in Chapter 11 of the Decree of the St, Petersburg Government № 1681 «On the St. Petersburg Strategy of Cultural Heritage Preservation». This document contains two different approaches to urban space: first, the ideas of public space as an important communicative part of the city environment, which plays a significant role in the identities of city-dwellers; second, the idea of open spaces as the 'museum under the sky' which has to be treated with respect:

"The improvement of the open spaces, the museification of the archeological objects and small architectural forms improves the quality of life in the city in general".

On the other hand:

"…they play the main role in providing the recreational and leisure needs of the city community, they are important for the social interaction. The open spaces reflect the collective life of the city; they are a kind of a public living room ('*gostinaya*') of St. Petersburg. They have a commercial value, and help the economic revival not only by creating the working places, but also by raising the city attractiveness for business investments and living" (Postanovlenie Pravitel'stva…).

The logic of the document is rather contradictory: the idea of the collective everyday use of open spaces and the idea of museification appear difficult to combine in practice. The simple fact that the conceptualization of the term 'open urban spaces' and their social role are included in a document on strategy for the preservation of cultural heritage shows that the perception of those spaces as a visual image, 'a view' dominates over the idea of them as a space of social communications. Also the term 'living room' ('*gostinaya*' mentioned in the above cited text) may suggest a space which has to be kept in order to be shown to guests, but which is not a space of everyday routine use.

During the preparation for the 300th Anniversary the open spaces of the city attracted the attention of the administration: the improvement of the quality of the urban environment included the creation of open spaces with respect to the 'European traditions'. In the historic city centre and nearby, a programme of creating pedestrian streets was implemented, and several zones were indeed established. However, the programme was not completely fulfilled, because in a city with a growing traffic problem the closure of streets for cars appeared to be a complicated task. Another argument against continuing the programme was the cost of street maintenance that had to be paid from the city budget. As a result, the equipment of the public places in St. Petersburg did not go farther than designing a few pedestrian streets (among which are the Malaya Konyushennaja and Malaya Sadowaya streets, and some others). Overall public space in St. Petersburg seemed to be understood as an aesthetic and visual concept rather than as a functional one, oriented towards providing an interactive and comfortable environment.

Being Civilized and Being 'European': Interpretations of Public Places

Thus, the 'europeanisation' of the open urban spaces was not consistent. After the celebration of the 300th Anniversary and showing the renovated St. Petersburg to the international and Russian public, the 'europeanised' public places did not all keep their public character. A short while after the celebration, some of the 'improved' public parks were closed to the public: in this way they were cheaper and more convenient to keep 'in order'. There are only a few

examples of this kind, but the conflict between the different perceptions of the 'city as a museum' and city for people is a very characteristic feature of the recent developments in St. Petersburg. The open spaces, the way they are equipped and used are often an issue of discussions bringing together the opposite points of view on St. Petersburg as a city-museum and as a city for people. The first one reminds us of the soviet model - interpreting open spaces of the city centre as a visual symbol, the second one is an updated version which focuses on the use of open spaces as public places, places of interaction and leisure.

Those two points of view can be traced in the example of the discussion regarding the reconstruction of one of the most centrally located public gardens - in front of the Kazansky Cathedral on Nevsky prospect. This little garden, consisting of a lawn, fountain, benches, bushes and flowerbeds, was improved for the 300th Anniversary celebration, but was fenced in and closed for public soon after the celebration. The fences were removed only 2007 after complaints from city residents. However, in 2009 the fences were back again – because people started lying on the grass and walking right on it, thus damaging the lawn. The main opponents to such usage of the space were the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, the owners of the Cathedral, who did not approve of the proximity of the Cathedral with the 'misbehaving' people (Chtoby sohranit skver u Kazanskogo, ego reshili zakryt' 2008). Their position had support among some of the citizens, for whom the uninhibited use of the public space contradicted the image of St. Petersburg as a museum. The adherents of this position appeal to this 'museified' image of the city and protest against violations of the rules of 'public propriety' and restraint. Among those violations are: lying on the grass, drinking and eating as well as expressive communication, kissing and hugging in public. It is important to emphasize that those expressing this opinion are not necessarily religious people: the main protest comes not on the basis of religious norms, but is rather caused by the specific idea of behaving in public, of the inadmissibility of private activities in public spaces which could damage the 'postcard' and great view of the 'gala' St. Petersburg.

An interesting discussion regarding the closure of the public garden (Skver u Kazanskogo segodnja nachnut ogorazhivat' 2009) took place in the St. Petersburg community of the blogger platform 'LiveJournal', which is the most popular in Russia.

