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ROLE OF DIGITAL TOOLS
IN COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT
AND URBAN PARTICIPATION
(EVIDENCE OF BELARUS)

This article is devoted to an analysis of the "hybrid neighborhood" phenomenon. Traditionally, a Soviet residential yard is presented in urban studies as the sphere of a neighbor's active participation. The post-Soviet changes have significantly weakened the activities of neighbor communities; however, the spread of digital communication tools (social networks and messengers) has led to an increase in civic engagement in cities (new forms of neighboring communities are created, traditions of spending time together with neighbors revived, and individuals are actively involving in the struggle for their "place in the city"). The empirical materials that are analyzed reveal the features of neighbors interacting demonstrate the differences between "neighbor" and "civil" communication modes, define the role of online communities in local self-government, and practically implement the "right to the city."

Keywords: online communication, local community, local self-government, neighborhood, "The Right to the City," urban participation

INTRODUCTION

The trends of attracting local populations to actively participate in improving and developing urban areas in recent years can be traced not only in Western cities and towns but also in post-socialist ones. The accumulated research and practical experience shows that the development and strengthening of urban communities not only contributes to improving the quality of the urban environment with less time and lower resource costs but also becomes a good alternative to the overgrowth of the municipal bureaucratic apparatus and makes it possible to exercise the rights of citizens to local self-government (Amster, 2004; Hartman and Robinson, 2003; Mitchell, 2003; Rosol, 2010; Weinstein and Ren, 2009). Conversely, if

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urban communities are not active in exercising their rights to quality urban environments, this leads to a distortion of the principles and goals of the long-term development of entire cities or towns (Dellenbaugh, 2015). Citizens in such a situation often become a buffer between the interests of the state and business without having sufficient power to influence either the former or the latter.

In this regard, the key research question of the article concerns *the particular mechanisms that contribute to community management and the role of digital tools in this process.* I will argue that *a community's activity* (on the example of courtyard improvement) is *in large part determined by the nature of neighbors' relationships (especially their chatting in social media)*. Then, the research focus will shift to 'local chats' themselves as the bases for urban participation. In a search for an answer to the key research question, I will undertake a qualitative analysis of neighborhood chat content. This analysis will reveal *the main communication patterns that are formed in the process of communication* and the effects of these patterns on the further development of full-fledged local self-government institutions in Belarusian cities (via the example of Minsk).

A rather contradictory situation as for the activity of urban communities has developed in modern Belarus. On the one hand, there are rather low levels of both urban residents' trust in each other in general and civic involvement in particular (as is the case in many post-socialist cities and towns). Among the reasons for this, researchers name the following: the specifics of architectural development, which contribute to the atomization of residents and prevent the appearance of urban communities and the care of citizens about those spaces and objects that are outside their private apartments (Cheshkova, 2000); the paternalism that had formed over a long period of life in Soviet society (i.e., the habit of relying on the state for everything as an entity), which is powerful but at the same time distant from society (Engel, 2007); and the communication barriers between society, business, and the state that were formed during the difficult transition period (Lebedeva, 2020).

On the other hand, the large-scale political crisis of 2020 in Belarus launched the processes of consolidating civil society that have never been seen before. From an urbanistic perspective, this meant the formation and strengthening of neighborhood communities, which began to quite actively claim their rights to manage their cities and towns. The grassroots decentralized nature of this Belarusian activism in 2020 has become its characteristic feature – along with demonstrations in central streets, urban residents began to actively gather in their own yards and organize holidays and joint tea parties. Moreover, one could observe an interesting transformation of local activity – starting with various kinds of art interventions (installing flags, making graffiti, etc.); this quickly acquired the classic features of good neighborliness, including yard holidays, independently organized sports tournaments, volunteer landscaping, etc.

The key mechanism for activating local communities that establish their boundaries not only online but also offline is the participation of citizens in various practices to improve their yards. Joint urban-improvement activities have allowed citizens to realize their common goals and objectives and formulate mutually beneficial solutions while also reducing the likelihood of conflicts and disagreements.

