Relations with Stranger: Government, Business, and Society in a Post-Soviet City

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The challenges of building viable relations between government and business in transitioning societies remains a popular research topic in post-Soviet studies. Scholars seek to understand how entrepreneurs, corporations, and other agents of emergent markets communicate their business interests to local authorities and urban residents (Cohen & Arato, 1997; Titarenko, 2009). After the fall of the Soviet Union political and economic changes have come into a conflict with the mission and legacy of the urban landscape of former Soviet cities causing a spatial crisis (Harvey, 1996). This crisis occurs when the legacy landscape created under socialism becomes a barrier for further development under new capitalist realities.

A modern city is perceived a *public space* that hosts citizens' informal and voluntary communication as "the core settings of informal public life" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 16). It refers to a community of citizens linked by common interests and collective activity, a space in which government, businesses, and different communities meet, collide, and interact. A public space facilitates interactions among disparate individuals and groups as a source of a socially positive cosmopolitanism (Lofland, 1998, p.214). The way urban residents interact with and within a public space represents the quality of civic engagement and cohesion among core constituents. The interaction among including public officials, entrepreneurs, and active community members, including volunteers and activists, further delineates the course of development for civil society.

This paper focuses on challenges in communication and interaction among business and government actors in Minks, the capital of Belarus. We argue that the success of communication and government relations is based on the way business operators and the city authorities apply normative frameworks, develop sustainable points of reference, and apply

innovative ideas as they attempt to transform the landscape of post-Soviet cities. To advance this argument, we examine the relations between business, government, and society in Minsk, the capital city of Belarus. The chapter will conclude by offering solutions and directions for future research.

The City as a Public Space

Public space is an anchor point for citizens to organize their public life. In urban areas, it plays the role of the "social leveler." It is accessible to the general public and does not require formal membership (Oldenburg, 1999). Public space allows for multiple unplanned interactions among random people (Sennett, 2002; Zukin, 1995) who use it as a stage for self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). In the city, this is a social hub where complex communications connect various individuals and groups and ensure the rapid dissemination of new ideas and practices (Zukerman, 2013). As stated by Mitchell (2003),

> "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" (p. 129).

In traditional urban sociology, any population living in each area can acquire the status of a local community. Community is defined by its ability to organize itself and build its identity around shared interests, values, and responsibilities, etc. This identity is linked to common memories about the past, common patterns of the present, and common plans for the future. However, the traditional notion of an urban public space does not always apply to the post-Soviet context.

Post-Soviet Urban Space: The Legacy Burden

In the USSR, the centralized system of economic planning created a blueprint template for building a typical Soviet city. This general model ensured an even placement of

buildings and facilities across city districts, prearranged commuting routes between home and work, and same type urban landscapes. With rare exceptions, any distinctions or signs of local culture or social stratification were molded into neighborhoods designed to promote social equality and industrialization. Public space in a Soviet city was subordinate to the communist doctrine. Monumental urban squares, parks, and boulevards exhibited symbols of the Marxism-Leninism ideology. Soviet public space was designed to display 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 mold of ideological reasoning" (Engel, 2007, p. 289).

In the Soviet Union, local communities did not elect city officials. They were often appointed from other regions and had no prior ties with community members. City councils had little authority to organize and engage community members. Their main responsibilities included assisting residents with obtaining certificates, registrations, and other vital records. Citizens' leisure time was organized by schools, clubs, and palaces of cultures as sites of cultural activities. This reduced chances for private individuals to organize community life around other activities not foreseen by the authorities.

Soviet urban environment was designated for collective gatherings and organized mass rallies, parades, and other activities run by the local authorities. Such controlled space could not become a social melting pot that could encourage any alternative initiatives for self-organization and activism. As a result, urban residents normally wanted to withdraw from any relationship with the local authorities including participation in city governance and urban planning. Overall, it helps understand why the notion of local community culture is still a novel idea in many post-Soviet countries. In order to understand the synergy among government, business, and the public in a post-Soviet city and their capacity to transform the

post-Soviet urban area into the community-centric public space, we need to understand the feelings and attitudes of these groups to each other.

