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Struggle over public space: grassroots movements in Moscow and Vilnius

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore urban mobilisation patterns in two post-Soviet cities: Vilnius and Moscow. Both cities were subject to similar housing and urban policy during Soviet times, and they have implemented urban development using neoliberal market principles, provoking grassroots opposition from citizens to privatisation and marketisation of their housing environment and local public space. However, the differing conditions of democratic Lithuanian and authoritarian Russian public governance offer different opportunities and set different constraints for neighbourhood mobilisation. The purpose is to contrast local community mobilisations under the two regimes and highlight the differences between and similarities in the activists' repertoires of actions in two distinct political and economic urban settings.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper employs qualitative methodology using data from semi-structured interviews conducted with community activists and state officials, presented using a comparative case study design.

Findings – Although, citizens' mobilisations in the two cities are reactions to the neoliberalisation of housing and local public space, they take different forms. In Vilnius they are institutionalised and receive formal support from national and local authorities. Moreover, support from the EU encourages organisational development and provides material and cognitive resources for grassroots urban mobilisations. In contrast, residents' mobilisations in Moscow are informal and face fierce opposition from local authorities. However, even in an authoritarian setting, grassroots mobilisations evolve using creative strategies to circumvent institutional constraints.

Originality/value – Little attention has been paid to grassroots urban mobilisations in post-Soviet cities. There is also a lack of comparative attempts to show variation in post-Soviet urban activism related to housing and local public space.

Keywords Housing policy, Moscow, Grassroots, Mobilizations, Public space, Vilnius

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The fall of the Soviet Union was one of the most remarkable events of the twentieth century, re-shaping European borders and global power structures. It was particularly significant for Lithuania, the first former Soviet republic to proclaim independence in 1990. In Russia, the event marked a significant transformation of the geopolitical,

economic and social situation of the country. All these changes were particularly pronounced in cities, which are the strongest reflections of the political, socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of a particular society (Pichler-Milanovich, 1997). As Tosics (2005) states, there was a move away from the communist city model based on state control and long-term city planning towards a market city model based on private ownership and limited state control of land property and housing markets. This has not only greatly affected the look of post-Soviet cities, but also the relationship between local authorities and citizens. Since Lithuania proclaimed independence in 1990, Vilnius, the country's capital with more than half a million inhabitants, has been opened up to rapid Europeanisation, democratisation, privatisation and marketisation. Russia's capital Moscow, with an official population of 12 million, is not only the financial and economic centre of the non-EU post-Soviet world, but has become an important player in global business. Since the end of the Soviet Union, the city has been the leading Russian city in the liberalisation of urban policy and development, with a heavy emphasis on maximising profits from the constant growth of population and capital as well as from the housing market and transport systems (Makhrova and Golubchikov, 2012).

Soviet housing and urban policies were highly centralised, and the state played a central role in the production, allocation and consumption of housing (Tsenkova, 2009; Tosics, 2005). But housing privatisation and marketisation, as well as the withdrawal of the state from housing and urban policy since the 1990s, have provoked mobilisations by citizens concerned about housing and local public space. In Lithuanian cities, people have successfully mobilised around environmental issues in order to improve infrastructure development in their neighbourhoods and defend their neighbourhoods against unwanted constructions (Aidukaitė, 2013; Aidukaitė and Jacobsson, 2015). In Russia, city dwellers have also united against the replacement of inner city green zones with new apartment buildings (Zakirova, 2008) and against the demolition of historical architecture (Gladarev, 2011).

This paper takes a comparative perspective in order to analyse urban grassroots activity around housing and related public space in two post-Soviet cities. There are several reasons for selecting the cities of Vilnius and Moscow in order to compare neighbourhood mobilisations. On the one hand, the two cities were subject to similar Soviet housing and urban policies. Under Soviet citizenship arrangements, the state provided and maintained housing in exchange for its overall dominance in all public affairs. On the other hand, while both cities witnessed dramatic changes after 1990, they followed different paths of development. Today, the political and institutional opportunities available to citizens to further their interests and have their problems listened to vary considerably between the two cities.

