https://doi.org/10.18778/1427-9657.09.12

EASTERN REVIEW 2020, T. 9

Elena V. Lebedeva
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3138-337X
Belarusian State University, Minsk, Belarus
Faculty of Journalism
Department of Communication Technologies and Public Relations
e-mail: Elena_lebedeva_bsu@tut.by

"The right to the post-Soviet city": Analysing communication gaps in the public space

Abstract. The paper investigates the *communication gaps in the public spaces* of post-Soviet cities (from the perspective of business-government-society interaction) through the spatial paradigm lens of urban sociology coupled with the perspective of communications studies. The author analyzes the particularities of the spatial organization of post-Soviet cities; describes the main features of their urban public space; and examines their impact on the patterns of social interactions. The paper presents the results of empirical research into the government-business relationship, using the case of Minsk, the capital city of Belarus. The author specifically focuses on the instances of communicative dysfunction (i.e. communication gaps) as the manifestation of social distance, exploring its nature from the perspective of the concept of "a Stranger". The findings point at a need to supplement the local communities with local public communication channels and content.

Keywords: spatial paradigm, post-Soviet urban space, "The Right to the City", communication gaps, Stranger concept, local communities, business-government-society interaction.

Introduction

There is a long history of the exploration of the complex relationship between government, business and society by philosophers, sociologists, political scientists. As far as the interaction between state and business is concerned, Adam Smith, Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen were among the first to apply a scholarly approach to studying such interaction. However, most of the available scholarship in this domain reflects upon the dominant role of the free market

and political elites (with less emphasis on civil society) in the Western context (e.g., USA, Western Europe) as exemplified, for example, by Charles Wright Mills, Giovanni Sartori, Joseph Schumpeter, and Roger-Gérard Schwartzenberg. Under communism, the state, to differing degrees, controlled all the major spheres of social interaction. Thus understandably, there could be no free academic discourse on that topic among local scholars, with the first meaningful studies appearing only in the 1990s and examined the emergent entrepreneurship. Sociologically speaking, the existing studies are often too empirically informed, lacking grounded conceptualization; and are mostly focused on the empirical measurement of specific parameters of the relationship between the state, business and society (such as, public awareness about government activities, entrepreneurial climate, and public participation in decision making). The research exploring the "spatial impact" on such relationships – that is, within the defined space-time boundaries – is still rather rare. From this angle, studying the city, as the classical case of government-business interaction, a place where it first emerged, further developed and acquired disparate, often controversial, manifestations, can be promising.

It is generally understood that social and human relations in big modern cities are less impersonal and rational. In a multicultural urban environment, the anonymity of city dwellers rises while their responsibility for personal actions declines. Some social groups lose their mutual connections which in turn distances them from one another and prompts the emergence of communication gaps. The established patterns of the relationship between local communities, business and authorities disintegrate, leading to the disputed decisions being made usually and exclusively for economic benefit. As a consequence, the urban infrastructure, landscape and the broader living environment deteriorate – offices are built instead of medical and social facilities; historical legacy is lost; green areas are turned into construction sites when city development strategies opt for profit generation without considering the possible negative impacts on social life. However, the most adverse effect is felt in the citizens' growing apathy and political disengagement, as they are neither able to participate in policymaking nor influence its outcomes.

An enquiry into the government-business relations of a post-Soviet city, which is the main objective of this research, involves the following tasks: firstly, to describe the nature of the post-Soviet urban space; secondly, disclose the problems arising in the interaction process between city authorities and entrepreneurs (using Minsk, the capital city of Belarus, as a case study); and, thirdly, offer possible solutions to address such problems.

Sociology of urban interactions: a theoretical framework of analysis

The end of the 20th century was marked by the growing significance of a so--called "spatial turn" (understood as the strengthening of the geospatial component) in the social sciences and humanities, e.g. philosophy, sociology, anthropology, literary studies, that has invoked a diverse range of space-related metaphors as a distinctive social construct, as an outcome of economic and cultural development. The French thinkers Henri Lefebvre (1974) and Pierre Bourdieu (1984), as well as the American postmodern geographer Edward Soja (2011) conceptualized the "spatial paradigm" which was further advanced by geographer and philosopher David Harvey (2003).

The essence of these contributions can be summarized as follows: the immediate space of human habitation is socially constructed and socially reproduced in the process of economic and cultural development. Inasmuch as the origins of most of the "spatial paradigms" lie in Marxism, a priority is given to the city's physical aspect of spatial organization as its core (i.e., the city's "means of production") that creates particular types of social practices that in their own specific way exploit and regenerate the city's physical "body". The changes in the "production mode", coupled with the ensuing transformation of the urban space, form new social practices and advance new forms of urban life. However, the reverse might also be true when "new" social activities transform "old" urban territories, and therefore it may be apt to compare this endless transformation process with the writing of the "spatial code" (Lefebvre, 1974).

E. Soja (2011) argues that the uneven "production" of urban space under capitalism inevitably brings about gaps between the economically advanced parts of the city with the less developed parts, since the capitalist production mode needs fewer territories which can supply labour and also serve as the market place for produced goods, as "commercial accumulation tended to generate uneven development among buyers and sellers" (Soja 2011: 176). Capitalism creates the "global spatial division of labour" that leads in turn to the rigid segregation of urban space (the working-class areas, commercial centres, retail zones, expensive residential quarters, slums) (Soja 2011: 157). In other words, the city space becomes another springboard for the continued class stratification and exploitation, while the struggle for the "right to own the city" often spills over to the street in the form of mass disorder and thus reveals the acute social, gender, racial injustice (the 1992 Los Angeles riots described by E. Soja in this context are a case in point). E. Soja further reasons that such an unevenness of economic development has a negative impact on urban space as "the evolution of urban forms (the internal spatial structure of the capitalist city) has followed the same periodizable rhythm of crisis-induced formation and reformation that has shaped the macro-geographical landscape of capital" (Soja, 2011: 173).

