

From Stable “Temporality” to Permanent Variability: The Role of Reciprocity in the Formation of Communities in the “Private Housing Sector” of Russian Cities¹

Abstract

The article is devoted to the specifics of local communities’ self-organization in the “private housing sector” of a Russian provincial city. It is shown that a significant part of the urban space of the Russian territory is made up of low-rise single-family houses, known as the “private housing sector”. The organization of living space and the way of life in such localities can be defined as “non-urban”. It is shown that reciprocity was the basis for the formation of such communities in Soviet times. Having spread as a mechanism for adaptation and survival in the urban environment, reciprocity has become the most important mechanism for securing the marginality (“temporary”) of communities in the “private housing sector”. Changes in the “private housing sector” in the post-Soviet period led to a decrease in the role of reciprocity in the organization of such communities, which in turn led to their fragmentation and the emergence of various variants of local communities. The article is based on the observation, including participant, of the evolution of local spaces and communities of the “private sector” of Irkutsk, Omsk and Khabarovsk during 2007–2019 and a series of interviews from 2016–2020.

Keywords: “private housing sector”, communities, reciprocity, marginality, urbanism, suburbanism

Introduction

The post-Soviet cities of Russia, their spatial and social development have become the subjects of regular attention among sociologists, anthropologists, and

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urbanists. Russian studies of urban spaces and communities have come a long way from the first observations of disparate cases to monographic studies (Markin, Chernysh 2019) and the emergence of academic institutions associated with the development of urban studies. The self-organization of city dwellers is of increasing interest (eg: Tykanova, Khokhlova 2014), along with forms and mechanisms of citizens' participation in city management, transformation of its space and everyday life (eg: Zhelnina, Tykanova 2019). These studies, based on the ideas of new or leftist urbanism (Lefebvre 2002; Graz 1995), form the image of a modern Russian city, in which there is no place for a "parallel city of slums" (Holston 1989) – slums are regarded as invisible-twins formed in the fast-growing cities of China and India (Vakhshtein 2014: 13).

Meanwhile, the majority of space in Russian cities is occupied by the manor housing buildings that developed during the period of rapid urbanization, which received the semi-official name "private housing sector". The scale and proportion of the "private housing sector" in the urban space is quite significant: even in the largest cities of Russia (with the exception of Moscow and St. Petersburg), the share of private development is estimated at 15–45% (Prelovskaya 2017). In the largest regional capitals of Siberia – the million-plus cities of Omsk, Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, the "private housing sector" occupies a vast space, not only filling the voids between the blocks of multistorey buildings, but also forming wide areas with a specific "non-urban" organization of space (Grigoriev 2019).

These vast urban areas and their communities, in fact, are outside the focus of contemporary Russian urbanists and are not included in the image of a Russian city in academic texts and in the media. There is almost no "private housing sector" in the practice of urban management, for which it is, first of all, a resource of space for the future growth of the city. The rare activity of municipal administrations in this area is, as a rule, reduced to small repairs of roads and measures to prevent flooding during floods. In other words, in the view of the municipal government, the "private housing sector" presents only as a problem space in which there are practically no citizens and their communities.

This perspective almost excludes not only the understanding of the specifics of life and self-organization of local communities living in the "private housing sector" of a Russian provincial city. Also, it, in fact, does impossible articulation of the question of such communities, the peculiarities of their everyday life and practices of self-organization. In this article I will try to show that the "private housing sector" of a modern Russian city is not only a special architectural landscape and spatial organization, but also a special type of community based on relationships that are atypical for the urban lifestyle. I view the evolution of "private housing sector" communities through the classic ideas of reciprocity and trust (Moos 1996; Polaniy 2002; Sahlins 1999) as the foundations of such marginal communities in the Soviet city and their decline in community building within the framework of post-Soviet transformations. The role of informality in the ev-

everyday life of the Soviet and Russian cities was considered by a number of authors from the standpoint of adaptation of non-urban practices to the conditions of Soviet urbanism (Boym 1994; Leбина 2015). Here, reciprocity was preserving, first of all, in the economic sphere (Ledeneva 1998: 139–174; Barsukova 2003) and ensuring the circular nature of services (Ledeneva 2000: 186). In this article I will try to show that reciprocity and informal practices were a mechanism for reproducing non-urban spaces and communities, and at the same time, provided residents of the “private housing sector” with access to urbanism.