Another important factor in the rise of civic activity was the so-called 'communication revolution' (the so-called Telegram revolution), which peaked in the autumn of 2020. Local network platforms ('neighborly chats') helped neighbors get to know each other, coordinate their actions, and made it possible to not only share 'local knowledge' with each other but also bring information about local problems to a wider audience – namely, municipal authorities. In general, the degree of citizen involvement in technical decision-making also depends on the structural features of a particular participatory mechanism. Nowadays, citizens have access to a wide range of electronic participation tools (electronic voting systems, group-decision support systems, discussion forums, etc.). However, e-government institutions (including in the urban management sphere) are still in their infancy in Belarus; the only well-known one is 115.bel (the portal that is aimed at solving housing and communal problems) – its services were used by 35.7% of Minskers in 2021. Perhaps the explosive growth for neighborhood chats was partially driven by attempts to fill the e-government vacuums that existed. In this case, social networks acted as a focal point – from spaces of connection and socialization came major infrastructures upon which much of modern life depends (Barns, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

The analysis of the activities of neighboring communities was predominantly carried out in the neo-Marxist critical theory frame (Attoh, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2011; Harvey, 2003; 2011; Lefebvre et al., 2010; Purcell, 2001). The key idea for the survey's design and construction was *the concept of "the Right to the City."* From a neo-Marxism point of view, the urban environment is a theatre of the struggles and conflicts – a field of social contradictions sharpening. Another key category of the analysis was the "*local community*", which is considered in the ecological tradition as a kind of collective subject that has a relatively high degree of social unity and the particular habitat. In this sense, a community is "a group of households located in the same place and linked to each other by a functional interdependence that is closer than similar interdependences with other groups of people within the social field to which the community belongs" (Elias, 1974, p. ix). The key features of such communities are the *locality* (belonging to a certain territory) and *social density* (the intensity of relationships within a community is higher than between individual members of the community and the external environment). A close definition of local community is the "neighborhood" (the phenomenon close in meaning to local community is neighborhood) – a community that arises in the process of the natural division of the city into segments (living yards) (Chernysheva, 2020). One more research concept is the term "hybrid neighborness" – a digital-human network that functions 24/7, unites thousands of local residents, keeps the history of all previous interactions, responds immediately, and can be easily appealed to in an incredible variety of situations (from seeking moral support to helping with the practicalities of life) (Gromasheva, 2021). Attention to neighborhood online communications made it possible to "rethink not only the organization of neighborhood communities but also the structure of collective political action" (Chernysheva, 2022, p. 45). This is fairly popular

research approach to conceptualize urban management "as a technology governance arena" (Lunevich, 2019, p. 80). From this perspective, urban participation mainly turns into citizen engagement in technical decision-making.

The empirical basis of the study was the results of computer-aided telephone interviews (CATI) – a total of 415 Minsk residents aged 15 years and older were interviewed (during the period of September–October 2021). The phone numbers for the calls were selected from a general database of mobile numbers in Minsk by the random number method. The sample was controlled by sex, age, and level of education. The estimated value of the sampling error did not exceed 4.8%. Information was obtained during the interviews about the peculiarities of the participation of citizens in the improvement of urban areas as well as their views that concerned the possibilities of local self-government. The second stage was an expert survey that involved five experts (specialists in the fields of architecture and urban planning with work experience in Minsk). The expert interviews were focused on a deeper understanding of such matters as the possible difficulties that are associated with the improvement of yard areas (the main trends in this field) as well as the balance of the efforts of the state, business, and the public in solving the emerging problems of urban improvement. As a supplement, we used the method of a qualitative analysis of the content of neighborly chats in Minsk during the period of August 15 through September 30, 2020. In total, six chats were selected in accordance with the specified criteria and located in various districts of Minsk; of these, two were located in areas with new apartment buildings, and four were located in areas of mixed buildings (mainly built in the 1970s–2000s).