The Case Study of Minsk as a Public Space

This discussion is based on a qualitative study with industry experts conducted by the authors in Minsk (Lebedeva, 2015; Lebedeva, Titarenko, & Filatova, 2015). Minsk was chosen as an example of a typical Soviet city that was rebuilt after World War II as the Sun City of Dreams or an ideal Soviet city of the future (Titarenko, 2009).

The interviews with local government officials, entrepreneurs, and government relations specialists defined relations between government and business as patron/client oriented. As a rule, this type of interaction involves an asymmetric relationship between the authorities and business. Generally, entrepreneurs constantly feel pressure because they depend on executive decisions made by the authorities. That explains why they prefer to interact with them only when they must submit applications, get permits, or lobby their interests.

Communication between the public and private sectors is highly impersonal. Business chooses to interact with the authorities when there is a problem or some perceived conflict. Small businesses consider government officials as having ultimate power to fix any problems. The dialogue is typically initiated by entrepreneurs seeking both formal and informal ways to resolve issues and looking for ways to have a private conversation with government officials. Main reasons for contacting government agencies include seeking authorization, a permit, a signature, or having problems with the application of new legislation.

Business representatives are expected to contact government officials only via regular mail. They may use e-mail or phone only as a follow-up to their original request in order to

clarify submitted information or schedule a personal appointment. The traditional letter-based correspondence remains the primary channel because it guarantees some feedback from the authorities. As one respondent mentioned, "if there is no documented inquiry, there will be no order assigned to a clerk to examine and process an application." Most of the time, government officials would feel no obligation to reply or to do anything.

Experienced business professionals are usually aware of some unwritten rules in government relation. Knowing these rules may significantly improve further interaction with the authorities. For example, any loosely prepared paperwork or request is likely to reduce any chances for feedback from the authorities or create an unproductive and futile paper trail. For example, an official letter to the city government must include a specific request or raise a clearly articulated question that pertains to their mandate. In addition, the letter must be brief but at the same time contain all necessary details. As stated by another respondent, "no government official will look into details or even do anything unless the issue falls under their scope of responsibilities." Also, "the letter needs to stand out and be unlike other inquires, or they will automatically reject it or give you a runaround with a very general reply."

The interviews revealed a serious communication gap between business and government. This is defined as "the lack of understanding between communicators representing different cultures manifested in their language and worldviews" (Zhukova et al., 2013, p. 168). Because business operators attempt to engage in a conversation with the authorities only when they have some issue to resolve, they fail to create strong ties with government bodies which in fact does not help reduce social distance between the two groups.

Business-government relations are accompanied with feelings of distrust and even perceived threat. Entrepreneurs thought of the authorities as a threat to their business because

their mission was to "defend the interests of the state, not the interests of other people." According to business professionals, they are regularly excluded from discussions concerning business-related policies. City officials "…did not even want to listen to us because they think they know better about our business than us. In fact, they don't get the full picture about things they try to regulate." On the other hand, government employees do not trust entrepreneurs either. They often decline their invitations to visit business sites to avoid later suspicion and accusations of favoritism and corruption.

Discussion: *The Stranger* Perspective

The above study demonstrates that the lack of understanding between business and government stems from differences in worldviews and multiple communication barriers. An interaction between business and government is random and occasional. Any attempts to communicate aim to serve functional purposes in order to acquire temporary benefits and achieve short-term goals. This type of communication is understood by business operators as a typical patron-client relationship. This clientelism system implies that a dialogue is initiated only in response to urgent issues or immediate conflicts rather than being part of a continuous and mutually beneficial cooperation. This case study shows that any relations between business and government in the post-Soviet context may not constitute any public communication that serves the public good. This is because the interactants are not invested in creating a public space or a vibrant community but rather dealing with emergent issues concerning their operations. Consequently, this type of relations is not serving the development of a strong public community in the city and in some cases even deepens a communication gap between business and the authorities. During the interviews, entrepreneurs referred to city officials as "strangers," "temporary bureaucrats," who just "function without putting their heart and soul into their work" and "have no passion for the future of the city."