The main concern of this paper is to demonstrate the wide range of forms of local civic activism in post-Soviet urban settings and to connect this variety to distinct political and institutional factors of post-Soviet urban development. We show that post-Soviet urban government regimes are entangled with various forms of grass-roots activism. And yet it is not our purpose to contrast strong and weak urban mobilisation, as one might suspect when a comparison is made between Lithuania, a democratic EU member state, and the more or less authoritarian regime of Russia, known for its crackdowns on civil society. Instead, we shed light on the character of various forms of urban activism in relation to the political and institutional environment from which they arose.

Our purpose is to document and compare urban mobilisation patterns in these two cities. Comparing local community protests in Moscow and Vilnius sheds light on the

different political opportunities and constraining factors in the two cities (Tilly, 1978; Tarrow, 1988; McAdam, 1996), as well as on their repertoires of contention (Tilly, 1993) *vis-à-vis* the state and business in the struggle over defining and controlling the transformation of housing and local public space. Issues of privatisation and land use are most evident in Moscow, while in Vilnius problems of sustainability and the environment are at the forefront. Nonetheless, many community associations and local grassroots initiatives in both cities relate their demands to public debate on housing issues.

The paper is based on 40 in-depth interviews (25 in Vilnius and 15 in Moscow) with urban activists, decision makers and state officials. The character of the case of mobilisation and interview partners selected in the two cities differs. In Vilnius, activists came from formal organisations which are firmly integrated into institutional networks of public governance. In contrast, the interviewed activists in Moscow are members of informal initiatives and grassroots groups founded for the purpose of momentary protest. In any case, this selection bias was the result of the need to reflect the field of activism in both cities appropriately in the data.

The major argument of our paper is that despite their distinct political and economic regimes, urban mobilisations in both cities arise as a response to housing privatisation and marketisation, while a creative repertoire of grassroots contention is applied in the more authoritarian Russian context vs capitalising Europeanisation in democratic Lithuania.

In the following section, we will discuss the relationship between housing, public space and citizenship under socialism and how it has changed since the fall of the Soviet regime. The two subsequent sections will present case studies of local grassroots mobilisation and the conditions that shape them in Vilnius and Moscow. The last section provides a comparative discussion of these grassroots urban mobilisation patterns, detailing differences and similarities, and finally offers some conclusions.

2. Public space and urban grass-roots mobilisation in post-Soviet contexts

Although during socialism all public space belonged to "the people", they were not free to use it independently of or in opposition to state institutions. Intense political control and surveillance turned streets and squares into a strictly limited social arena (Zhelnina, 2013). Demonstrations and rallies by the Communist party and other state organisations were staged public events dependent on detailed scripts. Public space was meant for collective action, but solely under the control of the state (Engel, 2006, p. 167). The Soviet regime thus effectively separated the public and the private by occupying the former and marginalising the latter (Stanilov, 2007). In contrast to state-occupied streets and squares, the backyard was part of private space, an "ungoverned domain" (Nielsen, 2004, p. 55) where people could interact more freely.

Housing was the material basis for the social contract between individuals and the Communist government. In exchange for work and uncritical engagement in the building of a socialist society, citizens had the undisputed right to living space. After the right (and obligation) to work, the right to an apartment was one of the most important pillars of Soviet citizenship. Although there was an obligation to pay rent, many people perceived their living space as their own (Reid, 2006). Due to this strong personal attachment, people cared about their housing environment, voicing their concerns to local housing management institutions installed and controlled by the

state, which were responsible for maintaining the housing stock. A second, and quite well used, opportunity to voice concerns related to housing issues was to write letters to official institutions (Kulavig, 2002). Although tenants had to make a small contribution to the maintenance of their home, the overall responsibility was with the state, legally as well as in peoples' perceptions. Overall, Soviet tenants were quite passive recipients of state-provided housing. In exchange for limited and strongly channelled opportunities to further their interests and voice their concerns, they expected the state to take care of their housing situation and provide a certain quality of life.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union rapidly altered the nature of urban development, housing and the meaning of citizenship connected to them. In Russia and many other post-Soviet countries housing, public services and transportation, as well as public space, were redefined by neoliberal city development (Stanilov, 2007, p. 7). Public space and state property were exposed to extreme levels of privatisation, which Bodnar (2001, p. 7) interprets as "the leitmotiv of post-socialist urban change".