LOCAL COMMUNITIES AS SUBJECTS OF ACTIVITY

As a rule, urban improvement is thought of as the creation of the most favorable living environment with the provision of comfortable conditions for residents. The improvement of residential yards is, in fact, one of the most urgent problems of modern urban planning. A person's home cannot be considered to be fully comfortable if the environment is not well-maintained. There is a relationship between spending on urban improvement and the level of social stability – reductions of such spending have an extremely negative impact on the social well-being of citizens, their assessment of their own prosperity, and the overall assessment of the policy that is being pursued by the state.

According to the results of the telephone survey, Minsk residents considered the most pressing problem of urban improvement to be those difficulties that are associated with parking private cars in yards; namely, *the lack of parking spaces, difficulties driving through residential yards, and potential dangers that arise due to this* – 70.5% of the respondents mentioned this. Second place was occupied by *bad playgrounds* (monotonous and outdated playground equipment, their shortage, and the poor location of playgrounds) – 39.2%. The last of the three urgent urban improvement problems was *the lack of places for walking dogs* (and, as a result, violations of the rules for walking dogs by the residents) – 23.5%. Another 15–17% of the citizens complained about *the lack of bike lanes and bike parking lots, the lack of benches and recreation areas in the yards*, and *the poor condition of the green spaces*.

The experts identified a number of reasons for the current problems with the improvement of standard yards:

1. The low interest of stakeholders in high-quality public spaces (especially on the periphery – in the so-called 'dormitory areas' with low housing costs).
2. The motivation of developers to maximize their profits ("*to provide just a minimum set of amenities*"[1]).
3. The lack of interest among district administrations in considering the requests of citizens ("*There is no feedback and there is no mechanism to obtain it*").
4. Difficulties with consolidating neighborhood communities – the rigid boundaries of their activities, and the inability to do something even at the level of one's own yard. According to one of the experts, this was due to the fact that "*not so many urban residents care about the urban improvement around them – they would rather put up with what they have and be happy if nothing gets worse.*" In such a situation, the improvement of yards is secondary – *working with neighborhood communities should come first*.

Indeed, the telephone survey showed that the participation of Minsk residents in urban improvement cannot be called a popular practice – only 11.3% of urban residents regularly participate in it. Another 35.8% do it rarely – once or twice a year. About a quarter of Minsk residents (28.4%) is potentially interested in taking care of the urban environment. Approximately the same number (28.1%), however, do not plan to spend time and effort on improving their own yards (see Fig. 1). It can be assumed that, in the absence of any external efforts in this field, a little less than a third of Minsk residents will remain outside the zone of activity, virtually excluding themselves from the number of actors that are involved in creating the urban environment.
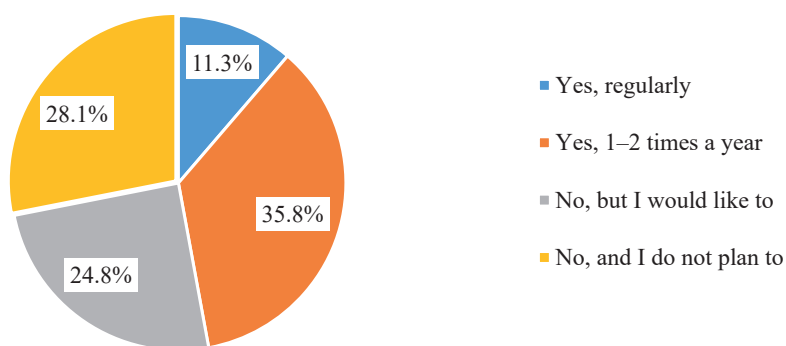

Figure 1. Participation of citizens in the improvements of their yards

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[1] Hereinafter, texts in italics indicate quotations from expert interviews.