D. Harvey deepens Soja's spatial concept further by shifting its focus from large-scale transformations of the spatial landscape to more discrete localities and other stand-alone geographic objects by introducing into the urban sociology the term "place" as opposed to a higher-level "space". "Place" in this context is a cumulative effect of certain social, political and economic forces. Moreover, Harvey underlines that the rights and liberties of any individual are mediated by the patterns of the spatial organization of political authorities; that is, how the political power is represented in the city's urban space (Harvey, 1996).

The *public space concept* is essential for the study's aims.

> Rights have to be exercised somewhere, and sometimes that "where" has itself to be actively produced by taking, by wresting, some space and transforming both its meaning and its use – by producing a space in which rights can exist and be exercised (Mitchell, 2003: 129).

All the different approaches towards the public space can be broken into two groups. One group of scholars (J. Habermas, H. Arendt, H. Lefebvre among others) define the

> publicness as a meeting space for free citizens who – using a public communication media free from coercion – form opinions regarding common public issues beyond their private interest (Pachenkov, 2012).

The public space in this perception draws on the ancient Greek agora as a place for citizens' assembly or on the Roman concept of a forum for a place where negotiations occur and commercial deals are concluded. In this interpretation, the notion of the "public space" is politically loaded as an argument in the struggle for "right to the city" in the context of policy negotiation and decision making.

Another approach (Richard Sennett, Jane Jacobs, Lyn Lofland, Ray Oldenburg etc.) is based on the assumption that publicity is a form of sociability viewed as a capability to interact socially, while the public space is a place where multiple unplanned interactions happen, where strangers meet forming thereby new patterns of social interaction (Sennett, 2002). These are the spaces playing the role of the "social leveller" – "a place that is a leveller is, by its nature, an inclusive place, it is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion" (Oldenburg, 1999: 24); or, additionally, serving as a stage to present one's self in everyday life (Goffman, 1959). Such places also can take the form of an "intermediate" (urban squares, streets, pavements, alleys, parks) or the "third" space (cafes, pubs, clubs).

However, the actual form of the space is less essential when compared with the importance of its contents and of the events that are unfolding or can unfold there. According to the American sociologist Sharon Zukin, the public space – thanks to its free access for all – allows undertaking one's activity and setting the

rules to direct it (Zukin, 1995: 32–38). A fundamentally important motivation to "visit" a public space cannot be reduced to personal material gratification or public duty. The goal of the urban public space fulfilling the function of an "anchor" of the public life is rather through hosting citizens' informal and voluntary communication, "the core settings of informal public life" (Oldenburg, 1999: 16), as well as to make communication possible between disparate individuals and groups as a source of a socially positive cosmopolitanism (Lofland, 1998: 214). To serve this function, such a space should contain reasons for its visitors to start communication in an easy and convenient way.

This description relates to the conventional understanding of the public space, which is rare for a modern city. Commentators agree that the urban public space is now in crisis due to expanded privatization and commoditization (Zukin, 1995: 35–37), combined with growing anti-urbanism and the increasing fear of the Stranger. This is further exacerbated by the information technology revolution that replaced the "space of places" with the "space of flows". As a result, the urban sociology has introduced such new notions as the "pseudo" public spaces and "non-places". These spaces facilitate the emergence of "social civility" that hampers the culture of communication and interaction among citizens (Sennett, 2002: 299). Lyn Lofland argues that the very urban architecture creates the spaces that control the public sphere, making it less public, homogeneous, "sterile" and predictable (Lofland, 1998: 200). Such a control can be exercised either directly, with the help of video surveillance, or symbolically via architectural design. These "non-places" may include, on the one side, large unwelcoming and "supercilious" central squares filled with cars but void of people, "they discourage the thought of "settling in", making colonization or domestication of the space all but impossible" (Bauman, 2000: 102); on the other side, there are spaces of consumption occupied by retail and entertainment facilities that create an illusion of community that does not require genuine communication and interaction.

The post-Soviet urban space can also be described in the above terms. The recent process of profound political and economic changes has transformed the urban landscape beyond recognition. Harvey calls such a transformation a "spatial crisis" when the legacy landscape (i.e., that created under socialism) becomes a barrier for further development (under capitalism). In order to overcome this barrier, "old places… have to be devaluated, destroyed and redeveloped while new places are created" (Harvey, 1996: 296); this is despite the existing resistance for change and an intention to continue reproducing the "old" social practices. Understood as such, many post-Soviet cities are still "alive". To check our hypothesis suggesting that the actual condition of the city's public space determines the character of social interactions, we will first look inside the Soviet public space. In this light, we intend to study the interaction of authorities with businesses in a post-Soviet context by applying the key principles of the spatial paradigm as understood in urban sociology.

The rational principles of the centralized economic planning under communism did significantly influence the spatial organization of Soviet cities.

> Older cities whose urban landscape was formed well before the 20th century were rather an exception; however, their subsequent emerging residential areas, as well as the new towns that were founded during the Soviet time, became a vivid example of the application of the rational planning' principles (Cheshkova, 2000: 16).

These principles were implemented in real life and formed the actual urban landscape of a Soviet city, thus creating also a *general model of the typical Soviet city*. Its main features were: equal and even distribution of public consumption facilities within the urban space; the maximal reduction of travel time from home to work and the rationalization of transportation routes; and the rigid zoning of the use of territory. These rational principles of urban planning were not entirely novel and were already described in the work of western city planners (e.g., Christaller's net). Yet whereas, in the 1960s, such a positivistic approach was replaced in the West with more humanistic and anthropocentric principles of urban planning, in the USSR this approach prevailed for much longer. "According to the Soviet planning ideology, social differentiation could not happen due to the universality of spatial patterns" (Cheshkova, 2000: 19). Those fairly insignificant social, spatial and cultural differences that still existed were gradually eliminated. The Soviet city did not know such urban phenomena as "elite" and "ethnic ghetto" areas, which were typical for the West. The only factor of differentiation at that time was a difference in the status of industrial production. Despite some exceptions – such as the access of the high-ranking status groups to certain parts of urban space – the ideology of social equality and the priority of production interest clearly prevailed, creating thereby its image and the functional use of urban space.