Due to shortcomings in their ability to finance and maintain the public housing sector, city governments promoted the privatisation of most of the state's housing stock in the course of post-Soviet liberalisation and marketisation of urban development. Although various methods of privatisation were taken up and implemented at different times, the majority (75 per cent or more) of housing stock in most post-Soviet countries is currently privatised (Eurostat, 2014). Over 90 per cent of the housing stock in Lithuania (Aidukaitė, 2014) is currently in private hands, and more than 80 per cent in Russia (Federal'naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoi statistiki, 2013). Thus, former Soviet tenants became home owners and participants in neoliberal real estate markets. Parallel to the privatisation of living space, the state has also privatised the maintenance and management of apartment houses, leaving decision making, organisation and finance to the new owners. But it was not only immediate living space which was penetrated by market rules; the state also allowed business interests to focus on public space within the broader housing environment, such as district parks, backyards and parking lots. Citizens were left to organise and care for their housing and living environment themselves, and they had to do this according to new rules and under the administration of a state that was no longer obliged to care for their quality of life. This profoundly changed the relationship between individuals and the state. Most notably, this concerned the notion of citizenship in the new post-Soviet societies. According to Marshall's (1950) classic account of citizenship, the civil right to hold property is historically closely connected to the development of political rights, e.g. the right to participate in political decision making, and social rights, e.g. the right to access welfare and social security. In that sense, post-Soviet transformation and privatisation processes potentially rendered urban space political space, where politicised social relationships can develop (Jacobsson, 2015). Therefore, the housing environment and related public space especially can be seen as interwoven with everyday politics of citizenship, when homeowners in multi-storey apartment houses gather to protect their quality of life against the neoliberal urban development interests of state and business actors.

Resistance to the neoliberal restructuring of housing and its public environment is among the oldest concerns of nonstate collective action in post-Soviet countries (Shomina, 1999; Kleman *et al.*, 2010). In that sense, "the reconstruction of the civic significance of urban space" (Czepczynski, 2008, p. 182) is an ongoing process in post-Soviet settings through which citizens regain and reformulate the meaning of public space in contention with state institutions and business actors. Neighbourhood parks, inner city squares and local district river banks become reflecting grounds for

new developments in rights-based citizenship, thus giving rise to local protest and grassroots movements. With regard to this, Andy Merrifield argues that the urban environment enables a "politics of encounter" (Merrifield, 2011), when people meet and collectively define themselves in public, constituting new forms of solidarity and collective identities.

Although so-called not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) protests are often disregarded as local mobilisations aimed at protecting the privileges of the middle-class (Mayer, 2008, p. 308), they still offer a form of participation in collective meaning-making and mobilisation which is not induced or directed by external actors. For the mobilisations in Vilnius and Moscow, this is of great relevance for several reasons. First, citizens often have little experience with independent mobilisation due to their past adaptation to the Soviet state's control and occupation of the public sphere. Second, the post-Soviet withdrawal into private life (Greene, 2011), and the concomitant "de-politicisation" of society, limits the concern of collective interest to the closest social environment, such as housing. Third, and finally, post-Soviet societies still inherit from the past a certain reluctance by political and administrative structures to open up and include citizens in decision-making processes of public concern (Petrovic, 2005, p. 10). Therefore, the backyard and the immediate neighbourhood represent an important place for an "encounter" (Merrifield, 2011) with regard to the collective definition of common interests. This encounter can trigger a process of collective meaning-making regarding interpersonally shared problems. In that case, NIMBY-protests against an unwanted construction side or neighbourhood mobilisation around the destruction of a district park create an opportunity for collective grievance and solidarity, which leads to shared identity on the grounds of everyday "civic significance" (Czepczynski, 2008) for the local urban space in which participants live.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly founded post-Soviet states developed in various directions, providing grounds for the formation of different conditions for collective civic action. Hence, urban protests and local grass-roots movements also face different political opportunities and constraints in their respective countries (Tilly, 1978; Tarrow, 1988; McAdam, 1996). For this reason, post-Soviet citizens have to deal with country specific conditions when making their demands heard, finding support, mobilising, employing strategies and influencing policy making (Meyer, 2004). Although influenced by similar urban development and housing policies during Soviet times, the political and institutional structures of today's Lithuania and Russia offer different opportunities for and place different constraints on collective action by residents. Whereas Lithuania took the path of liberal democracy and became a member of the European Union, Russia can be described as an authoritarian regime (Petrone, 2011). This means that both international influence on policy (e.g. from the EU) and the inclusion of citizens and their collective demands into public governance are much stronger in Lithuania than in Russia. Moreover, Russia's media is less free and less protection is afforded to civil and political rights than in post-Soviet EU member states, which severely constrains the publicisation and political acknowledgement of citizens' demands. However, this does not prevent independent civic action and mobilisation in Russia and also means that contentious collective action in post-Soviet EU member countries is not fully independent of the state.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to describing local grassroots mobilisation by citizens in the capitals of Lithuania and Russia. We aim to compare how context specific conditions in Vilnius and Moscow support or constrain civil contention towards marketisation and the limitation of local public space. The following case studies will

