ZOiS Conference 2018

Contested Spaces

2 March 2018

Abstracts

Panel 1: Contested Spaces between State and Society
Chair: Mihai Varga (Freie Universität Berlin)

Nadja Douglas (ZOiS)

Evolving protest culture and trust in institutions in the Armenian context

As part of the ongoing research project "Public initiatives and state power structures – a post-Soviet comparison", this paper focuses on the evolution of protest and policing culture in Armenia. Recent social and political unrest, such as during the "Electric Yerevan" protests in 2015, have demonstrated the destabilising potential of social grievances and discontent. The Armenian authorities have reacted by displaying a mixture of weakness and intransigence and by considerably strengthening the law enforcement sector. The paper draws on findings from interview narratives (collected in Yerevan in spring 2017) and extensive document analysis in relation with results from public opinion polls on trust and confidence in state structures, notably the law enforcement sector. Emphasis is placed on the question how changes in protest and policing culture have a transforming effect on state-society relations in general and the development of public policy in the country.

Christian Fröhlich (Higher School of Economics, Moscow)

Urban activism and citizenship under post-Soviet conditions: the Muscovites' struggle for public space

This paper studies local urban activism in the semi-authoritarian context of contemporary Russia. It takes Moscow as the cumulative place of post-Soviet neoliberal, capitalist urban development and shows why and how Muscovites oppose it by engaging in local informal initiatives. This original research employs data from interviews with residents organizing and participating in activism against new apartment blocks, radial highways and churches in residential districts as well as against the diminishing of public parks and recreational areas. It reveals a new form of citizenship in contemporary post-Soviet urban settings, which is connected to the cultural meaning of property and a changing nature of state-society relations. These localized forms of urban protest offer individual participation in collective meaning-making and mobilization that is able to overcome widespread withdrawal into private life and the lack of experience with public politics, which often is described as a post-Soviet condition of the civil sphere. Thus, contemporary urban activism re-politicizes public space without engaging into party politics or central state structures. The backyard and the immediate neighbourhood can therefore become nurturing grounds for 'politics of encounter' (Andy Merrifield). The analysis will systemize reasons and conditions for everyday encounters of neighbours to become politicized and develop into collective mobilizations. Attention will also be paid to ways of how residents undergo strong limitation and control over public space as well as how they deal with channelling and cooptation strategies in an increasingly authoritarian Russian context and under 'authoritative neoliberalism' of Moscow´s urban governance in particular.

Tatiana Golova (ZOiS)

Politics of the practical: Finding common ground and boundary work by activists in Novosibirsk

Local single-issue mobilizations have been discussed as a prevalent mode of activism in present-day Russia. Against the background of perceived de-politicization and distrust towards the official public realm, such self-organised protests look inspirational. Yet, they are seldom able to transcend the limits of localized life-worlds and address systemic topics, or to frame local contentious issues in a universal way. This paper argues that the development of non-particularist interpretations of localized conflicts is connected to the challenge of establishing cooperation between protest actors. Drawing on a case study of recent socioeconomic protests in the third-largest Russian city of Novosibirsk, the paper explores how actors of different political orientation create organizational and discursive spaces of cooperation. The empirical data consists of in-depth interviews with activists and document analysis. Further, the analysis demonstrates how activists establish differences between their respective we-group and others. In particular, I will show how they accentuate boundaries to the public, first-time protesters, and fellow activists. These dimensions are especially important to answer the question how opportunities for sustained cooperation and mutual acceptance of contentious actors are perceived, created, or diminished.

Panel 2: Public Spaces between Secular and Religious Claims
Chair: Regina Elsner (ZOiS)

Alexander Agadjanian (Russian State University of the Humanities)

Secular/religious borders in Russia: Multiple, questioned, elusive

This paper will summarize trends in how 'the religious' is constructed and interpreted in today's Russia. It will attempt to draw the line between 'the religious' and 'the secular' and to catch the way it is moving. The paper will overview aspects/levels where this moving, elusive line manifests itself: physical environment and urban landscape; mass media and virtual space; markets and commodities; non-commercial 'moral economy'; bodily practices; artistic life; education systems; legal casuistry; political discourses; bioethics and medicine; national historiosophy and post-memory; finally, individual moral self-fashioning. The de-secularization seems obvious, played with by the ruling regime, but the secular resistance, both passive and articulated, looks strong, and cannot be ignored.

Tsypylma Darieva (ZOiS)

Religious pluralization: Popular beliefs and informal practices in Azerbaijan

The sacred constitute a hierarchy of challenges for contemporary authorities in Azerbaijan as urban public spaces are appropriated and claimed by a variety of actors in traditional and innovative ways. Within de-secularization processes in the post-Soviet Caucasus, we observe internal pluralization in Islam on one hand, and homogenizing projects on the other hand with the tendency to purify, to take control over 'informal' hybrid folk practices and incorporate into national narratives. In Azerbaijan, different groups (local and transnational clergy, new 'purist' practitioners) increasingly contest informal shrines, pilgrimage sites and popular beliefs related to Shia Islam, however the state does not seem to have a clear project regarding the strict segregation between the 'little' and the 'great' traditions. This paper discusses how 'vernacular' Islam and small-scale worship sites project their visions on religious boundaries and how these convivial public places adjust to new political and social realities in Baku.

Catherine Wanner (Pennsylvania State University)
Martyrs and the creation of an affective atmosphere of religiosity in Kyiv

Religion was an undercurrent during the Maidan protests in Kyiv in 2013-14, and remains so given the hybrid war on the Ukrainian-Russian border, because it plays a key role in defining space in terms of sovereignty, borders and sacredness. The popular turned official commemoration of the murdered protesters have turned the Kyiv city centre into a space of death. Personalized, shrine-like graves mark where each person was killed and small chapels replete with religious objects, such as icons and candles, foster an atmosphere of religiosity that creates attachments – or alienation – to persons, places and events. As such, urban space has become a site of politicized place-making and self-making, situating individuals in newly redefined political and cultural spaces. The projection of injustice, struggle and death onto urban space mediates the ongoing twin processes of producing the materiality of urban space and constructing the meanings of that space and the encounters that may or may not take place there. By considering affectivity, urban space and political ritual together, we see how politicized subjectivities and understandings of citizenship are interactively created as well as how urban affect is generated through the materiality of death. Affective experiences and the presence of martyrs serve as vehicles to validate particular interpretations of the recent past with the aim of forging a new governing and moral order.

Keynote Lecture

Mark Beissinger (Princeton University)
The Urban Advantage in Revolution and Struggle for Control of Public Space

The talk will explore the shift of revolution since the end of the Cold War to cities and the rise of "urban civic revolts"—i.e., revolts that attempt to mobilize as many people as possible in central urban spaces in a concentrated period, thereby paralyzing government and society with the hope of inducing regime collapse. In contrast to rural rebellions and urban armed revolts, urban civic revolts attempt to take strategic advantage of the spaces between buildings — the empty space of the public square and the boulevard — to mobilize large numbers in order to disrupt political and commercial life. This type of revolt demonstrates an extraordinarily high rate of success due largely to the ways in which it can effectively leverage the revolutionary advantages of cities: the power of numbers; the thickened presence of communications networks; and the vulnerability of concentrated centres of power and commerce to disruption. As this talk will explore, the emergence and outcome of urban civic revolts to a large extent reflects a struggle between regimes and oppositions for control over public space — through its design and the regulation and policing of its use.