The fact of the relaxing people being in the city landscape displeases some city-dwellers:

> "We'd better have a meter-high cast-iron fence there than all this meat".

To explain their dissatisfaction, the protesters against such use of the city gardens and lawns appeal to the idea of 'civilisation':

> "Those who are civilized – they'd never loll about near the prospect and suck beer" (ibid.).

The opposite point of view -protecting the right of citizens to relax in the fresh air, refers to the image of the 'European city', claiming that in all European

cities, people lie on the grass in the green areas of the cities. Thus, if St. Petersburg is a European city, public spaces should be freely used by the citizens. The statements of the opponents to the garden closure often used comparisons with the European and North American cities:

> "Petersburg is a window to Europe. So the people relaxing on the grass – it is the usual European thing";

> "People want to live normally, the living standards are growing little by little, people see how it is all done in the West, and it is understandable that they want it to be just as good in their homeland, too" (ibid.).

So, the European image of St. Petersburg is shared by the media discourse and the people's perception, but the idea of "Europeanness" among the city-dwellers is not uniform.

For the supporters of closing the garden, 'Europeanness' is 'civilisation', meaning restrained behavior in public places. The inhabitants of St. Petersburg are blamed for not being able to behave in a 'civilized' way, therefore according to this view, there is a need of formal restrictions and regulations of access.

> "I'd like it so, that the people would realize it for themselves, that this particular Russian lawn is not for lolling about. But even if we are here all such conscious persons, there are still some people treating public places as hooligans and mere consumers. Evidently, we cannot change it, because even if there are normal people here, there is still always much more cattle ('bydlo')" (ibid.).

The personal qualities and behavior of the users of public places, and the visual image they create, contradicts the image of the 'cultural capital' and 'Russian Europeanness'. The supporters of this point of view prefer the image of the 'gala' ('*paradnyj*') St. Petersburg, an estranged city that can only be observed from the side, but not used:

> "Many people would prefer to see the green grass, even if it is behind the fence, than a dirty hangout-place, even if the latter is in the 'best European tradition'".

This conflict of different images of the city shown in the example of one public place is a general contradiction of the post-soviet perception of St. Petersburg in general. First position is oriented towards the 'European lifestyle', the idea that includes active communication and self-expression in public places, and which prioritizes the interests and comfort of the city-dwellers. The opposite point of view sees the open public space as an object of visual delight, a representation of the cultural and historic heritage of the city, but not the living environment. The latter point of view has deep roots and is connected with the soviet tradition of the gap between public and private, of interpreting the city space as not a living space, but a decoration and symbolic landscape. The soviet concept of the public place ('*obschestvennoe mesto*') ruled out the confluence of public and private, and did not permit any expressions of individuality in public. It is the (unacceptable from the soviet point of view) penetration of the private into the public that makes some of the citizens protest against picnicking on the lawns in the city center. Another peculiarity of the post-soviet city is the perception of public places as dangerous – often they are perceived as being used by marginal people: alcohol and drug addicts, or homeless people. The perception of

strangers or "Others" in the urban space has a negative connotation (e.g. the people on the lawn in front of the Kazansky cathedral were called 'cattle' (*bydlo'*) by one of the discussion participants. That is however part of a general problem: the lack of the habit of diversity, and this leads to different lifestyles in public places automatically being perceived as alien and hostile.

The sharpness of the contradiction between the interpretations of the open urban spaces and the styles of behavior practiced there is partly connected with the novelty of the spatial format itself: pedestrian streets are a new phenomenon for the post-soviet city. That stimulates a new type of being-there and communication – observing the others, not just passing by. This type of behavior has gradually spread to other suitable spaces – gardens, lawns and embankments. But the novelty of such usage of the spaces causes rejection by some city residents. Another section of the population has appropriated the new spaces and models of behaviour in the city, and is trying out the new 'European' image of the city.

'Creative' Ways of Becoming 'European'

The 'European' influence on the development of urban public space in Russia is not limited to the levels of perception and identities. The direct impact is becoming visible in the form of various projects for the improvement of citylife, many of which are 'bottom-up'. Since the protest did not really succeed in changing the political system in Russia, the idea of 'small deeds' became very popular among young participants in the protest rallies: they turned to the improvement of life in their own 'backyards'. Most of the projects involving the idea of public space started in Moscow and in St. Petersburg. One of the most popular and active initiatives in the field is the 'Partizaning' initiative of Moscow, which has spread now to some other cities including St. Petersburg (the newsletter of the actions and ideas can be found on the web-page http://partizaning.org/). The general idea behind the majority of Partizaning's actions is the creative re-designing and re-interpreting of the urban space in a 'human-oriented' mode. Most of the actions are artistic and activist and are not supported by any governmental or commercial organization. It is clear that this kind of initiative is a 'western' experience translated into a Russian context, aiming to try 'rooting' it into Russian cities.