The above attitudes towards government officials are discussed in sociology of space from the prism of the *stranger* concept. Simmel (1976) introduced the notion of *the stranger* as a member of the group who lives and participates in public life but remains distant from other members of the group. The stranger does not share community values or have feelings for his/her urban habitat, its unique history, and experiences. The stranger is perceived as foreign to the group even though he/she is in constant relation to other group members. The stranger is not included in intra-group relations, has week ties with ingroup members, and does not follow any obligations and norms of the group membership. Thus, the stranger is almost a symbolic figure, a function that keeps social distance with other group members and avoids any ingroup solidarity. Importantly, in the city space anyone, including government officials, business operators, and ordinary residents may be considered the stranger. The below study illustrates this assumption.

In 2015, students from five Minsk universities filled out a survey of attitudes towards their city and their neighborhood (Lebedeva, 2015). The survey asked if young people felt responsibility for making their city a better place to live or had self-efficacy to transform their urban environment or to influence other residents/government officials to change their neighborhood. Respondents were 19-20 years of age and had no experience living in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the results demonstrated high disengagement from public life among college students. Only half of the respondents (52,4%) felt responsible for the appearance of their city and their neighborhood. Some students (24,8%) believed they could organize a city event. 24.6% of respondents considered using the city as public space for informal gatherings and social events. 20,6% of respondents thought they "actively exercise their right to the city" (Harvey, 1996) or could transform (e.g., change, clean, or decorate) the city the way they wanted. Only 9% of students believed they could influence others to make changes in their neighborhood.

The Soviet legacy of disengagement from public space can persist in a post-Soviet environment. This assumption is supported by the above survey measuring the attitudes of younger residents toward their city (Lebedeva, Titarenko, & Filatova, 2015). Weak social ties and low solidarity among agents representing government, business, and the public lead to further reluctance to seek dialogue with each other. In general, civic engagement is complicated because of numerous strangers unwilling to make efforts to improve the quality of their communities. As a result, urban residents often disengage from participation in public life including social activities intended to influence policy making and policy implementation.

In sum, the role of civil society in the context of a post-Soviet city is not defined except when urban residents occasionally participate in social events, rallies, or parades organized by city authorities. These social events are arranged merely for the sake of the publicity for the local authorities and rarely represent issues or social causes that indeed concerns citizens. Some events may result in an open conflict between community members and businesses, especially when developers attempt to appropriate developed residential areas. Even when business and the local government agree on developments as a result of some extra lobbying, these efforts may amount to nothing because of poor community relations. Local residents will continue to perceive both business operators and government functionaries as the stranger who threatens to disrupt their social order and ruin the local culture.

Conclusion

Sociologists argue that the stranger can become part of the community if they get more culturally attuned and engage more with public space. For example, Chernyavskaya (2015) identifies several community relations strategies for public engagement. They include identifying local community leaders capable of transforming the urban space, turning some city places into social hubs to launch social projects, and promoting relevant public events to

increase social cohesion within communities. Collaborative efforts between business and the city authorities to contribute to festivals, city fairs, and other events will eventually lead to future cooperation and projects based on common interests. In addition, finding ways to mitigate and resolve unavoidable disagreements helps reduce tension between parties and establish working relationships.

Finally, Internet media can also help bridge communication gaps between government, business, and society. Social networking platforms for neighborhoods can be used for testing new ideas (e.g., new landscape designs), promoting public events, and exchanging services with government agencies that meet essential neighborhood needs. Social networking also helps integrate alienated strangers into community life by connecting them with community leaders, interest groups, and management offices. Social networking platforms also alert city officials of some existing problems and reduce social distance between government agencies and residents. These ideas should be further explored in future studies analyzing urban communication projects in post-Soviet cities.[i]

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[i] See the chapter by Olga Pichugina in Volume II