It should be noted that the term "public space" was not in official use in Soviet urban planning, for the entire territory of the city was considered public anyway, public by default; that is, it belonged to all dwellers in equal measure. Instead, Soviet architects used such notions as the "vacant" and "open" space for areas free of any buildings. In some cases, the term "public space" was used with the intention to specifically underline the importance of collectivism in the Soviet city's life. "Public spaces were divided in three groups: a system of social/public centres; a street system; and a green system" (Engel, 2007: 287). Yet, as mentioned above, it wasn't the form of the public space that was important but its internal events and their purpose that mattered most. This public space was strictly subordinated, first and foremost, to the communist political and ideological aims that dominated the planning and design process manifested in the construction of large and monumental urban squares, parks and avenues; which were in turn filled in with numerous political symbols.

As a rule, the classic public space of the Soviet city took the physical form of wide avenues and grand squares intended "to serve as a visual symbol of the

power of the Communist Party" (Engel, 2007: 288): "huge boulevards for tanks, windswept squares looked down on by scowling statues, and scrubby open space between concrete slabs – alienating, inhumane, authoritarian" (Hatherley, 2016). The role of the Soviet public space was to demonstrate the power of the state and "substitute the chaos of urban life with a logical organization of space and human activities, one fitting the particular mould of ideological reasoning" (Engel, 2007: 289). The formal meaning of the "public" did not pertain to the real opportunity of citizens actually using these public spaces. It simply meant a place designated by authorities for certain collective action. Even though Soviet urban planning included a wide range of options for recreation and sports – for example, parks, skating rinks, other sports facilities – their existence was seen as part of the socialist lifestyle to show that the state takes care of its citizens, not as a space to encourage citizens' voluntary local civic activism and self-governance so as to improve their neighbourhood and exercise their city rights.

On the contrary, the emergence of the pseudo-public spaces in Soviet cities was a manifestation of "the transparent desire of the government to control people's lives and activities at all times and all places" (Engel, 2007: 289). As a consequence, the manufactured and controlled public space could not function as a "social melting pot" to enable the free and voluntary interaction of city residents among themselves; rather than occurring in the city's centre, this function was by necessity moved elsewhere, with residential areas on the city outskirts becoming an "informal public space".

> As people's gatherings outside government control in the centrally located open areas wasn't sanctioned by authorities, citizen's everyday encounters took place in the private sphere: such as kitchens, garages, backyards, or in empty, uninhabited places or abandoned territories; forming there an alternative type of public life in opposition to that imposed by the state (Zhelnina, 2014: 269).

That led to the substantially reduced ability of city dwellers to organize themselves locally within a Soviet public space. They voluntarily withdrew from deciding how to improve their living environment, leaving it to the city government.

This legacy still exists, revealed by the fact that residents of post-Soviet urban areas have a very limited desire to improve the territory adjacent to their private living places (stairs, entrances, children's playgrounds, courtyards). According to a sociological poll conducted in 2014 in Minsk, less than 10% of its residents participated in some form of collective action aimed at improving the city's ecology (e.g., clean-ups, tree planting, or filing complaints about environmental legislation breaches) (Titarenko, 2015: 112). The number of environmental activists is estimated to be at a level of 7–8%, which can lead to the conclusion that the overwhelming majority of city dwellers believe that city improvement is the government's obligation (just as housing and communal services are) while

their personal role in it is minimal and can well be represented by a handful of urban activists. This is typical for other post-Soviet countries (Russia, Ukraine) as well.

An enquiry into the communication gaps in the post-Soviet public space, which is the main objective of this paper, involves the following tasks: firstly, to describe the nature of the post-Soviet urban space. Secondly, disclose the problems arising in the process of interaction between city authorities and entrepreneurs. And, thirdly, outline possible ways of developing the communication sphere of post-Soviet cities. Minsk, the capital city of the Republic of Belarus, was chosen as a case study to collect empirical data. It was viewed as the best exemplification of a classic Soviet city that was created almost from scratch after 1945; as a "mythical--symbolic Sun City, i.e. an ideal city of the Soviet dream" (Titarenko, 2009: 33).

The working hypothesis that was put forward argues that the social (public) urban space is the primary element that determines the ways people are becoming active in civic terms, their lifestyle and worldview. Urban space eventually defines the dominant model of social interaction in general and between business and the state in particular. In 2015, a sociological study into the phenomenon of communication gaps in a post-Soviet urban space was undertaken in Minsk to answer the following research questions:

- What are the dominant features of the urban public space in a post-Soviet city?
- What is the specificity of social interaction in such a city?
- How could the interaction between business and government be described in a post-Soviet urban space (typical patterns, actors, external circumstances)?
- What are the barriers hampering government-business communication, and how could such barriers be removed?