show how activists' topics and "repertoires of contention" (Tilly, 1993) in Vilnius and Moscow differ. We will shed light on how different ways of departure from the Soviet social contract between citizens and the state, which traded housing security and quality of life for compliance with the Communist Party, led to differences in the issues people mobilise for today, and the tactics and strategies they use to do this. Everyday encounters between neighbours develop into everyday politics of citizenship differently under authoritarian and democratic regimes.

3. Community mobilisations in Vilnius

As an important cultural, political and economic centre, Vilnius, with 523,000 inhabitants, generates most of Lithuania's wealth and attracts most foreign investment, providing an attractive location as well as a well-educated labour force (Lietuvos Statistikos Departamentas, 2012; Pichler-Milanovich, 1997). Since 1992, the city has implemented housing privatisation and decentralised housing and urban policy by selling former state-owned housing stock and encouraging people to buy property at low prices. At present, 97.2 per cent of dwellings in Lithuania are occupied by their owners, with only 2.8 per cent accounted for by public and municipal property (Lietuvos Statistikos Departamentas, 2012). Moreover, the construction sector is dominated by private builders, and gas and heat suppliers also have been privatised. The Environment Ministry is responsible for development and implementation of the state's housing policy. Municipalities manage land rental and sales and issue housing construction permits (Zavadskas et al., 2002). However, with 97 per cent of housing stock being privately owned, the state has a limited role in the fields of housing and urban policy (Aidukaitė, 2014). Although Lithuania's housing policy strategy envisions an increasing proportion of social housing, a reduction in housing deprivation and encouragement for renovation, there is little implementation of this vision in practice, due to legal, bureaucratic and financial obstacles (Aidukaitė et al., 2014).

Previous studies of Central and Eastern Europe have documented how a liberal approach to housing and urban policy has been beset by problems, including increasing housing inequality, gentrification, inadequate state policy and legislation, policies favouring new private constructions and a lack of experience in public-private partnerships (Balchin, 1996; Polanska, 2011; Tsenkova, 2009). The absence of coherent and sustainable urban planning by the state, turning private agents into major players in the field, creates a situation in which many new construction projects, such as factories or even public infrastructure (e.g. roads), are initiated against the will of people living nearby, putting the environment and people's health at risk. This has provoked protests and the mobilisation of residents against the construction of waste plants and other infrastructural objects in their neighbourhood.

Mobilisation around issues of housing management, especially by flat owners striving to improve their housing conditions, is an important feature of the urban environment in Lithuania. Previous studies (Aidukaitė, 2013; Aidukaitė et al., 2014) have shown that community organisations and self-management housing partnerships are the organisational types which mobilise most actively around housing and urban issues. Both are officially registered with the authorities and therefore have legal status. Flat owners form self-management housing partnerships in order to perform house maintenance duties required by the sustainable city revitalisation process, such as improving heating efficiency[1]. Since 1995, the state's general strategy has been to encourage them to transfer all responsibility for housing maintenance and repair to home owners. In addition,

flat owners in Vilnius form housing partnerships for reasons of self-determination, such as managing the affairs of their apartment block, reducing heating costs, improving the living environment (infrastructure, playgrounds, street and outdoor lighting, increase security), and carrying out partial renovation (repairing staircases, roofs and other common facilities, etc.) (Aidukaitė *et al.*, 2014).

