Urban Spaces: Caucasian Places, Transformation in Capital Cities

Veranstalter: Tsypylma Darieva, Wolfgang Kaschuba, Madlen Pilz, Sonderforschungsbereich 640 Repräsentationen sozialer Ordnungen im Wandel, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
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The Caucasus is generally known as a diverse and problematic region, especially after the Soviet era. The specificity of the small but troublesome zone challenges scholars to be concerned predominantly with topics like conflicts, geopolitics, wars, and nationalism. The studies about the urban spaces which have a long tradition in the West were not taken up for the Caucasus region. The first important step made towards a development of this field of research was the workshop 'Urban Spaces: Caucasian Places, Transformation in Capital Cities' organized by Tsypylma Darieva, Wolfgang Kaschuba, Madlen Pilz (Humboldt University of Berlin, Collaborative Research Center, SFB 640) and sponsored by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). On 22 and 23 September 2009, Tbilisi State University, represented by Ketevan Khutsishvili, hosted the workshop and brought together social scientists working and interested in the transformation of postsocialist urban spaces. The schedule of the conference was quite tight, including 18 presentations divided into four panels. Despite the fact that the presentations were about different postsocialist countries, the majority of the presentations was about the South Caucasian urban places. The constellation of participants was quite interesting, since it encompassed scholars from all three South Caucasian lands, Western Europe and Russia. These have often been separated by ideologies, languages and varying approaches. Social anthropologists and other social scientists pointed out that a lot changed after the Soviet era in the urban spaces and these transformations had been expressed in new symbols, new social spaces and/or in different urban cultures. Scholars made comparisons between postsocialist and capitalist cities in order to show that some common characteristics between post-Soviet urban spaces remain. The discussants of each panel made crucial contributions to the workshop, summarizing the speakers' points and giving important directions to the discussions. After the first panel, the discussant ELIZABETH DUNN (University of Colorado) casted doubts on the efficacy of the term postsocialism. Soviet regime, she argued, has been over for 18 years and some scholars are already talking about post postsocialism or the post post-Soviet period. This question provoked some discussion and several speakers tried to show that the term postsocialist is still a useful category for describing the urban places.

The first panel „Toward anthropology of the postsocialist city" was opened by WOLFGANG KASCHUBA (Humboldt University of Berlin). He gave the presentation about sights and signs in urban cultures, setting out the main theoretical framework for the workshop topic. TSYPYLMA DARIEVA (Humboldt University of Berlin) readdressed the question of the 1970s and 1980s 'Are the socialist cities different from the capitalist ones?' in a new form: Is the postsocialist city different from the city of non-socialist post-industrial cities? Presenting the features of ideal socialist cities, and peculiarities of the regional ones, she discussed the literature about the reconfiguration of urban public spaces in the South Caucasus from the anthropological point of view. The logical continuation of the question was the presentation of CATHERINE ALEXANDER (University of London): she showed that regimes do not always define the peculiarities of urban space. The post-war need of housing gave rise to the similar concrete panel apartment blocks in London and Almaty, while in the 1990s the interpretation of neoliberalism created the differences between these similar types of lodging.

The participants of the second panel „City Symbols, Old and New" showed how the postsocialist transformation was symbolically expressed in city maps, music culture, sculpture, square design in different urban centres. Alongside the Soviet regimes, some cities

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lost the cosmopolitan character, and sometimes gained a new secular image, sometimes defined with the '*consumer uniformity*': MADLEN PILZ (Humboldt University of Berlin) discussed how the postsocialist transformation affected the symbolic urban landscape of Tbilisi. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Soviet street names were replaced with new national ones, but the change was not always included in the city maps and sometimes it was not recognized and used by the city dwellers. SERGEY RUMYANSEV (Azerbaijan National Academy of Science, Baku) illustrated how the influence of authorities affected the Soviet music traditions in Baku. From the 1960s to the 1980s jazz was the marker of the city as an industrial, cultural and cosmopolitan capitol during Socialist times. After socialism, jazz lost the unwilling political label although the authorities encouraged citizens to return to 'right roots', which was expressed in a new identity of the city as the capital of Muslim culture. IRAKLI PIPIA (Tbilisi State University) showed the multiplying sculptures in the capital of Georgia as a tool of presenting the 'true Tbilisian' style. The new statues show the liberal policy of the government to decorate the city landscape, although the speaker argued that this policy was suggested 'from above' and citizens did not know how to communicate with new symbols.