My analysis is based on observations, comprised of those included, over the evolution of local spaces and communities of the “private housing sector” of Irkutsk, Omsk and Khabarovsk during 2007–2019 and a series (23 units) of interviews conducted from 2016 to 2020. The interviews were structured as biographical and focused on describing everyday practices mostly, but they reflect the interrelations of local community’s members and also their interaction with the urban space also. Basically, my respondents are second generation residents of the “private housing sector” areas in the second generation; however, 4 interviews were conducted with new settlers in such localities. In the first case, these are people aged 50 to 70 years; in the second, the age of respondents varies from 25 to 65 years.

The “private housing sector” as a non-urban space of a Russian city

The formation of the “private housing sector” as a significant part of the urban space was associated, definitely, with rapid urbanization and intensive migration processes in the first half of the twentieth century. In the East of Russia, the most important factor of urbanization has become the evacuation of industrial production during The Second World War and, as a result, a massive influx of population into cities. The massive influx of migrants (partly voluntary, partly compulsory) exacerbated the problem of providing housing for the townspeople. Under these conditions, the provision of housing for new townspeople was postponed for the future (Kotkin 2002), on the one hand, due to limited resources, and on the other, within the framework of the implementation of the state housing policy as an instrument of domination.

Continuing the pre-Soviet traditions, townspeople new to the area settled in historical and recently built *slobodas* (large industrial villages) around the growing industrial enterprises, using rural architecture and the organization of estate space as specific techniques. The sprawl of the territory of cities, which absorbing rural settlements, also stimulated this process (French 1995: 137) Here, paradoxically, urbanization, which is one of the most important mechanisms of modernization, has led to the reproduction of non-urban spaces in the urban habitat.

Even by the end of the 1980s, about 20% of housing in the cities of the RSFSR was in personal ownership (Kalyukin, Kohl 2020: 1775), the main part of which was made up of single-family houses. This paradox, defined by A.G. Vishnevsky (1998) as “conservative modernization”, determined the formation of the Soviet city and the preservation until the 1990s of vast spaces in which the rural visual landscape and everyday practices were reproduced.

Self-building, although regulated by the state through determining the layout of streets, the size of estates, and later – the provision of electricity and water taps, was not considered as space for creating urban infrastructure. After a short-term of support for individual housing construction from 1946–1950, to overcome the consequences of the Second World War, the state limited the possibilities for the private construction (Kalyukin, Kohl 2020: 1775). In Siberian cities, individual construction continued in large volumes until the 1960s, but already in the 1970s it began to decline sharply (Dolgolyuk 2008: 89). Schools and kindergartens, medical and social institutions were located in the areas of multi-apartment buildings intended for “labour-household collectives” (Meerovich 2008: 31) and the rational using of resources. As a result, housing in buildings without central heating, water supply and other “benefits of civilization” as well as limited access to urban infrastructure determined the practices of everyday life, the budgets of non-working time and the nature of relations with members of local communities.

Uncomfortable housing with a predominance of the type of village house (often transferred from the villages) was the most important visual and symbolic sign of the “private housing sector”. It defined a wide repertoire of everyday practices, which in turn determined non-urban lifestyles. Lack of central heating implied the dominance of single-storey houses with stove heating. This was determining the stable annual cycle of practices in preparation for the heating season: bringing in, sawing and chopping firewood, buying coal. Use of the estate as a vegetable garden and a place for raising small livestock and poultry implied the inclusion of residents of the “private housing sector” in the annual cycle of peasant practices. The daily rhythm of life during the heating season was determined even more rigidly: daily cleaning and heating of the stove, removal of ash and slag work in the garden and with livestock.

The lack of central water supply has given rise to a stable set of practices for the provision of drinking and “technical” water. Regular delivery of drinking water from water pumps required special appliances for transporting containers of water, the delivery of which was usually the responsibility of children and teenagers. With the onset of regular positive temperatures, a “summer water supply” was installed on the territory of the estate for irrigation and household needs, which was subsequently taken down in the fall.

“Patsanami my kazhdy den’ na kolonku za vodoi «ezdili» eto kak obyazannost’ byla, kak v shkolu”.