While housing self-management partnerships unite apartment block owners, community organisations bring together the inhabitants of a residential area. These bodies are founded by local residents, who are also the organisations' members, for the purpose of implementing local initiatives related to the common interest of the neighbourhood (LR Socialines apsaugos ir darbo ministerija, 2011). At present, there are 26 community organisations active in Vilnius, which have become important agents in promoting self-governance at the grassroots (community) level. While community organisations also perform various social and cultural activities, many were established in order to fight unwanted or sometimes illegal construction, to solve environmental issues or preserve green zones in the city, to reduce neighbourhood crime rates, to improve infrastructure or to protect architectural monuments against demolition. Community organisations in Vilnius often initiate neighbourhood campaigns for roads to be asphalted, parking lots to be built, street lights to be put up on walkways, children's playgrounds to be built, etc., although these matters are the responsibility of the municipality. Nevertheless, community organisations make their own efforts to address the need for infrastructural development, negotiating with the municipality and also turning to various other sponsors to find possible financial and political means for solving problems. Activists believe that by uniting they will achieve better communication with local authorities and their claims will be taken more seriously (Aidukaitė, 2013; Aidukaitė and Jacobsson, 2015; Nefas and Narkevičiūtė, 2013)[2].

In particular, since Lithuania joined the EU in 2004, resource opportunities provided by the European Structural Fund have favoured the mushrooming of community organisations in Lithuania, especially in rural but also in urban areas (Aidukaitė and Jacobsson, 2015). Monetary support was accompanied by cognitive influence when models of grassroots civil society mobilisation as well as concepts of partnership-building with public authorities diffused from Western member states. This argument is supported by 25 interviews conducted with community activists in Vilnius, but also by data from the State Enterprise Centre of Registers, which shows a major "boom" in community organisations in Vilnius in the EU accession year of 2004. In the following, we will briefly provide two examples of community mobilisations in more detail.

The Baltupiai community organisation was established in 2007 through an initiative by the municipality of Vilnius. However, its members have developed into actors who vigorously defend community interests and pursue its goals by influencing the municipality's decision making. The community centre mainly performs various social and recreational activities: ceramics and other clubs, camps for children, New Year celebrations, etc. However, when environmental problems arose, the community mobilised actively under strong leadership. The mobilisation started when community members learned that there were plans to cut down trees in a large park known as Jomanto, and for the location to be used to build a football stadium and another general sports stadium. In order to defend the public interest, the community's leader used strategies such as sending petitions and letters to government bodies, and also managed to collect more than 1,500 signatures against the construction taking place close to their neighbourhood. They also organised a campaign called "Apkabinkime

medį" ("Hug a Tree"), which was widely reported in the mass media. Children from kindergartens and schools gathered in the presence of journalists from major newspapers to celebrate forests and trees and form a live human chain around the park. In the end, the park was saved due to the huge efforts of the community. At present the community is active in solving other neighbourhood problems.

The Žvėrynas community association was established from below in 2004. It evolved as a grassroots movement which attempted to stop illegal construction and protect architectural monuments and squares. The Žvėrynas neighbourhood is one of the most prestigious areas in Vilnius, thus it was of interest to many private construction companies and investors. Since the 1990s, development of the neighbourhood has been chaotic and sometimes illegal, and the interests of the people living nearby have been ignored. To defend their common interests, the community mainly practices legal strategies, such as litigation in court. They have won almost all cases they have pursued over a ten-year period. One case brought against a potential illegal construction planed near sixteenth century mill, an architectural heritage monument, even reached the European Commission and the Constitutional Court of Lithuania. This demonstrates that community activists are not bound by national institutions in pursuing their goals, but that they also actively approach international organisations. Notably, community activists have used their own money to bring all their cases, and have used their own social networks to mobilise around the trials. The community organisation is not supported by the local municipality, but mainly relies on donations or on EU financing through various projects.

In both cases discussed above, Vilnius municipality's urban development plans had put the private interests of investors above the interests of common residents. This forced residents to employ strategies such as litigation in court, resulting in the involvement of major national newspapers in their public protest campaigns. Previous studies (Aidukaitė, 2013; Aidukaitė and Jacobsson, 2015) have also pointed out that the relationship between local authorities and community organisations in Vilnius is not perceived as good, and community organisations do not feel supported by the municipality. Thus, even if community organisations are institutionalised and formally supported by the state, they have to reclaim their access to public space. Nevertheless, many community organisations in Vilnius have managed to successfully solve their problems and take their issues to the decision-making level.