In the third panel „Public Spaces and Sacred Places", speakers discussed how the public spaces were constructed and reconstructed in post-Soviet cities in order to present national, religious or social aspects of the independent states. In his presentation LEVON ABRAHAMIAN (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Yerevan) showed how certain meanings were officially attached to certain architectural monuments. In their social use, many of these buildings had a fate quite different from the one that had been planned ahead. The opera theatre built by Alexander Tamanian was later used for national rallies only. Before, however, it was used as the centre of Soviet celebrations, whereas the Cathedral of St. Grigor the Illuminator became less of a religious centre than had been planned. OLEG PANCHENKOV (Centre for Independent Social research, St. Petersburg) compared flea markets in Berlin and St. Petersburg. The flea market in Berlin has the symbols of 'aestheticisized counterculture', while in St. Petersburg the flea market is the place for *homo soveticus* to express a grass root civic initiative, he argued. According to Panchenkov, both cases carry the features of the medieval carnival and create the charm of the city.

Finally, the forth panel „Subcultures and Urban Practices" was mostly devoted to the specific groups who occupy and sometimes reshape the space and image of the city. STEFAN KIRMSE (Humboldt University of Berlin) illustrated how the youth search and establish mixed and new images of Osh in Kyrgyzstan, while the government, Islamic activists and NGOs have other views about the city. The ethnographic material collected by Kirmse shows that youth try to elect different representations of the city as 'urban', 'Muslim', 'southern'. The blending of Russian, Muslim, or Western music and ways of life led the audience to argue that the youth is rather '*looking around*' than '*looking North*'. OLGA BREDNIKOVA (Centre for Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg) discussed the lives of women labour migrants in St. Petersburg. For migrant women 'home' is the only place for rest, but without privacy and comfort. They ignore the city life or city attractions, for them it is more the (post-)modern city, without ends, centre, and demarcated districts. EUGENIA ZAKHAROVA (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg) discussed the street corner life in Tbilisi. She tried to highlight the structure and function of Birzha (male peer groups gathering and interacting in public spaces) in the life of neighborhoods. Although she admitted that due to the effort of the last government, street corner life may disappear.

Due to the high quality of presentations, which were based on recent and current field work, it was a useful conference with lively discussions. During these discussions and personal communications, it was clear that there still exists postsocialist space with many common features and past and that it is still playing an important role for understanding and designing new urban spaces.

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Conference Overview:

Welcome by Ketevan Khutsishvili (Tbilisi State University) and Tsypylma Darieva (Humboldt University of Berlin)

Panel I: Towards Anthropology of Postsocialist City
Chair: Madlen Pilz (Humboldt University of Berlin), Discussant: Elisabeth Dunn (University of Colorado, Boulder)

Wolfgang Kaschuba (Humboldt University of Berlin), Sights and Signs: Urban Cultures on Stage
Tsypylma Darieva, Is there a Postsocialist City in the South Caucasus?
Catherine Alexander (Goldsmiths, University London), Reconfiguring Post-industrial Cities: A Comparison between Almaty and London
Lado Vardosanidze (Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, Tbilisi), Tbilisi Vernacular Urban Development, Infrastructural Changes and City Smells in Tbilisi

Panel II: City Symbols, Old and New
Chair: Tsypylma Darieva, Discussant: Catherine Alexander

Madlen Pilz, Symbolic Transformation of Urban Landscapes: Tbilisi City Maps
Sergey Rumyansev (Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, and 'Novator', Baku), Baku: From „New Orleans on the Caspian" to the Capital of Muslim Culture
Irakli Pipia (Tbilisi State University), Tbilisi's New Symbols and Sculptures after the Soviet Era
Gayane Shagoyan (National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, Yerevan), „To the Ground and then..." Three Vectors in the Reconstruction of City Squares in Gümri (Leninakan)
Artyom Kosmarski (Moscow State University), Tashkent in the 2000s: the Loss of Locality?

Panel III: Public Spaces and Sacred Places
Chair: Ketevan Khutsishvili, Discussant: Tsypylma Darieva

Levon Abrahamian (National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, Yerevan), Yerevan Sacra: Old and New Sacred Centers in the Urban Space
Ilham Abbasov and Sevil Gusseinova (Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, and 'Novator', Baku), Post-Soviet Baku: Representing National Capital as Multi-Ethnic and Multi-Religious Space
Oleg Pachenkov (Centre for Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg), Urban Public Spaces and Cultures: Flea Markets in Berlin and St. Petersburg
Hamlet Melkumyan (National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, Yerevan), The Yerevan Vernissage: Creating and Presenting a New National and Urban Brand

Panel IV: Subcultures and Urban Practices

Stefan Kirmse (Humboldt University of Berlin), Looking North? Urban Youth Culture in a Southern City (Osh, Kyrgyztan)
Olga Brednikova (Centre for Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg), Reshaping Urban Landscape, Labour Migrants from Caucasus in St. Petersburg
Shorena Gabunia (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Tbilisi), Gay Culture and Public Places in Tbilisi
Eugenia Zakharova (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg), Street Corner Life: Ubani and Urban Neighborhood in Tbilisi

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