"As boys, we 'drove' (went with a special cart and flask – KG) to the water pump every day. It was like of duty, like going to school". (Irkutsk, second generation resident of "private housing sector", 69 years old)

Uncomfortable housing determined the spatial organization of such a "city" estate and its functions. Buildings for storing coal and firewood, household and agricultural equipment, a cold lavatory and a bathhouse were the obligatory elements. The latter played, first of all, a purely utilitarian role. This resulted in the relatively small size of the bathhouse and the absence of separate recreation areas in it. As in a typical rural area, a significant part of the local area was occupied by a vegetable garden, which served as the most important mechanism for supporting the family. The practices of breeding poultry and small and sometimes even large cattle did not apply to every household, but, nevertheless, they were widespread, which made the "private housing sector" manors even more rural.

"Ogorod vseгда byl, ot veka. Zarplata na odezhonku, na chto drugoe... A kormilis s ogoroda, darom chto v gorode zhivem".

"The vegetable garden was always, since the year dot. Salary for clothes, for what else... But feed off of themselves by the garden, although we lived in the city". (Irkutsk, second generation resident of "private housing sector", about 65 years old)

The "non-urban" nature of the living space was determining the "non-urban" budget of non-working time and activities. The house and the estate in the "private housing sector" took up any time not spent in official employment. It rigidly determined the annual and daily cycles of everyday practices and, thus, excluded their inhabitants from the city. In fact, only labour and infrequent recreation practices remained urban here: participation in mass Soviet holidays, which involved interaction with public spaces occurred, as a rule, in the city centre. The separation of urban and everyday practices is reflected in the specific expression "go to the city", which describes a trip to the central parts of the city for non-work purposes (most often, for shopping and for receiving services).

In fact, until the early 1990s, in most Russian cities, a significant part of the urban space was occupied by localities, the spatial organization of which did not correspond either to the image of an ideal Soviet city, or to the idea of the organization and way of life of a "burg" as a normal European city. The formation of such "non-urban" localities in the Soviet city was considered by the authorities as a temporary phenomenon, and the space of the "private sector" – as a reserve of territory for the development of urban development. Inevitably, the informal status of "temporary" was acquired by the communities living here. As a result, significant groups have been formed in the social space of the Russian city, marginalized by the power discourse, and retaining the status of "temporary" throughout the life over three generations.

Reciprocity as the basis of non-urban communities in the city

Since the growth of the “private housing sector” was associated mainly with urbanization migrations, the bulk of its inhabitants were first generation urban dwellers. The reproduction in the “private housing sector” of the largely rural organization of living space and the practices of everyday life, led to reproduction of the practices of organizing social space. Of course, this was not a complete copying of the structure and relations of the rural community, which by 1950–1960 was already impossible due to the destruction of the community in the village. However, “private housing sector” communities reproduced a reciprocal relationship based on a high level of trust.

The degree of trust in local communities was largely determined by the need for mutual support in conditions of, in fact, rural life, and at the same time urban employment. Shift work at enterprises, the need for overtime work or business trips required either the involvement of children or the older generation in everyday practices (heating, water delivery, gardening and, often, caring for animals and others), or seeking help from the local community. Such assistance was impossible without a high level of trust, since it concerned the performance of key life-supporting functions of the household. This, in turn, created a situation in which such assistance could not be paid for in cash or any other method other than reciprocal service. As a result, the elements of the gift economy (Moss 1996) reproduced here formed a closed community attitude, which could not be correctly interpreted and regulated from the outside.

One of the clearest examples of trust-based practices in the “private housing sector” is associated with home heating. The absence of any central or automated local heating required the obligatory daily presence of the owners for heating of stove once a day, which was done, as a rule, in the evening at the end of the working day, and twice a day in the winter. In the conditions of a long Siberian winter, residents of the “private housing sector” found themselves “attached” to their own home from late September to mid-April. At the same time, employment in enterprises with a shift or daily work schedule often required the absence of owners, and in the case of a multi-day business trip, such absence became critical. Almost the only solution to the problem of such dependence was an agreement with neighbours to look after the house and heat the stove daily.

“Dom – ego ne brosisht’ zhe... Khochesh’ – ne khochesht’, zimoi nuzhno protopit’. Vystynet... Tak chto s raboty domoi, kuda tam khodit”.