The European influence is first visible due to the examples that the 'Partizaning' tries to follow. Western (both European and American) art-projects are presented as good practices on the web-site as well as during multiple public presentations of the project, e.g. in the framework of the 'Delai Sam', Do it Yourself –Urban Actions Marathon, that takes place in several Russian Cities (Tretiy Delai Sam… 2012). The Marathon has the goal of improving the quality of life in Russian cities by turning them into friendly, comfortable and 'human-oriented' spaces. A great deal of attention is paid first of all to the qualities of the public space, and to public participation in the process of shaping them. A quote

below shows the importance of the 'western' experiences for the actions of the activists:

> "World practice during recent decades shows a new model of development – creation of the environment for the people by people themselves. The best cities in the world create good conditions for experimentation; unite the citizens interested in changing the space around them" (Mikhail Klimovsky, co-organizer of the 'Delai Sam' (Gid po marafonu… 2012).

The majority of the projects and discussions within the initiative show the growing significance of the term 'public space'. The post-soviet relation between 'public' and 'private' mentioned in the beginning of this text is now re-interpreted by the new active public – the activist artists, the so called 'creative class' in general. Not only the way the urban space looks, and the kind of opportunities it gives, but also the more general issue of public participation is raised. One of the most often-mentioned ideas within the 'Partizaning' initiative and the 'Do it Yourself' Marathon were participatory planning and the 'theory of small deeds': according to this new framework, and new attitude to the urban public space, the citizens should care not only for their private worlds and apartments, but also 'step outside' their enclosed worlds and take care of squares, yards and other public areas to make life in the city, and as a result in the whole country, more decent. Whether this plan actually works is disputable, since many projects of the artists remain artistic projects for the artistic community. E.g. some of the projects are reduced to short interventions into the urban space and photographing the process for further display on the website. But the intention to provoke public communication in and regarding the urban public space is obvious. The following quote represents the idea of the importance of the public-private balance (even expressed with the help of English words 'public' and 'private' within the Russian phrase instead of the Russian translation), the idea of what is important for the public and what is not important; and also the relation to the 'European experiences':

> "It is pointless to develop public art in Russia because of two reasons. 1) In the soviet time the whole urban space was public. After 1991 its pieces rapidly become private, but there are only a few legal mechanisms regulating it, or they are easily avoided. And as long as the scheme of the transition from public to private is not transparent, it's too early to speak of public art. 2) Almost all of the projects in this sphere are demonstrative and snobbish ("finally we are doing something they have had in Europe since ages")". Valentin Dyakov, art-critic (Ponosov 2012).

The 'snobbish' and elitist character of many projects involving the words of 'public space' is sometimes the result of the efforts of the developers and investors trying to install the 'European'-like lifestyle in Russian cities. An example of this is the recent development of the Island 'New Holland' in the center of St. Petersburg.

The project is seasonal and relatively recent – this year is the second time the old island is open to the public due to the activities of a private investor, Roman Abramovich, and the "Iris" foundation supported by him. New Holland is an artificial island coming from the first half of the XVII century. For the summer projects, the island was equipped with free Wi-Fi, a green lawn, various cafes

and small shops, as well as exhibition spaces to show 'modern art'. As the head of the Foundation, Darya Zhukova, puts it, again using the term 'public':

> 'We realize how important this project is for the city dwellers, thus the summer program is the first step in studying the possible target group, its interests and wishes. First of all, we have the goal of making the island a public place, where everyone can see what's happening' (Ignatyev 2011).