The danger of such a situation lies –n the fact that, if the balance of activity in the triad of '*State – Business – Local Communities*' is disturbed, the cities begins to transform under the influence of the strongest actors (most often, the state and business); meanwhile, urban residents will be unable to protect their own interests and will be pushed aside to peripheral areas (their apartments, summer houses, etc.).

The positive moment is that, out of the 28.1% of urban residents who do not intend to participate in urban improvement in the near future, only 12.0% have completely ruled out such a possibility (they will not participate under any circumstances). Therefore, this situation may change. The residents of new houses (built after 2010) where condominiums[2] have been formed demonstrated the maximum willingness for self-government; 48.2% of them are willing to participate in improving their yard areas through various local self-government institutions. In addition, the residents of new districts are less willing to finance the improvement of yard areas through taxes and utility bills; more often than others, they would like to use the services of private service companies (which indirectly confirms their readiness for local self-government).

The experts named certain *factors that influence the activities of citizens*:

1. *Clear boundaries of yard areas* – when yards are closed and houses are combined into quarters, there is a feeling of the boundaries of "one's own" territory, etc. All of this can significantly increase the level of responsibility of urban residents and, therefore, their motivation to participate in urban improvement.

2. *The presence of stable neighborhood communities* – in such situations, interest in improving yards as well as control over their conditions is formed and maintained without any external influences.

3. *The practice of spending time together with neighbors* – the tradition of yard holidays and neighborly tea parties that draw the attention of urban residents to their yard areas as potential places for spending free time (extensions of their apartments).

4. *Simple and understandable mechanisms for independent transformation of yard areas* – the absence of overwhelming bureaucratic barriers to local activity where urban residents know how and what they can officially do in their yards.

The answers of Minsk residents that were received during the telephone interviews suggest that the possible prospects for local self-government lie precisely in the self-organization of grassroots structures that are formed on the bases of neighborhood communities (*so-called* '*grassroots activism*').

This conclusion correlates with *the most convenient form of financing the improvements of yard areas (in the opinion of Minsk residents)*. Less than half of the respondents (47.0%) are willing to pay utility bills to the state to maintain improvements of their yards, while the

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[2] A legal entity that is founded by the owners of residential premises that are located in one multi-apartment residential buildings within one adjoining territory or in several single-apartment houses and/or townhouses that are located on adjacent land plots in order to preserve and maintain their common property of joint household ownership, possession, and use of it as well as for other purposes that are provided for by this code and the condominium charter (the association of owners).

remaining 53% would like to be able to independently manage the finances that are intended for urban improvement (without the direct participation of the state). This means the appearance of so-called 'urban commons'; i.e., situations where urban residents seek to take the management of nearby areas under their actual control – to independently clean yard areas, landscape them, jointly install new equipment in playgrounds, restore recreation areas, etc. It is noteworthy that more than a quarter of Minsk residents (27.2%) expressed their willingness to direct their own financial resources to organize district and yard holidays; this indicates a growing demand for interaction with neighbors and the formation of an internal need to create local communities and actively participate in their lives.

Only 8.7% of the respondents would completely refuse to independently finance the improvements of their yard areas. It can be assumed that, in the current situation, only a small part of urban residents consciously refuse an active role in developing the urban environment, while the majority are willing to act as active subjects of transformation (under certain conditions).

COMMUNICATION WITH NEIGHBORS AS FACTOR IN ACTIVITY OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

It was noted earlier that one of the reasons to reject participating in urban improvement is the lack of acquaintances with neighbors, the low intensity of the contact with them, and the lack of a collective initiative. In this regard, the peculiarities of relations with neighbors can constitute one of the most powerful factors that influence the activities of local communities. This was confirmed by the results of the telephone survey – about a quarter of the respondents in Minsk (25.9%) do not participate in the improvement of their own yard because they do not know their neighbors and do not know where to start and who to contact. Therefore, *overcoming communication barriers between neighbors and improving their interactions can increase the levels of activity of urban residents*.