“You can’t leave the house. Willy-nilly, in winter you need to heat it. It cools off... So from work to the home at once, where could you went...” (Omsk, second generation resident of “private housing sector”, about 60 years old)

“Nu, ty zhe vidish’, ya sutkami rabotal. Vot... Gde sam vyrvesh’sya, gde sosedei poprosish’ protopit’. Oni zh kak rodnye. Dazhe bol’she...”

“Well, you see, I worked round the clock. So... Sometimes I myself was able drop in home, sometimes ask neighbours to heat it. They are like a relative. Even more...” (Irkutsk, second generation resident of “private housing sector”, about 72 years old)

Obviously, such a service could only be provided by people who have close relationships with the owners and a high level of trust. On the one hand, this is determined by the very fact of intromission to the dwelling in the absence of the owners: penetration into the most closed part of the family’s life (dwelling) is possible only for members of the group who enjoy unconditional trust. On the other hand, this practice implied high responsibility due to the high risk of fire as a result of any negligence. Such trust could not be calculated and paid for. As a result, the owners have had an obligation that could not be paid, but required the provision of a mutual service based on the implementation of similar or another practice based on the similar level of trust.

Similar practices have been implemented during construction or renovation work that requires the participation of several people. So, replacing the roof or constructing a “summer” (temporary) water supply system involved not only inviting a “specialist” – as a rule, a resident of the same “private housing sector” with experience in such work, but also neighbours for auxiliary operations. If the services of a “specialist” could be paid for (by no means always with money), the participation of neighbours did not imply any payment, but always created an obligation to participate in similar assistance in the future. The only symbolic payment was the joint drinking of alcohol at the end of the work, which at the same time was a kind of ritual for securing mutual obligations.

“Den’gami my ne bogaty zhe byli... Otkuda den’gi? Posle razopyosh’ s sosedyami butylku, posidish’... po chelovecheski... Znaesh’, chto oni potom k tebe pridut, pozovut pomoch”.

“We were not rich in money... Where did the money come from?... You will drink up a bottle with neighbours after, sitting with them... as a human being... And you know that they will come to you later, call you to help...” (Irkutsk, second generation resident of “private housing sector”, 69 years old)

It was widespread practice to ask neighbours to “look after the house” while the owners were away for several days (for example, for mowing or picking wild berries). In the summertime, such supervision did not require access to the house, but it did impose the obligation of regular monitoring as an important element of security. Such a service was immeasurable and, accordingly, did not involve any payment, except for the mutual obligation to provide a similar service “on demand”. This practice presupposed a high level of mutual trust associated not only with the provision of a specific service, but also with a guarantee of simi-

lar assistance in the future. It is important to emphasize that trust in the community of the “private housing sector” is not public trust (Sztompka 2012: 183), which presupposes not only trust in an institution, but also a person from outside the community who represents the institution. This is trust within a rather closed community, in which the Stranger, even included in the system of interactions with the community, remains significantly distanced and excluded from the practices based on trust (Simmel 2008).

Thus, living in the “private housing sector” presupposed the implementation of an extensive repertoire of everyday practices based on trust and reproducing reciprocity as the basis of community life. As a result, the community that emerged in the modernization logic of urbanization reproduced the organization of the community and its economic sphere, which dominated in the pre-modern society (Polanyi 2002). Of course, the economy of the gift (Moos 1996) did not completely shape the economic life of the “private housing sector”. Money earnings in urban enterprises were playing an important role in it. However, it was reciprocity that remained a way of forming a community of the “private housing sector” in the Soviet city, and life of such localities outside of working hours.

Reciprocity here was both a method of life in the city and one of the key constraints on access to urbanism. On the one hand, the reproduction of reciprocity made it possible to maintain acceptable living conditions in localities devoid of both a rural supporting environment and urban infrastructure. Moreover, under the conditions of the Soviet mobilization economy of the 1930–1950s, reciprocity remained almost the main mechanism for the survival of the townspeople of the first generation and was reproduced in the second urban generation. It is significant that the practice of gift-giving was transferred, albeit on a limited scale, from the “private housing sector” to other urban communities (Barsukova 2003). On the other hand, inclusion in the system of reciprocal relations limited the possibility of generating new life practices in the city, associated with the expansion of network interactions outside the local community. In fact, reciprocity as the basis of relationships closed the network of interactions in the local community, in which the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1973) not only survival, but also the isolation of the community was ensured. From this perspective, it was reciprocity as the basis for the organization of the “private sector” communities that ensured the sustainability of these “permanent temporary” non-urban communities.