4. Community mobilisations in Moscow

Russia's capital is the political and commercial centre of the country and it expanded massively during the Soviet period (Rudolph and Brade, 2005, p. 136). Moscow's population skyrocketed, particularly with the construction of huge high-rise housing developments at the city's periphery in the 1970s. Since the end of the Soviet Union, the city has been subject to ongoing neoliberal urban redevelopment (Makhrova and Molodikova, 2007). Integration into global financial markets and global business networks also triggered the implementation of large construction programs and huge development projects (Medvedkov and Medvedkov, 2007), such as the Moscow City business district and a huge expansion of housing stock and the transport system.

The post-Soviet housing market in Moscow exhibits a mixture of political control left over from the Soviet era and neoliberal market elements. A change in housing policy in the 1960s marked a move from communal housing to family apartments. A separate apartment was an entitlement for good and productive citizens, while the

state also took care of maintenance. In 1991 the new Russian state introduced legislation to privatise the majority of the housing stock, creating a private housing market on the US model (Zavisca, 2012). In 1992, Moscow was the first Russian city to adopt free-of-charge privatisation of public housing (Daniell and Struyk, 1994). It was also a forerunner in implementing neoliberal housing reform policies, which shifted responsibility for maintenance from the state to private contractors (Lee *et al.*, 1998). Moreover, since then the city administration has followed entrepreneurial strategies and financial interests (Badyina and Golubchikov, 2005). Developers were given the opportunity to circumvent legal regulations, including avoiding participation by citizens, and they were given preferential administrative treatment. This proactive role is integral part of the "authoritative neoliberalism" of the Moscow government (Badyina and Golubchikov, 2005, p. 127).

The transformation and privatisation of the Russian housing sector contributed to the rise of local self-management committees formed to defend residents' rights against plans for urban development (Pickvance 1994, pp. 444ff.). Since the 1990s, this has been a nationwide phenomenon with neighbours coming together in an attempt to improve living conditions and defend their interests against new constructions and any unwanted development in their backyards and districts (Shomina, 2008). However, the situation in Moscow differs crucially from the rest of the country, because after Boris Yeltsin's assault on the federal parliament in 1993 self-management committees were prohibited in order to prevent any future uncontrolled public organising. The number of committees fell from 250 to 49 (see Shomina, 1999). Today none remain active in Moscow, which sets the institutional environment for community activism apart from that in most other Russian cities, as well as Vilnius, and leaves very little opportunity for residents to mobilise.

Nevertheless, grievances against unwanted construction in urban areas are considered among the most important reasons for Russian residents to mobilise (Kleman *et al.*, 2010, p. 181). Whereas in cities such as St. Petersburg and Astrakhan broad urban mobilisation campaigns have had considerable influence on construction plans and political decision making (Dixon, 2010; Kleman *et al.*, 2010), residential grievances in Moscow remain limited to local and short-term protests, despite a longer mobilisation phase in 2007-2008 (Rublev, 2014). The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a description of two recent cases of neighbourhood protest against unwanted constructions in Moscow.

In January 2013, flat owners in the eastern Moscow district of Novokosino organised a protest under the slogan "netstroike" (no to construction) at a construction site where a hotel for immigrant workers was being built. Residents living next to the site were taken by surprise when heavy machinery began to cut down trees and started digging without any preliminary information being provided by the local authorities. In the following days, the pioneers who were blocking the machines in the icy winter mud were joined by many more of their neighbours. Since Russian law requires permission from the authorities for public gatherings of more than one person expressing an opinion, residents took shifts in picketing alone along the construction site's fence. It took 50 days of picketing before the local authorities reacted. In the course of the first few days of the protest, more than 1,500 residents gathered around the construction site to discuss the issue, founding an initiative group to coordinate further actions, the first of which was to collect nearly 12,000 signatures in only four days for an appeal to the mayor of Moscow[3].