The study is based on the results of the qualitative and quantitative research undertaken in Minsk through December 2015–February 2016. The research was done conducting nine interviews with experts (the first phase), and by polling 502 students (the second phase). The sample size for expert interviews was established by using a "snowball" method when respondents could not provide new unique information which meant that the answers were adequately and fully describing the typical status of the sought phenomena. Such a method of determining the sample size is considered as one of the most effective (Shtejnberg, 2009). The second phase dealt with the identification of the most typical aspects of the urban public space pertinent to a post-Soviet city. University students studying in Minsk served as the survey respondent. The rationale behind this choice was as follows. Firstly, university students have enough time to organize their leisure and entertainment activities in an urban space since only 31.1% of all the polled were employed on a regular basis, while 82.6% spent their leisure time outside families. In addition, young students are actively engaged in establishing their networks and feel a need to expand them by adding new contacts. That can be done in urban

public spaces as they are "universal special melting pots". Also, the scarcity of financial resources at students' disposal encourages them to make their leisure more diverse, going beyond the time spent in cafes and restaurants traditional for older population groups. As many as 502 students, representing Minsk's five major universities, were polled in groups at the place of their study. The Belarusian State University accounted for 45.4% of all surveyed students, the Belarusian State Pedagogical University – 19.9%, the Belarusian National Technical University – 16.1%, the Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics – 10.6%, and the Belarusian State University of Economics – 8%. The distribution of the polled students by gender (the ratio between female and male students was 57.7% and 42.3% respectively) and universities matched the actual broader statistics and thus made the sample sufficiently representative. The survey contained, *inter alia*, the questions asking about specific parts of the urban space where students spend their free time; how they interact within this space, and what was their attitude towards the city's public space (for example, whether they felt responsible for the quality of urban space, intended to transform it and influence a decision making process).

Below, we present and discuss the survey results (respondents' original answers obtained during expert interviews are in italics).

The next chapter explores in more detail how this context manifests itself in the case of the interaction between authorities and businesses.

Communication gaps: real threats or mythical fears?

Viewed from the sociology perspective, the notion "social interaction" implies two distinct types of structures: internal and external interactions. The former are pertinent to those well-defined groups whose members are mutually intertwined to signify unity by the virtue of being part of the group. The latter are the interactions that extend beyond the group to connect with other individuals and groups (Krasnopolskaya, Solodova, 2012: 25). The research results demonstrate that the relationship between business and city authorities is defined by external interactions largely in the form of service provision (e.g. getting permits for certain activity). Typically, such interactions are "forced"; that is, it is a reluctant response to a conflict since "business is always dependent upon government and communicate with it if and only it can bring about profit; entrepreneurs approach the government to lobby their private interests". The commercial sector interacts with authorities in a highly depersonalised manner by sending formal letters via postal mail to a specific government official ("the major communication channel and carrier for us are the postal mail letters"). Approaching the city government through e-mail, phone call or a personal appointment is practised as well but it

is seen rather as a supportive measure meant to explain the reason of addressing authorities – "we are going to send you a letter, please give us an advice how to do it better" or "we have sent you a letter, please check it in and read it". The traditional paper-based interaction is popular because, as entrepreneurs explain, it is the only communication channel that guarantees feedback ("no paper – no request from supervisors; no request – no obligation to do anything"; "sending an official inquiry guarantees receiving a response"). While internal interactions are usually simple and clear within one group, external communications are far more fragmented and intermitted. However, with more experience in external interactions members of the group are able to discover unwritten rules and procedures enabling such interactions. On the contrary, an "unprepared" communication diminishes its effectiveness ("approaching authorities without being prepared may result in unnecessary, futile activity"). For example, an official letter addressing city authorities should be written according to certain specific rules: firstly, it should raise a clearly formulated problem falling under the addressee's mandate ("if the letter does not contain a request, then the response will be useless"; "no government official would do anything unless it is part of their official duty"); secondly, it must be succinct but substantive; thirdly, it should not be "typical" since a typically written letter would prompt a similarly typical reply ("if rejection is possible on the purely formal grounds then it is very likely the answer will contain a rejection as no one will go any deeper to look into details"). As many of the surveyed respondents attest, the acquisition of knowledge in external interactions is always a very personal "hit and miss" experience – "once you know the rules, all goes smoothly; if not, then the 'football' game starts when your letter is endlessly moved back and forth from one office to another". The dominance of external, short--term and fragmented interactions alienates individuals from the events of public life and further increases the social distance to them. The attitude towards other individuals becomes increasingly depersonalised despite the ongoing interaction with many other individuals and their groups. Such a behaviour influences the way the relationship with city authorities is perceived within the business community – "city administrators do not have time to deal thoroughly with the issues raised by each individual".

Let's put this into the context of the Stranger notion, as proposed by Georg Simmel (1976). The classic interpretation views the Stranger as a person who resides in the city's certain territory but is not integrated into its social life; someone who does not resemble the majority of other residents, who in turn don't accept that person as theirs. Physically, the Stranger interacts with others but the social and symbolic distance with them remains significant. Strangers do not consider themselves members of the urban community, their interests do not intersect with the interest of the city they live in, they lack the feeling of being included in the urban social space.

In different contexts, any of the interacting group – business, authority or urban dwellers – could become the Stranger. When, for example, the Stranger

is the city government, its representatives are perceived by local businesses as "temporary bureaucrats" who just "hold office" ("just performing the assigned duties, without a mission to represent the city's soul and make the city better in earnest"). According to Simmel, the emergent, and often irrational, feeling of fear typically accompanies the interaction with the Stranger. The fear of being accused of corruption prevents city officials from establishing closer contacts with the business community ("The invitation to visit our enterprise and get familiar with our products is more often than not considered as an attempt to bribe them"). On the other hand, when entrepreneurs compete for the market with city-owned companies, urban authorities are viewed as a threat to local businesses ("All city officials always, almost maniacally, protect the state-run business"). This feeling of fear is part of any communication with the Stranger regardless of whether or not the threat is real or just perceived.

The main features of the Stranger emerging in the process of government--business interaction are as follows. Firstly, there is a territory-free mobility, a lack of dependence on a particular area. In the past, the typical Stranger was someone who did not belong to a territory-based group (for G. Simmel, these were traders and the Jewish residents who could not own the land). However, for the modern Stranger, the impossibility to own the urban land is less important than the inability to "possess" a private part of a social environment. Mobility in this context takes the shape of a freedom to change the distance towards any social subject in the social space. The resulting outcome of the authorities playing the Stranger's role vis-à-vis entrepreneurs is that the latter are excluded from discussing with them vital business-related policies ("city officials who prepared a policy document did not even want to listen to us, maintaining a »we know better« position while lacking a deeper understanding of what they are trying to regulate and what will be the effects of that").

