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## ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

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### **URBAN ACTIVISTS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ANTI-CORRUPTION: A FRAMING APPROACH**

This work proposes to investigate anti-corruption by examining how corruption and the strategies to counteract it are framed by urban activists. I argue that the increasing importance of urban initiatives in strengthening citizenship and keeping local authorities accountable in Russia deserves the attention not only of social movements scholars but also those studying corruption. In fact, more institutionalized organizations, whose goal is the promotion of anti-corruption and democratic principles, struggle to position themselves as mediators between civil society and the authorities due to the lack of trust from citizens and government laws that limit their activities. In this context, informal grassroots initiatives, as in the case of Kaliningrad analysed below, are particularly important, as they can become 'laboratories' where citizenship is strengthened and implemented, and knowledge is produced. Applying a framing perspective, this study shows how corruption is perceived and framed by activists not only as the abuse of power for private gain, but also as immoral behaviour. Here the lack of competence and the lack of respect towards citizens are also framed as corrupt behaviour. The strategies and activities to make the authorities more accountable, such as increasing transparency and citizen engagement in the policy-making process, are directly linked with the way corruption is framed. In fact, activists legitimize their activities as a professionalized and qualified response to the incompetent approach of authorities and their unethical behaviour, emphasizing the educational role they play.

*Keywords:* Russia, anti-corruption, urban grassroots initiatives, framing perspective

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This article proposes to broaden the research approach usually applied to the study of civil society actors engaged in anti-corruption in Russia by focusing on urban activists. If we consider the literature published so far on anti-corruption in this country, we notice how researchers mainly devoted their attention to organizations and initiatives directly involved in this field or to actors whose main goal was the promotion of democratic values and principles. This focus is not peculiar to Russian studies but reflects a standard approach generally adopted that echoes the importance given by the international anti-corruption discourse to these actors. However, I argue that in this way we risk excluding from the analysis players whose goals and actions can pressure governments to adopt more transparent practices, to become more accountable, and to include civil society in the decision-making process, thereby strengthening anti-corruption principles and their implementation.

The urban social movements that have emerged in this country since the early 2010s represent an interesting case to investigate how citizens develop strategies to keep authorities accountable for their decisions in parallel to organizations and initiatives whose goal is the promotion of anti-corruption and democratic principles. In this article, I analyse the case of Kaliningrad by drawing on the literature on the framing perspective to explain how these initiatives understand corruption and how the strategies to counteract it are framed. Building on analyses of the practices used by activists in these contexts, this article focuses on the link between these initiatives and anti-corruption, showing how in the case of Russian civil society, these spaces can serve as 'laboratories,' where democratic and anti-corruption principles and practices are developed, unlike more institutionalized organizations that struggle to gain trust and support from citizens.

### **The case of Kaliningrad**

The urban activism that has emerged in Kaliningrad over the last years is directly connected with the history of the city, but it is also shaped by a transformation that occurred at the federal level in terms of urban planning. One of the main focuses of the urban initiatives is the preservation of spaces and architectural symbols that represent the specific historical background of the territory. Founded by the Prussians in the 13th century as Königsberg, after the Second World War the city became part of the Soviet Union and was renamed Kaliningrad. Today it is characterized by a mix of German and Soviet-era architecture, together with the pre-Soviet gates and walls that once defended it (Sezneva 2013; Siegień 2016). The question of how to develop the urban planning of Kaliningrad, while maintaining its specific features, has been widely

discussed over the years. In 2020, the decision to demolish the House of the Soviets and the Dvukhyarusny Bridge provoked harsh criticism by some citizens. The authorities justified their decisions by claiming that these constructions were no longer usable due to their bad condition, although, at the moment, only the demolition of the House of the Soviets has been confirmed (NewKaliningrad 2020; Ria Novosti 2021). However, these two were only some of the latest urban projects that fuelled the friction between some citizens and the local administration.

Discussions concerning the development of the centre of the city, while preserving its specific historical features, are not new. In 2014 and 2015 two international architecture competitions were organized: one to reconceptualize the historical centre, the other to propose a project to be realized on the site of the former Königsberg castle, where the House of the Soviets also stands, the construction of which began in the 1970s but was never completed. However, the projects remained on paper, and the question of how to develop the city centre was temporally archived until 2020.

Despite the historical background that makes the city of Kaliningrad unique within the Russian context, there are other aspects that link the experience of its activists with those of other regions. As explained in the 'Strategy of the socio-economic development of the city of Kaliningrad' (2020), launched by the administration and projected to be completed by 2035, emphasis is given to the strengthening of conditions that can foster tourism and make the city more attractive to investors. These aspects were discussed in other studies on urban activism in Russia, which considered them both as possible resources for profits for the elites and triggers that could lead to the collective mobilization of citizens (Zhel'nina, Tykanova 2019). In the case analysed here, the link between the concern for the role played by neoliberal urbanism and personal interests in the decision-making process, and the meaning attributed to the historical background of the city, create the basis for the framing processes.

The article is based on ten semi-structured interviews collected in the period between 2019 and 2021 with urban activists of grassroots initiatives based in Kaliningrad, and two interviews with experts conducted in Moscow in October 2020 and February 2021. The data collected were contextualized by the analysis of open sources.