According to the survey, 71.2% of urban residents described the relations with their neighbors as good (with 14.2% of the respondents noting that the relations with their neighbors had improved over the past year). By contrast, only 29.6% of the respondents described their relations with the representatives of housing and utility services or condominiums as good. Only 15.4% considered their relations with the district administration to be good. The positive dynamics in the relations of urban residents with formal structures was minimal as well – only 6.7% of urban residents believe that their relations with the representatives of utility services had improved over the past year, and 2.4% had improved their relations with the district administration.

A general analysis of the interaction of Minsk residents with their neighbors, representatives of utility services, and district administration suggests that horizontal ties (with neighbors) are currently much stronger (and continue to strengthen) than vertical ties (with utilities and district administration). About one-quarter of the respondents (28.6%) are members of 'neighborly chats' (which is one of the signs of a formed stable neighborhood community). Urban residents who are members of a condominium interact much more often with their neighbors in neighborly chats (60.7%).

The survey data revealed a direct relationship between the state of neighborhood communication and the willingness of urban residents to participate in urban improvement; the better relations are between neighbors, the more often they communicate with each other (including over the Internet) and the more actively are urban residents to be involved in various practices to improve the urban environment. By contrast, no one devoted time to urban development on a regular basis among those respondents who described their relations with their neighbors as bad. Indeed, almost half of the urban residents (45.5%) who have not established neighborly communications do not plan to participate in urban improvement in the near future at all (for a comparison, this proportion is much lower among urban residents who have good relations with their neighbors – about 26%). Among those who do not chat with their neighbors, every third citizen does not plan to participate in the improvement, while this number is only every fifth among those who do communicate (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Relations with neighbors and participation in improvement correlation [%]

Participation in improvement	Relations with neighbors			
	good	rather good	rather bad	bad
Yes, regularly	14.9	3.3	0	0
Yes, 1–2 times a year	36.8	34.1	40.0	31.8
No, but I would like to	21.3	36.3	40.0	22.7
No, and I do not plan to	27.0	26.4	20.0	45.5

Table 2. Chatting on social media with neighbors and participation in improvement [%]

Participation in improvement	Chatting	No chatting
Yes, regularly	17.6	8.8
Yes, 1–2 times a year	39.5	34.3
No, but I would like to	23.5	25.3
No, and I do not plan to	19.3	31.6

Thus, 'neighborly chats' are an effective tool for forming local self-government institutions. They could potentially make a shift in the focus away from "sharing economy" toward the participatory ecosystem including the collection and extraction of urban data with implications for the regulatory influence of city governments (Barns, 2019).

'LOCAL CHATS' AS BASIS FOR URBAN PARTICIPATION

A qualitative analysis of the content of neighborly chats made it possible to divide them into two groups – '*For everyone*,' and '*For locals*.' This division is based on the hypothesis

that "the communication of local network communities in social media does not just take place in the form of 'public network conversations' but balances between two modes, which can be conveniently called '*neighborly mode*' and '*civic mode*'; these correspond to different types of network publics" (Pavlov, 2016, p. 48).

Yard chats '*For everyone*' are as open as possible – anyone can join in (one does not have to confirm their belonging to the 'yard' community), although the 'backbone' of the participation is usually made up of actual neighbors. Interaction is concentrated around both local problems (improvements of yards, organizations of holidays, etc.) and general political and social issues (there are no clear boundaries between these two areas). However, the spatial factor (directly adjacent territory) is of a secondary importance. The key criterion for presence in this type of chat is not the actual neighborhood but the similarities of the views and values – *that is, only those who share the value-based worldview of each other remain among the permanent participants*, while the 'dissenting' ones are removed from the chat by the administrator quickly enough. Such chats are, first of all, turning into political issues; internal discussions and contradictions are less likely to occur in them, participants as a rule openly demonstrate their political views (there may be calls for participation in actions, offers to sign petitions, etc.), and reposts of news from other chats (also predominantly political ones) can appear. Considering these circumstances, the majority of the participants in '*For everyone*' chats resort to the tactics of maximum anonymity (they use fictitious names, hide personal phone numbers, etc.); this causes certain difficulties in identifying 'locals' (neighbors) and 'strangers' (all of the others).