Secondly, this is a new objectivity that emerges as a result of the detachment of the Stranger from the dominant group and the large social gap between them. The Stranger by default cannot belong to any grouping and therefore does not share its unique history, experience and interaction modes; there is no feeling of solidarity and community that have created the group over time. The Stranger is not "embedded" in intra-group relations and has weak ties with the group members' interests. There is no need to follow the group's internal obligations and rules that connect the group members among themselves. That leads the Stranger to observe intra-group relations from the outside in an objective manner and has a position to regulate such relations by, for example, settling internal conflicts. In the context of our case, the city government and a local business community distance themselves from one another when the latter employs the strategy of "ignoring" the former ("entrepreneurs do not know how to communicate to the authorities their problems… it is easier to close the business down, sell it and change the country of residence"), whereas city officials avoid communicating

with a business that attempts lobbying the decision-taking process ("we met, talked but that was a formality with zero effect on the actual state of play... they might seem to be prepared to listen but it does not mean hearing and doing something").

Thirdly, the Stranger experiences the imbalance between the physical and psychological closeness. On one side, there is such a closeness in sharing with other groups the common urban territory. Accordingly, the group members are capable of developing a solidarity sentiment and feeling a certain psychological closeness and kinship with the Stranger ("we have common goals – profit, taxes, new jobs"). However, on the other side, that does not happen in real life as the Stranger is someone who physically should be kept at a distance, should not interfere ("*Why is this regulation needed in the first place?*"). That confuses group members and they start artificially curtailing their interaction with the Stranger who becomes an abstract figure, a symbol; function as opposed to the solidarity-based relations within the group ("responds only when asked a question", "provides a formal response to a request within the established timeframe", "acts according to a certain strategy", etc.). When the group members interact with the Stranger, the latter's activities are less clear for them than those of other people and not tied to specific issues and practical competencies ("simply moving papers on the desk"). Thus even when the group boundaries are crossed, the Stranger keeps the distance from the group, avoiding in-group solidarity ("does not see and hear and does not want to see and to hear").

Lyn Lofland distinguishes between the "formal" and "real" types of Strangers (Lofland, 1985). The formal Stranger is the one who is culturally and value-wise close but not personally acquainted. The real Strangers are those who belong to an unknown or even hostile culture ("people who came from another world"). A degree of fear (nervousness) when in contact with the "formal Stranger" is lower, with the social distance reducing as the acquaintance deepens; while the "real Strangers" have little chance to get integrated into the city's social life. Viewed through the lens of a government-business relationship, we could assume that it is the "formal" type of Stranger that is meant (as communication intensifies, the social distance gets reduced).

The concept of social distance is not measured in spatial (territorial) terms; it is rather as a reflection of the Stranger's dual nature that is manifested either in the closeness or remoteness from the group. The distance is short because the Stranger interacts with more members of the group (entrepreneurs tend to approach city authorities often). Yet this distance is also large as the Stranger – as an external observer – shapes the interaction modality upon demand, making it context-dependent, whereas the group members interact following mutual expectations cemented by kinship relations, community responsibility and joint activities. External interactions and communication with the Stranger do not reduce the social distance between them (due to the Stranger's duality and the ability to be both close and far away at the same time, as noted by Simmel). This

situation can be defined as a "*communication gap*". In other words, it is "the lack of insufficient understanding between communicators, representing different cultures, manifested in the language and worldview differences" (Zhukova, 2013: 168). Until now, the term "communication gap" has been used to describe inter-cultural communications and denote communicative dysfunction as revealed in the course of inter-ethnic interaction. However, our study provides evidence of communication gaps within the same ethnicity and residents of the same city. Employing Harvey's interpretation of the spatial paradigm, we note that the urban landscape dating back to a certain historical past can become a barrier for the further transformation of the established social interaction patterns (for example, in the case of political regime change). Despite the significant political and economic changes that occurred in Minsk in the wake of the fall of the Soviet system, the external representation of the urban environment (architecture, the location of the mayor's office and district authorities) has remained unchanged, which might explain the difference between the worldviews of the "new" business community and the "old" city bureaucracy.

Nonetheless, there are mechanisms to overcome the communication gaps between citizens, businesses and city authorities. We believe that it can be done by, firstly, *place-making and tactical urbanism* and, secondly, by *event organization*. Both of these mechanisms involve the active participation of *local communities*. We will now look at these opportunities in greater detail.

The alleviation of residents from local urban communities

A city is a place where complex communications connect various individuals and groups in real-time and ensure the rapid dissemination of new ideas and practices (Zukerman, 2013). Olga Chernyavskaya (2015) identifies several conditions that help integrate people into their city's communication space and thus close communication gaps in the urban social space; there should be: (a) a large number and diversity of local communities that are capable of transforming the urban space to fit their interests, and (b) a large number of various venues that activate social contacts in local communities. The key here is the extent to which an urban space is suitable for channelling communication, for organizing events that activate communication inside the urban environment. In other words, to develop a sense of public awareness of being an integral part of the urban community. Robert E. Park, Ernest Burgess and Louis Wirth (Chicago School of Sociology) view local communities as an environmental entity uniting people (environmental agents) living in a certain area, which determines the most important aspects of their public life (e.g., the pattern of settling within the city). According to Park, every community is, to a certain degree, an independent cultural entity with

their own standards, notions of good and bad, of acceptable behaviour and what does or does not deserve respect (Park, 1952). Alternatively, the anthropological tradition defines an urban community through the uniqueness of lifestyle, a special cultural environment and the established practices that individuals follow in a particular urban community which may differ from everyday practices within a larger majority. The identities of such communities are based on the emotional connection between its members (affinity with fellow members and hostility towards outsiders). Its main features look as follows (arrived at by combining the methodological findings of anthropologists and sociological theorists, e.g. within the research area of *community studies*):

- an urban community should be locally embedded where its members consider one another "theirs";
- local communities are built and united on the basis of common interests, values, and lifestyles – common memories from the past, common behavioural patterns of the present, common plans for the future;
- local communities are capable of self-organizing and generating autonomous power structures by putting forward local leaders;
- local communities depend on the emotional connection between their members, which can last for a long time through many generations;
- local communities are capable of taking responsibility for actions in the areas of their interest.