Modernizing the “private sector”: reducing the role of reciprocity and erosion of communities

Since the late 1990s, the “private sector” of the Russian city has begun to change noticeably: the degree of improvement of single-family houses increases significantly with the advent of new technologies, which are gradually becoming avail-

able to the ordinary citizen firstly by means of the Chinese bargainers and later local entrepreneurs. By the end of the 2000s a detached house with local hot water supply and sewerage in the "private housing sector" is no longer exotic and becomes, rather, a new norm. The softening of the regulatory role of the authorities, including through privatization, led to a change in the architectural landscape of the estate development. Firstly, single-family houses and then large parts of the "private housing sector" are moving farther and farther away from the image of "a village within a city". The economic importance of the personal plot is also decreasing, which is gradually turning from a means of self-sufficiency into a space for recreation.

An increase in the level of home improvement, a decrease in the economic value of the estate, however, does not lead to the formation of a full-fledged urban environment and an urban lifestyle. This is largely determined by the spatial structure of the "private housing sector", which was formed earlier and includes almost exclusively residential buildings and adjacent estates. There are no public spaces and "third places" (Oldenburg 2014) here, the role of which the small stores still play. The latter are gradually losing these functions, losing in competition with large shopping centres. To a large extent, this is also dictated by the change in the spatial environment of the "private housing sector", which is becoming more segmented, dissected by blank fences, and its inhabitants are becoming less and less in need of "third places".

So, these changes do not mean the gradual incorporation of the "private housing sector" into the urban space and its way of life. The way of life taking shape here contrasts with urbanism in a way other than a "village within the city", but no less than before. The key characteristics of the emerging model of life are much closer not to urbanism, but to suburbanism: in the dichotomy of "urbanism versus suburbanism" shown by A. Walks (2013: 1479), the new "private housing sector" reproduces almost all the characteristic features of the suburban lifestyle, with the exception of high dependence on personal vehicles (Grigorichev 2019).

The emergence of new physical boundaries is largely determined by the construction of new symbolic boundaries. The architecture, level of improvement and the nature of the use of estate territory clearly reflect the growing differentiation among residents of the "private housing sector". If in the Soviet era, living in the "private housing sector" equated its inhabitants with a commonality of conditions, lifestyle and the stigma of a single space, which pushed for the reproduction of certain forms of community, then post-Soviet transformations, became an incentive for the growth of individualization of life. From the point of view of the social space in the "private housing sector" development, it is the fences, and not the architectural forms and the degree of improvement that become the symbol of post-Soviet changes.

At the same time, these changes in living space and the ways of organizing the estate did not exclusively mean a change in the visuality of the "private housing

sector” and its spatial differentiation. These transformations have become important prerequisites for the destruction of reciprocity as the basis of neighbourly relations, the foundation of local communities. Solving the problems of improvement, repair and maintenance becomes a matter of financial viability, and not inclusion in a network of neighbourly-friendly and family relations. To a large extent, it is the modernization of the dwelling and the complication of its engineering infrastructure that leads to the abandonment of reciprocal practices: for example, the installation of a modern multi-fuel heating system, as a rule is impossible with the help of neighbours and requires contacting a specialist or company operating within the framework of market relations. Building a local water supply and sanitation system requires techniques and skills that “private housing sector” communities do not have. Forced recourse to market mechanisms leads to the gradual abandonment of neighbourhood help. As a result, there are fewer and fewer deferred commitments between group members and the circle of gift-giving is broken.

Monetization of relationships turns out to be beneficial, first of all, to the relatively wealthy strata of “private housing sector” residents. A one-time payment not only allows them to solve a specific problem, but also does not impose deferred obligations on the customer in relation to the service provider. Even more obvious is the rejection of the practice of gift-given transactions for the new residents of the “private housing sector” – the owners of individual cottages and residents of cottage settlements built within such localities and formally referring to localities of “low-density single-storey development”. Being partly a form of status consumption (Humphrey 2002), and more an element of a larger-scale process of the post-soviet suburban revolution (Spórna, Krzysztofik 2020; Grigoriev 2019), cottages and their residents are organically included in market relations and do not need direct support from the local community.