Moreover, individual members of the initiative took the construction company and the district municipality to court, accusing them of forging residents' signatures in

order to fraudulently comply with the city's regulations on public hearings, according to which local authorities need majority support for changes in the neighbourhood[4]. Construction was put on hold due to the litigation, but the residents' drive to work with each other and discuss the district's issues and problems continued. Because of the absence of local self-management structures, in contrast to the case of Vilnius it was only possible to meet informally. In order to circumvent once more the strict law on demonstrations, neighbours organised voluntary community work, free markets or meetings with city councillors in order to gather legally. In addition, the initiative's social network sites have several thousand subscriptions and constitute a virtual public space. This was particularly important for sustaining the activities, as the mainstream media is hesitant to report mobilisation by independent citizens due to its connections with local authorities[5].

Gradually, the initiative's attention and action has turned to other issues and problems in the district, drawing on its vast network of local supporters. The creation of a neighbourhood news channel on YouTube, which also covers news and events from neighbouring districts, is the latest step in sustaining action. In addition, this opening-up to broader everyday life issues in the district makes the initiative attractive to political actors, which has caused serious internal divisions in the group over whether to support candidates for the mayoral elections in September 2014. Dealing with state and party politics is generally regarded very negatively within the initiative.

In September 2012 a resident of the western district of Fili-Davydkovo accidentally discovered that the local authorities were trying to authorise a huge construction project for a six-lane relief road which would destroy district green zones and "pass right under our windows[6]", by staging public hearings which did not meet legal regulations. Personal ties between a few neighbours, the immediate setting up of a social network web site and the dissemination of self-printed leaflets allowed the information to spread to two other affected districts, mobilising a total of over 1,000 residents to attend the public hearings in two districts. Similarly to what occurred in Novokosino, the responsible municipal authorities tried to bypass citizens' opposition by pretending to hold further hearings, making temporary promises to build alternative routes and forging supportive signatures. This only triggered greater mobilisation of protest. Residents began to publish a district newspaper to publicise the details of the latest developments, and electronic social networking was expanded. During 2012 and 2013 the group organised four public meetings in the very centre of Moscow. Although the organisers were careful not to violate the official limit of 500 participants, the city administration refused to give permission again. In addition, and similarly to Novokosino, the mainstream media did not report on the protests and showed little interest in the initiative.

As further road construction plans were revealed, the residents in two more affected districts asked to join the initial protest group and participate in the already institutionalised communication and mobilisation measures. The initiative group thus installed contact persons and representatives in each district and made use of its vast network of supporters. They also began to search for compromises by offering alternative routes and construction plans which took residents' interests into account. However, to date this has not been successful and has been ignored by municipalities. Although city councillors acted as bridges between citizens and the authorities, city hall's position remains unchanged as it clings to its attitude of urban development carried out without the participation of citizens. In an attempt to bring the topic to the level of general city politics, the initiative group and its network of supporters put forward the original

initiator of the protest as a candidate in the city's mayoral elections in September 2014. Although he was unsuccessful, this enabled the issue of citizens' participation in urban governance being blocked to be disseminated beyond district boundaries.

Both cases illustrate how the initial purposes of the residential initiatives' mobilisations developed beyond district boundaries and across issues. One the one hand these initiatives aim to protect public space from privatisation and the city's urban development plans, while on the other hand they also create new public space by developing possibilities for a "politics of encounter" (Merrifield, 2011). Although they were not entirely successful, both mobilisations at least managed to delay construction and attract the municipality's attention. The most important spillover effect, however, was the politicisation of neighbours' grievances by building social networks between them.

5. Comparison and conclusion

Cities are the main stages of post-Soviet transformation. The rise of neoliberal, market oriented urban government in post-socialist cities has considerably changed the lives of citizens. Housing, although limited in size and poor in quality, as well as in severe shortage, was heavily subsidised and maintained by Soviet state institutions (Leonavičius and Žilys, 2009; Ripka, 2013). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, public housing stock was privatised and city authorities put housing property and its maintenance entirely into the hands of their citizens. This caused a profound shift in the nature of citizenship. Former passive recipients of housing and state-organised services became property owners who faced the state's demand that they care for themselves. The result was an activation of citizens' collective interests in protecting their quality of life from the profit-seeking activities of state and business actors, not only with regard to housing stock but also to related local public space. Although the initial Soviet conditions for activism by citizens regarding housing and public space were similarly narrow for all successor states, post-Soviet urban regimes developed differently. This paper has asked which paths shape the opportunities and constraints for the expression and inclusion of public interests into urban development today. The examples of Vilnius and Moscow have shown the different ways that urban governance regimes interact with citizens' initiatives and mobilisations. The fact that the EU has strongly promoted the development of community organisations as legitimate actors in urban public governance has overcome the reluctance of the local government in Vilnius to integrate these organisations into politics. Although formal regulations in Moscow require that the public interest is included in decision making, the municipality takes every step to exclude citizens from the process. Despite more unfavourable conditions, Russian home owners nonetheless mobilise by using more informal organisational means and tactics than their Lithuanian counterparts.