In the context of this study, we believe that the revealed communication gaps can be closed only locally at the community level. Urban communities serve both as a conduit and a catalyst of such communication.

In traditional (primarily Western) urban sociology, any population living in a given area is assigned, if potentially, the status of a local community (with the ability to organize itself, common interests and responsibilities, etc.). There is no question of whether or not such a community exists – it certainly does – and is regarded as the necessary condition for people living in any neighbourhood. However, when it comes to the post-Soviet cities, that approach does not seem to apply, for the institution of local communities was considerably weakened in the Soviet time. The following factors directly or indirectly contributed to the process: assigning rather than electing municipal officials from the "above" (moreover, a hired head of a municipality had to be an outsider with no social relations with residents); the lack of power of local councils (their functions primarily concerned registering births, deaths, marriages and issuing various certificates); work-related social links (people made friends in the workplace rather than in their neighbourhood); the active organization of people's leisure (Soviet people did not need to act in order to organize their free time, because this was the responsibility of trade unions); and finally, the centralized provision of housing (which prevented intergenerational relations in the neighbourhood). All that gradually resulted in voluntary neighbourhood relationships becoming

virtually non-existent or non-consequential (city residents tended not to know their next-door neighbours). If we also bear in mind the distinct features of the Soviet public space we discussed earlier, it becomes clear why the culture of local communities is still visibly lacking in many post-Soviet cities. This Soviet legacy is believed to be the main reason for the social passivity of many urban residents living in post-Soviet cities. This is further complicated by the difficulty experienced in interpersonal social interactions; which is most vividly manifested in the perceived presence of "strangers" and communication gaps. A survey among university students conducted in January–February 2016 in Minsk demonstrates that only half of the respondents (52.4%) felt any responsibility for how their city (including their neighbourhood) looked (Table 1).

Table 1. The involvement of urban residents in local affairs (based on polling University students, %)

Level of involvement	Totally Agree	Partially Agree	Partially Disagree	Totally Disagree	Not Sure
I feel responsible for the look and attractiveness of the city of Minsk (including my neighbourhood)	12.2	40.2	21.6	8.4	17.6
I could act as the organizer of a city event (including in my own neighbourhood) if I had the chance.	7.0	17.8	25.5	36.9	12.8
I can influence decision-making in regards to changing the city of Minsk as a whole and my neighbourhood in particular.	2.2	6.8	26.2	50.0	14.8
I can transform (change. clean and decorate) my city (my neighbourhood) to my liking	5.2	15.4	26.4	38.8	1.,2

Sources: Lebedeva, 2017: 88.

Even fewer people (24.8%) felt that they could act as an organizer of any city event, including in their own neighbourhood. And still fewer respondents (20.6%) accepted the possibility of being able to transform (change, clean and decorate) the city to their liking, or in the words of David Harvey, actively exercise their right to the city. Against this background, just 9% of young people believed that they could influence decision-making regarding changing the city either as a whole or just their neighbourhood. It must be mentioned that the respondents were born around 1994–1995, i.e. they did not have experience living in a Soviet city, but nonetheless, they already display the traits of alienation from the urban public space.

Those people interviewed, in their turn, acknowledge the existence of an alleviation challenge. They stressed the need to create and develop their communities to bridge the existing communication gaps between business and government by asserting that:

- "Business and government need a common goal; they need to sit down at the negotiation table and look at each other as partners";
- "Mutual interest areas should be found to reach the right decisions and make things work";
- "Contact should be established when there are no problems. When an official knows about your company, what you are and what you do, he will be more willing to help you".

Recognizing the importance of a common goal, which is necessary for the members of any community, makes it possible to overcome the passivity demonstrated by entrepreneurs ("I pay taxes"; "I do not owe the government anything, so it must please me"), and the unwillingness of businessmen to get involved in legislation ("Why waste my time; it is futile"). Meanwhile, creating various communities does not only give extra weight to business, but also makes communication safer. It lowers the level of fear that inevitably accompanies any interaction with "strangers" and increases the level of trust between business and government. As a result, the social distance between the two communication partners becomes shorter.

To become a functioning community, its members have to have certain qualities: 1) initiative; 2) an ability to set goals and achieve them both as a team and individually; 3) a feeling of owning the personal and common causes and bearing responsibility for them; 4) the willingness to show solidarity and so on. There need to be certain conditions in place to make it possible for collective subjects to exercise their common will. Ray Oldenburg (Oldenburg, 2014) stresses, for example, the importance of the so-called "third places", i.e. informal public gathering places making a community a living public space. Cafes, bars, small shops, pharmacies, post offices, libraries and even schools can serve as these third places. If necessary (in special circumstances) such physical places or "gathering points" for local communities are being supplemented/replaced by virtual spaces – groups in social networks, chats and channels in messaging applications, etc. In turn, regular events at such "gathering points" help communities to maintain stability. In fact, this is a kind of "roll call" for members of a particular group – "we are still together, we have the same views, we are ready to continue to support each other".