“My, konechno, mestnye. Stol’ko let zdes’ zhivem. Na vybory zdes’ khodim. No s etimi sovetскими соседями ne obchaemsya pochtі. Tak, pozdorovaeshsya byvaet, I vsyo. Kak-to ne o chem obschat’sya...”

“We, of course, are local. We have been living here for so many years. We go for an election here. But we hardly communicate with these Soviet neighbours (living in the private sector since Soviet times – KG). Well, I say hello, it happens, that’s all. Somehow there is nothing to talk about...” (Khabarovsk, first generation resident of “private housing sector”, 54 years old)

Undoubtedly, trust and reciprocal practices as the basis of neighbourhood continue to persist among low-income groups and older residents, however, even they are gradually being replaced by market relations here. As a result, the economy, formerly rooted in the social relations of the “private housing sector”, absorbs social ties (Polanyi 1999), forcing reciprocity to the periphery of everyday life. Trust as the dominant characteristic of the “private housing sector’s” social space

is being replaced by “acquaintance” and the “low chance of meeting a stranger”, which are characteristic of modern suburbs (Fischer 1995).

The decline in the importance of reciprocity as the basis for organizing local communities in the “private housing sector” does not simply mean the transformation of this population group in the Russian city. The disappearance of reciprocity and trust, or, at least, their displacement to the periphery of social relations means the disappearance of the basis for the construction of local communities, which ensured, firstly, the typological similarity of such communities in all Russian cities, and secondly, the stable reproduction of the marginality of such communities in a city for three generations.

Conclusions

The Russian city outside the metropolitan areas is a much more complex organism than it appears in the discourse of academic research and “spontaneous” urbanism. Outside of one’s own “urban” quarters and squares, there are vast spaces, discursively excluded from the “normal” city. In the field of view of the authorities and the media, they remain “reserve” spaces, unchanged in their temporality and marginality. The specific of post-Soviet housing construction often preserved the building and organization of spaces that developed during the Soviet era (Kalyukin, Kohl 2020: 1782). Arising during the period of rapid urban growth, they have firmly taken this place and retain it, despite the obvious growth of the heterogeneity of the physical and social space of the modern Russian city.

Communities of such localities were built on a non-market basis due to the specifics of the organization of living space and everyday practices. The non-urban nature of such localities and communities was legitimized in the city by temporality, transience, which was consolidated in the power’s rhetoric and following that in the media discourse and public perception. This also justified reciprocity as the basis for the existence of communities of the “private housing sector” and an important mechanism for their wellbeing. Possible in the city only as a rudiment (Harvey 2018: 264), the gift economy and the system of relations built on its basis was perceived as the same temporary phenomenon as the “private housing sector” itself.

However, tolerated as a temporary phenomenon and a kind of side effect of social modernization, reciprocity here has become a mechanism for the conservation of the non-urban organization of a significant part of the Russian city. Not being a gated community in the full sense of the word (Low 2001), the inhabitants of the “private housing sector”, nevertheless, reproduced a closed network, outcome beyond which was possible almost exclusively by the travel outside the local area. And, on the contrary, incorporation into a local community was possible only through inclusion in the gift-exchange network. As a result, despite the grad-

ual replacement of some of the residents (some families “getting” apartments and moving to comfortable multi-storey buildings), the “private housing sector” was remained a stable part of the Russian city, reproducing the non-urban landscape and lifestyle in the urban environment.

The modernization of the “private housing sector”, associated, at first glance, only with a change of residential and estate space entailed a rapid decline in the role of reciprocity as the basis for organizing local communities. The stability of the “temporary”, transitional state of such localities and communities of the Russian city that existed for decades has been replaced by rapid multidirectional transformations. In place of a more or less homogeneous social space based on close bonds of gift-giving and trust relations, a wide range of local communities is being formed, built according to the most diverse models: from “closed” communities of cottage settlements to slum outskirts. But in all cases, the stability of marginality here is replaced by permanent variability (liquidity by Zygmunt Bauman), continuously producing new forms of space and community.

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