In both cities, people are demanding inclusion in public matters because post-Soviet city administrations seem to be more orientated towards the interests of business elites than those of their citizens. The existence of grievances about such a rapid change in the role of the state in urban life and with regard to the security of quality of life in both Vilnius and Moscow is a prime reason for citizens to mobilise against urban municipalities rather than against business elites. One tactic, deployed by activists in both cities despite the different institutional and political conditions they face, is to challenge state and business actors in court. Protesters strive to conform to the legal framework while trying to circumvent restrictions legally, but thereby at the same time they accept and alter the formal order of public behaviour. Still, the call for legal

measures to solve conflicts is prevalent in both urban contexts. Thus, litigation seems to be a general means to overcome the closedness of post-Soviet public governance. It is remarkable, however, that the lawsuits were privately funded in all cases, giving an example of how post-Soviet residents are willing to relate their private interests to public issues in order to protect the collective good.

Outside the courtroom, activists in Moscow and Vilnius face different conditions for mobilisation. In the Russian capital, local protest and community initiatives arise out of informal everyday encounters between residents who gather spontaneously, define problematic issues and decide how they can be strategically solved. Although protest is rarely successful, and the construction of unwanted buildings and highways is only stalled rather than stopped, the encounter between neighbours becomes politicised and their communication becomes consistent, thus contributing to positive community development and an improvement in the quality of life. In contrast, in the capital of Lithuania an institutionalised field of nongovernmental organisations is established, legitimised and even in some ways supported by the municipalities in dealing with local housing issues. Protest and mobilisation against the city's urban development measures therefore has an opportunity to become embedded in formal channels of communication between community organisations and the authorities in Vilnius. In contrast, local activists in Moscow face a lack of such institutionalisation and legitimacy *vis-à-vis* the state, which considerably constrains opportunities for them to influence urban development. Access to the media plays its own important role in strengthening opportunities for activists to publicise their issues and demands. In Moscow, the relative closedness of state structures is reflected in the indifference of mass media. In Vilnius, however, activists can count on media coverage and build their strategies around it.

By comparing urban grassroots mobilisation in two post-Soviet cities, this study contributes to closing a gap in the international research literature. On the one hand, urban studies has often neglected social movements and grassroots mobilisation, while on the other hand, Central and Eastern Europe has received little attention in the study of urban movements (see Jacobsson, 2015). This paper has shed light on different opportunities and constraints as well as on diverse strategies *vis-à-vis* the state in residents' struggles to define and control the transformation of housing and related public space in Vilnius and Moscow. We have shown how deep changes in the state's relation to issues of housing and public space, from general provision to neoliberal marketisation and privatisation, has provoked citizens to act collectively to hold the state nonetheless accountable for securing their quality of life and protecting it from business interests. Still, the concrete forms of the "politics of encounter" depend on domestic conditions in specific urban contexts. Similar historical impacts and institutional legacies nevertheless allow for different pathways for a return to the "civic significance" of post-Soviet public space. Even when there are severe constraints on mobilisation, as in Russia, the field of housing and related public space is one of the most vital spheres of civic activism in the region.

Notes

1. There are 1,147 housing self-management partnerships registered in Vilnius. However, only 16 per cent of them are active.

2. It is important to note that community organisations have formed an umbrella association. The Lithuanian Union of Local Community Organisations was established in 2010, and within one

year of existence had achieved significant results: a cooperation agreement was signed with the Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour, a national community development programme was approved, and a channel for communicating directly with the parliament (Seimas) and the government was established (see www.kbca.lt/pages/apie_kbca).

3. Personal communication with a member of the initiative, 6 October 2014.

4. Interview with a member of the initiative, 14 October 2014.

5. Interview with a member of the initiative, 14 October 2014.

6. Interview with the initiator of the protests, 14 October 2014.

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