Discussion

The results of this survey indicate that the development of local communities in post-Soviet cities can be a useful mechanism in bridging communication gaps in society. However, further studies are needed to better understand the barriers

hampering government-business-society communication in the post-Soviet urban space and mechanisms to overcome them. At the moment, we can state that our underlying hypothesis that the internal conditions of the urban public space determine the character of social interactions within it (including those between government and business) has been only partly confirmed. Indeed, while the prevailing conditions have an important role to play, the Soviet legacy still dominates at this particular time juncture the patterns and level of civic activism, on the one hand, and the relationship between city authorities and business, on the other.

We have found evidence suggesting that the dominance of social interactions in influencing business-government relations manifested, for example, in the presence of "strangers" and communication gaps. Nevertheless, the question as to whether such gaps are caused by the spatial organization of a city's life – which in turn fixes these gaps in the physical built-in environment – remains unclear. The following question demands further research: is it enough to change the political regime in order to transform the city's life in the direction of greater and more responsible civic activism and stronger and inclusive urban communities or will the "old legacy" space resist this transformation, keeping the rudiments of the regime and passing them on from generation to generation?

The events that took place in Minsk after August 2020 emphasized the importance of having effective mechanisms to bridge communication gaps between government, business and society. Observing the practices of spontaneous social activity helps to identify the most popular citizen's "self--advocacy" mechanisms. This is *place-making* (the organization of an informal memorial at the site of the first person killed as a result of mass actions, the installation of flags with alternative state symbols, the application of graffiti etc.), and the *organizing of events* (protest marches, performances by musicians, athletes and theatre artists) which take place right on city streets and in residential yards). It seems as if the previously disunited citizens have begun to perceive themselves as *members of the same community* and are trying to defend their "Right to the City".

As a consequence, the character of social interactions in the post-Soviet city began to change rapidly. Today we are seeing a departure from the stereotypical ideas about the life of a post-Soviet city (residents' reluctant involvement to improve the city they live in; weak internal solidarity leading to socially weak local communities that do not adequately participate in both city life and decision-making that concerns the transformation of the surrounding urban space; a perception of the authorities as the ultimate power able to tackle any problems or eliminate the "undesirable" etc.).

Further deeper comparative analyses of the role of local communities on social relations in the Western and post-Soviet cities would provide better answers to these and other debating points, taking into account specific political conditions and the governing business-government relations of the cities compared.

Conclusion

Designing this study, we asked a number of research questions, the key one of which was associated with the emergence and overcoming of communication gaps in cities. However, we did not attempt to find complete answers as to what all the main patterns and character of social interactions in a post-Soviet urban space are. One of the study's limitations was the predominant focus on university students chosen as the survey's respondent in one city – Minsk, the capital of Belarus, with almost two million inhabitants (although we interviewed experts too, although to a less extent). The survey's sample thus left out other important categories of urban residents whose interaction patterns might substantially differ, just as adding other cities, of smaller size for example, to the survey might produce results which differ somewhat to those we have received by studying the Belarusian capital city. Yet we believe that the research results provide valuable answers to the questions asked in a more general sense, being indicative of those typical challenges that many in post-Soviet cities have to overcome in adjusting to market conditions.

That said, the evidence is quite convincing; allowing us to generalize that, for instance, establishing a two-way government-business dialogue is a daunting task in a former Soviet urban space. Our analysis of the spatial organization of the post--Soviet urban space illustrates the persistence of the so-called general model of a Soviet city. The way a public space looks and functions determines the character of the urban social interaction that takes place within it. It reveals a spatial equality in the distribution of consumer facilities; rationalized traffic routes, with the main aim to cut down the amount of time needed to get home from work; a strict zoning policy. According to this model, the public urban space is primarily used to perform political and ideological functions. It reflected the communist ideas and values, either serving as a "stage" for government-sponsored collective action such as parades, political rallies, etc., or as an integral element of the Soviet way of life, emphasizing the state's patronage of its citizens (e.g., recreation parks and sports grounds). Neither in the first case, nor in the second one, did it serve as a venue for civic activism or provide opportunities for free self-expression. Being used for informal and voluntary interaction was never implied. As a result, the Soviet public space decreased the urban residents' ability to organize themselves at the local level. People voluntarily delegated their right to address their local needs to authorities. Many cities of the former Soviet Union still show the remnants of this model. Minsk has been arguably one of the most vivid examples of this. These factors exert a significant influence on the appearance of a communication gap in post-Soviet cities.

Moreover, the urban landscape itself could be a source of communication gaps. As a legacy of the historical past, this landscape has become a barrier to

transforming urban social interactions. Bridging such communication gaps would include the activation of various local communities that serve as a link between business and local authorities. We also would like to highlight a need to fill in the post-Soviet urban space with new, digitally enabled, public communication channels and renewed content reflecting upon essential local needs, including those related to government-business interaction. Making such communication public would help engage civil society as a valuable "third actor" intermediary and unite the often divergent intentions of urban authorities and business for greater synergy. That could manifest itself, for example, in the process of integrating business sector resources and the local government's economic planning. It could potentially result in the form of mutually beneficial public-private partnerships in order to demonstrate good implementation practices. The eventual outcome would help transform the urban landscape into a social, public communication-based, space and accommodate into it the alienated "strangers" via public discourses by providing them with local media communication channels to connect with other groups and communities. The sustainable development of a city is possible only on the platform of the common interests of all subjects of urban communication – business, city authorities and local communities. In the event of a "loss" of one of them (the emergence of communication gaps), the synergetic effect will be absent, which will require a significant increase in the efforts and resources spent on the development of the city. Inter-sectoral communication technologies play a decisive role in bridging communication gaps, enabling citizens to exercise their "Right to the City".

References

Arendt, H. 2004. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Revised ed. New York: Schocken.

Bauman, Z. 2000. *Liquid Modernity.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Trans. R. Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press.