Yard chats '*For locals*' have a fundamental difference – joining them is possible only after confirming one's place of residence (the administrator performs the control function). The range of identification mechanisms in this case is quite wide – from a request to tell the chat administrator one's address to the request to show a photo of a passport registration page, share one's geolocation, or show the view from one's window. The strictness of the control practices that are used depends on how carefully the yard community guards its borders from 'strangers.' The predominant topics of the messages in the chats '*For locals*' are concentrated around local issues, although essential events that are taking place in the country may be discussed as well (such as elections, the recent constitutional reform, sanctions, etc.). An important feature of the chats '*For locals*' is that *the key criterion for being present in the chat is the actual neighborhood* – participants may not share each other's political views but can be in the same chat and interact exclusively on local issues ('*outside politics*'). In this regard, such a chat has a more debatable nature – conflicts may arise in it due to the different political views, which as a rule end by switching over to the domain of everyday issues (which is confirmed by quotations from chats: "*This chat is about the house, not about politics or the expressions of opinions. Some are against, some are for*"; "*It's a fact that people of different views live in our house*").

Despite the fact that the communication in both cases is tied to a certain urban space (residential yard), *the types of relationships that are formed in 'For everyone' and 'For locals' chats are different*. Communication in the chats of the first type ('*For everyone*') is based on the principle of an '***online community***,' while in the chats 'For locals,' we are now dealing with '***network societies***' (using the terminology of Dutch new-media theorist

Jan van Dijk (van Dijk, 2006). 'Network societies' that are formed on the basis of 'For local neighbors' chats do not solely depend on the local network platform that is used – they can combine various means of online and offline communications (including giving preferences to the latter – for example, participating in yard holidays). In other words, 'network societies' were not solely created thanks to Telegram channels; this means that they can maintain their existence without them (provided that the connecting element is preserved – namely, the neighbors' interest in each other and their yard). In the case of an 'online community,' their existence depends directly on the well-being of the digital platform that it is based upon (after such chats are blocked, the established communities as a rule turn out to be unviable in an offline environment).

'Network societies' are 'communities of practice' that are based on something *common*, not communication; i.e., they are based on common interests that are concentrated in a certain territory that is perceived by all members of the community as "their own." They allow urban residents to see alternative points of view, clearly show the diversity of existing views, develop tolerance and form the ability to find common ground, reach compromises, and develop generally accepted rules of communication – first as 'chat rules' ("*Please, do not descend to insults – we will all continue to live in the same house*"[3]), and subsequently as universal rules of communication ("*Let us hold events that will unite people and not divide us further*"). Due to the fairly strict moderation, the spontaneous communication that occurs in 'network societies' ('networked public talks' (Walker, 2011)) **has a chance to develop into a special form of political culture**. The boundaries of one's 'right to the city' are not always correctly defined by neighbors; this often leads to local conflicts (especially in the context of a socio-political split). In everyday online communication, private interests (for example, the desire to live in a well-maintained yard) are articulated by many users (parameters and criteria for improving the yard that are acceptable to all are developed) and gradually move into the plane of 'generally significant topics' (the desire to have access to the decision-making that concerns the improvement of one's yard); after this, they become the basis for the formation of new values (civil rights and freedoms, participation, responsibility, etc.) – "acting as highly participatory ecosystems for value-sharing means" (Barns, 2019).