The event is indeed very important – the city was returned a territory that has been closed to the public for a very long period. This territory was always symbolically and historically significant (it has a mysterious aura). Now it is open as a new, creative and 'public' place. It attracted a diverse public – creative youth, older citizens, tourists, residents of the houses nearby. The enthusiastic reviews multiplied on the Internet, the quote from a blog of a young girl below shows both the reference to 'European-ness' again and the characteristics of the public – 'normal', which is a way of saying 'there are no others that I don't like':

> "And you can see how cool Piter [Saint Petersburg - AZ] really is (as someone sometime used to say, more European than many European cities). And people THERE INSIDE are amazing. "Somehow normal" (c)" (URL: http://backbone-flute.livejournal.com/128797.html)

Similar descriptions of the public could often be found in similar reviews: the place became a concentration spot for a certain social milieu, that could finally come together and see 'people like us'. It was made possible because of active advertisement of the project, because it proposed the kinds of activities attractive for the 'creative class' but also because of the very strict security measures on the entrance: there is only one gate leading to the island equipped with metal locators and attentive security guards. The rules have been established not to allow bringing own food and drinks to the island – bags can be checked by the security, who take any drinks and food out of visitors bags and give them back when they leave the island. Formally, the island is open for anyone, but the public still is filtered, letting through'hipsters', 'creative class', or those who want to identify with it. In the end, these are all people following a certain lifestyle, able to afford the proposed level of consumption (the food in the cafes on the island is relatively high priced), including the cultural consumption.

The term 'public space' is there, and it refers to the 'western' and fashionable ideas of tolerance and diversity, but the rules and activities on the island limit the diversity in reality – the space is very socially homogenous. It is a 'public space' for 'people like us', without *'bydlo'* and alcohol addicts from the neighboring residential area. Such an interpretation of the space was very popular during the discussion on what urban public space should be like on social networks (Facebook and Vkontakte). One of the arguments for the limitations and rules on the island was

> "if one doesn't prohibit it all – we'll have fights, hooliganism, because our people cannot just sit peacefully in the air" (URL: http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=222147384496176)

The content of the online discussions shows the aim of the educated and 'cultured' visitors of the 'creative space' - to fence out the *'bydlo'*. Thus, one part

of the citizens should pay with the limitation of their freedom in order to gain their desired outcome - the limitation of entry to New Holland of 'Others', or undesirable citizens.

Conclusions: Urban Public Space after the 2011-2012 Protests

The open spaces in St. Petersburg are rarely perceived by the citizens as their own territory that can be freely used and appropriated. The image of the city, the representation of cultural heritage, the historic landscape, on the contrary, is a common good of a high symbolic value. The global trends of privatization and commercialization of public places are visible also in St. Petersburg; however, they are not the ones that shape the perception of the spaces by the citizens. For them, the issues of combining the new uses of space and the heritage of the city, 'Europeanness' are the most topical.

Nevertheless, public places do exist, and they are produced by the activities of people, even though they are not firmly established as a value and a right of citizens. The ongoing discussions show two contradictory points of view. The first, 'post-soviet' point of view does not allow the confluence of private and public in the open spaces, it seeks to protect the symbolic space of St. Petersburg from everyday penetrations. The second, emerging 'Europeanized' point of view assumes the everyday appropriation of public space of the city to be the right of citizens. This shows the slow transition from the soviet model of a dual city where private and public life were strictly separated, to a model of a city with public space being appropriated and used by people in their daily lives.

Interestingly, this situation somewhat differs from the observations made in the cities of Central Europe (Stanilov 2007), where one of the features of transition to capitalism was the reduction and fragmentation the public space. Of course, in St. Petersburg there is also a tendency of exclusion and spatial separation of different social groups, however, it is possible to say, that compared with Leningrad, where the public space was reduced in its functionality, and repressed by the state power control, in St. Petersburg, a new perception and interpretation of the city space is forming: this includes the appropriation of the open spaces by the city-dwellers themselves, who have started claiming their right to it. The means of appropriation are different: hanging out in open spaces, organizing thematic excursions and walks, flash mobs, etc. However, in recent years, the free use of open spaces is again being complicated by the political situation in the country – public gatherings and activities are often interpreted as a threat and driven away by police.

Important developments followed the 2011 protest activities which had been caused by the December Parliamentary elections and March Presidential elections. The difficulties the protesters faced in their attempts to make their discontent visible by gathering in central urban places provoked the growth of interest and discussion regarding the public space of the cities. Though the connection between the discussion about public spaces in the post-soviet city described above in the article and the recent protests may not seem obvious, the link exists: after the protests, several important articles about 'Cities and Protest', 'Urban revolution in Russia' as well as 'Right to the city' appeared in the mass media (Trubina 2012, Kurennoy 2012, Zhelnina et al. 2012). The general interest in urban issues has also grown: the researchers within urban studies have suddenly become highly demanded specialists who are asked for expert comments in the media. The term 'public space' is starting to be used more in the media and social networks as a representation of the general problems of power inequality and political struggle.

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

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

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

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