Chernyavskaya, O.S. 2015. *Gorod kak kommunikativnoe prostranstvo* [The city as communication space], https://www.hse.ru/pubs/share/direct/document/64374784 (accessed 21.01.2016).

Cheshkova, A.F. 2000. Metodologicheskie podhody k izucheniyu prostranstvennoj segregacii [Methodological approaches to studying spatial segregation]. In: V.V. Vagin (ed.). *Rossijskoe gorodskoe prostranstvo: popytka osmysleniya*. Moscow: MONF.

Engel, B. 2007. Public space in the "blue cities" of Russia. In: K. Stanilov (ed.). *The Post-Socialist City. Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism*, pp. 285–300.

Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation Self in Everyday Life*. New York: An Anchor Book.

Harvey, D. 1996. *Justice, Nature & The Geography of Difference*. New York: Blackwell Publishing.

Harvey, D. 2003. The right to the city. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27(4), pp. 939–941.

Hatherley, O. 2016. Soviet squares: how public space is disappearing in post-communist cities. *The Guardian.* http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/21/soviet-squares-public-space-post-communist-cities?CMP=share_btn_tw (accessed 28.05.2016).

Jacobs, J. 1993. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.

Krasnopolskaya, I.I., Solodova G.S. 2012. Vospriyatie chuzhaka gruppoj v sociologii G. Zimmelya [Perception of the stranger by a group in sociology of Simmel]. *Sociologicheskij zhurnal* 4, pp. 24–35.

Lebedeva, E.V. 2017. Public space in post-soviet cities: sociability and «crisis of publicity». *The Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology* XX/1(98), pp. 74–92.

Lefebvre, H. 1974. *La production de l'espace*. [The Production of Space]. Paris: Anthropos. Translation and Précis (in French).

Lofland, L. 1985. *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space*. Paperback. Waveland Pr. Inc.

Lofland, L. 1998. *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Territory (Communication and Social Order)*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Mills, C.W. 1956. *The Power Elite*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mitchell, D. 2003. *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. New York, London: Guilford Press.

North, D.C. 1955. Location Theory and Regional Economic Growth. *Journal of Political Economy* 63(3), pp. 243–258.

Oldenburg, R. 1999. *The Great Good Place. Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. New York: Marlowe & Company.

Pachenkov, O. 2012. Publichnoe prostranstvo goroda pered licom vyzovov sovremennosti: mobilnosti "zlou potreblenie publichnostyu" [The urban public space in the face of modern challenges: mobility and 'the abuse of personal publicity"]. *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 117, http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/2638#sthash.ixC7rkWP.dpuf (accessed 21.01.2016).

Park, R.E. 1952. *Human Communities: the City and Human Ecology Glencoe*, Ill: The Free Press.

Park, R., Burgess, E., McKenzie, R. 1984. *The City.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Radaev, V.V. 1998. *Formirovanie novyh rossijskih rynkov: tranzakcionnye izderzhki, formy kontrolya I delovayaehtika* [Creating new Russian markets: transaction costs, regulation and business ethics]. Moscow: Centr politicheskih tekhnologij.

Sartori, G. 1987. *The Theory of Democracy Revisited. Part One: The Contemporary Debate*. Vol. 1. Chatham House Publishers, New Jersey.

Schumpeter J.A. 1991. *The economics and sociology of capitalism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Schwartzenberg, R.-G. 1998. *Sociologie politique*. 5ed. Paris: L.G.D.J.

Sennett, R. 2002. *The Fall of Public Man*. London: Penguin Books.

Simmel, G. 1976. "The Stranger". *The Sociology of Georg Simmel'.* New York: Free Press.

Shtejnberg, I. *et al*. 2009. *Kachestvennyemetody. Polevye sociologicheskie issledovaniya* [Qualitative methods: sociological field studies]. St Petersburg: Aletejya.

Smith, A. 1977. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Soja, E. 2011. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory (Radical Thinkers).* New York: Verso.

Sokolova, G.N., Ageeva, L.A. 1994. *Ekonomicheskij obraz myshleniya: realnost i perspektivy* [Economic thinking: reality and future prospects]. Minsk: Nauka itekhnika.

The Public Affairs Council (What is public affairs, 2013) URL, http://pac.org/faq#WhatPA (accessed 10.10.2016).

Titarenko, L.G. 2009. Gorodskoe razvitie na postsovetskom prostranstve: teoreticheskie modeli I realnost [Urban development in the post-Soviet space: theoretical models and reality]. In: J. Terborn (ed.). *Postsovetskie stolicy: Minsk. Vilnyus. Baku*. Minsk: Izd. centr BGU, pp. 23–40.

Titarenko L.G. 2015. Tipy ekologicheskogo povedeniya: Homo Ecologus vs. Homo onsumer [Types of environmental behavior]. *Sociologicheskij al'manah* 6, pp. 105–115.

Veblen, T. 2007. *The Theory of the Leisure Class (Oxford World's Classics).* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reissue edition.

Weber, M. 1978. *Economy and Society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. Berkeley: University California Press.

Wirth, L. 1964. *On Cities and Social Life: Selected Papers*. A.J. Reiss (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zhelnina, A. 2014. "Tusovka", kreativnost' ipravona gorod: gorodskoe publichnoe prostranstvo Rossii do iposleprotestnojvolny 2011–2012 godov. [The get-together, creativity and the right to the city: the urban public space in Russia before and after the protests of 2011–2012]. *Stasis* 2(1), pp. 260–295.

Zhukova, I.N., Lebed'ko, M.G., Proshinoj, Z.G., Józefowicz, N.G. 2013. *Slovar' terminovmezh kul'turnoj kommunikacii* [Dictionary of cross-cultural communication terms]. Moscow: FLINTA, Moscow: Nauka.

Zukerman, E. 2013. *Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection*. New York, London: Norton and Company.

Zukin, S. 1995. *The cultures of cities*. Oxford: Blackwell.