In these processes, digital platforms go beyond an instrumental role and become active participants in urban transformations. By facilitating more efficient value-sharing between platform participants, platform ecosystems have been described as "sharing economies" (Barns, 2019). Platforms continually reinforce the intentional interdependencies between the personal and the algorithmic, restructure the nature of interpersonal interaction just as significantly as they restructure coordinates and corral the distribution of information. The results of the survey showed the relationship between getting to know one's neighbors and participating in collective practices – the more actively urban residents communicate with their neighbors (including outside 'neighborly chats'), the more likely they are to participate in improving adjacent areas, yard holidays, joint tea parties, etc. Such hybrids of physical and digital, material and social *are quite often mobilized within the framework of everyday self-government and actually become a "school for democracy."*

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[3] Hereinafter, texts in italics indicate quotations from chats.

Unfortunately, the heyday of local neighborhoods chats in Belarus was rather short – in less than a year, many local Telegram chats (including the interactive map of neighborly chats – dze.chat) were recognized as extremist groups by the authorities. The practice of holding the participants of local neighborhood chats administratively liable has endured in Belarus recently. All of this has happened against the background of the serious administrative pressures on civil society (self-organized non-government local festivals are now prohibited, urbanistic NGOs were closed down by court order in 2021, etc.) which displaces the grass-root activism by the top-down administrative decision-making position. For the time being, it is difficult to judge how the new bans have affected the activities of neighborhood communities due to the lack of sufficient empirical data in this area. One can only assume that, when the existing neighborhood chats become more private and secured, the participation of the citizens in them turns out to be more cautious and the grassroots activism involves communication with the city administration to a lesser extent.

The relevance of the study is that it indicates the fundamentally important role of digital communication tools in community management and urban participation. There are no possibilities for urban participation without horizontal interaction, self-government, and local leadership. The weakening of horizontal interaction (by the local chat limitation) and its displacement by an administrative vertical will definitely lead to communication gaps between society and the state. On the contrary, strong neighborhood solidarity could influence the sense of citizens' responsibility and willingness to act together in pursuing common goals – that is to say, it contributes to the participation turn in urban development. For local authorities, urban participations could be a chance for economic relief and the stabilization of a representative democracy system (Dellenbaugh, 2015).

By participating in accessible ways in the transformation of the urban environment, urban residents feel their own importance and involvement in urban life and form a responsible attitude toward the city/town (they learn not to wait for the initiative 'from above' but to act 'here and now'). With this approach, public places 'grow out' of the already existing habitable space without destroying it but, on the contrary, focusing on the needs of the people that live in the neighborhood and turning into a tool for forming a strong local community. In the course of the joint solutions of emerging problems of urban improvement, the structuring of neighborhood communities occurs, the search for resources and supporters is carried out, and local leaders are identified. The resulting group structures and relationships are often quite stable and persist after completing collective improvement activities, making it possible to maintain the high quality of the urban environment. It is 'neighborly chats' that provide urban residents with the opportunity to 'become visible' and draw the attention of city/town managers to the opinion of the 'ordinary person.' It is worth noting that, in the interpretation of David Harvey (Harvey, 2011), 'the right to the city' means (among other things) the right to 'stay' in the city; i.e., the ability to resist the mechanisms and processes (economic, political, and cultural) that seem to 'force' urban residents outside the city limits (for example, forcing them to leave in the event of a significant rise in housing prices or making it impossible to exist in public spaces by introducing bans on gatherings and mass events).

Belarus faced serious domestic and external challenges during the period of 2020–2021. Civil freedom – the most important intangible asset – is the key factor for countering them.

According to the experts of the Fraser Institute[4], the main recommendations for countries whose governments want to create institutions for rapid, long-term, and inclusive economic growth are the following: operational legal and administrative institutions for the protection of private property, the elimination of conflicts of interest in public administration agencies, free trade as a mandatory element of competition, and a *solidary society – as a full-fledged partner in an open dialogue with business and government*. Implementing these simple tips turns a rigid bureaucratized economy into a truly entrepreneurial and popular one. Thus, rehabilitating the digital tools of local self-government (in particular, 'neighborly chats') can be one of the most effective steps for the nearest development.

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[4] https://www.fraserinstitute.org.

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