### **Proposing a different theoretical approach to investigate anti-corruption in Russia**

The anti-corruption literature that focuses on social movements mainly consists of studies that analyse incentives and the mobilization of resources (Della Porta 2018). In Russia, the link between social movements and anti-corruption was investigated considering the potential collaboration of opposition and civil society, due to the increasing interconnection between the two since the protests

of 2011–2012 (White 2015). However, the anti-corruption literature on Russia more generally usually devotes the attention to organizations whose aim is to counteract corruption and promote democratic principles to consider the outcomes of anti-corruption policies, the barriers that limit them, and their dialogue with the state (Shelley 2005; Schmidt-Pfister 2012; Chiarvesio 2020). This approach reflects the international discourse that emphasizes the role played by more institutionalized civil society organizations.

I argue that this limits the understanding of civil society engaged in anti-corruption and that a further step forward has to be taken. In fact, the increasing importance of urban initiatives in Russia in fostering citizenship provides an interesting case to analyse how activists themselves frame their understanding of corruption and, therefore, of the lack of transparency and their response to it.

Domestic and foreign scholars have contributed to the production of a notable body of literature on urban movements in Russia investigating different aspects such as the practices and strategies developed by activists, the barriers determined by the structure of political opportunities, and the mobilization process (Aidukaite, Fröhlich 2015; Clément 2015; Moskaleva, Tykanova 2016; Shevtsova, Bederson 2017; Chernova, Koroleva 2018; Shatalova, Tykanova 2018). These works also show how activists identify with the problem of corruption and the abuse of public office for private gain, one of the main reasons behind the decisions taken by authorities that concern the public space. In this article, I propose a framing perspective to disclose how corruption is perceived and understood in the context of urban activism in Kaliningrad, and I analyse the link between these framing processes of corruption and the activities they carry out, to better understand the forms anti-corruption can acquire in different contexts.

The idea that activists actively construct meanings began to draw the attention of scholars investigating social movements in the 1980s. The shift from studying structural constraints and applying the rational actor theory to investigate the beliefs and ideas behind social movements, and the space they were operating in is referred by scholars as the 'cultural turn' (Williams 2004). Until then studies would mainly apply a structuralist approach that focused on resources and opportunities, neglecting the ways in which participants of social movements would actively construct frames through which they would 'filter and organize information about the social world' (Travaglio 2014: 6). Actors have been seen since as signifying agents, directly involved in the process of producing identities, guiding action, and defining other actors (Snow, Benford 1988). This approach borrowed from the concept of frame introduced by Erving Goffman as 'schemata of interpretation' that allow individuals to 'locate, perceive, identify and label' experiences (1974: 21), making them meaningful. Scholars began to focus on agency and meaning, investigating them through the prism of emotions, identities, and framing processes (Benford, Snow 2000; Flesher Fominaya 2010; Jasper, Owens 2014). In this study, I analyse how activists frame corruption and their response to this issue considering what is referred to as the diagnostic and

prognostic frame, i.e. the 'identification of a problem and attribution of blame or casualty <...> and the identification of strategies, tactics, and targets' (Snow, Benford 1988:200–201).

### **Urban activists and anti-corruption: a framing perspective**

According to a Levada Center annual report (2021), corruption is the aspect that most characterizes Russia, an opinion that remained constant since 1998, although the percentage of people agreeing with the statement reduced over time. These findings are reflected in the public outrage provoked by corruption scandals over the years that caused protests such as those in 2011–2012, identified by scholars as the event that laid the foundation for the formation of urban activism, that later began to focus on local practical issues (Chernova, Koroleva 2018; Tykanova, Khokhlova 2020). The role played by these initiatives and movements in the Russian context is particularly important as they represent a development for a civil society that in the past was labelled as passive or shrinking, due to the low trust and engagement of citizens, and where the activities of advocacy-oriented organizations are limited by the regulations introduced by the government in recent years (Ljubownikow et al. 2013; Moser, Skripchenko 2018). In fact, these initiatives seem to be able to bring citizens together for the common good, a goal that more institutionalized organizations have struggled to achieve in Russia as well as in other post-Soviet countries (Ishkanian 2015). One expert of civil society and anti-corruption explains:

In recent years, in Russia, there is energy coming from the bottom, which is just manifested in the fact that there is a demand for real self-government. These local movements are truly democratic, they demand to regain control of their territory. This can be called civil society, as it is understood by the liberal model, since it is not political and leads to solidarity (Moscow, expert and researcher, February 2021).

It is precisely for the potential of these initiatives to become spaces where democratic principles are learnt and implemented that their role is interesting from the point of view of anti-corruption. In Russia, the civil society engaged directly in this field has progressively become more 'domestic' following the approval of the laws that regulate the third sector that limited the possibility to receive external funding, leading to the closure of many organizations and research centres. Besides the Russian chapter of Transparency International, there are other organizations, such as the Anti-corruption foundation and the National Anti-corruption committee, that operate in the country; in addition, several organizations were established within the framework of the National Plans to Counteract Corruption approved since 2008. However, the politicization of the field, the status of 'foreign agents' that some of these organizations hold, and the specific development of civil society since the fall of the Soviet Union restrain their impact in terms of strengthening citizenship skills within society, as

they struggle to be identified as mediators between them and the government by citizens. Another expert in civil society and anti-corruption explains:

People don't know much about them [anti-corruption organizations]. And they consider institutionalized organizations as a complaint book. As lawyers. They come to them as to lawyers, not as to civil society organizations. And if it is necessary to join forces, then this is most likely to happen informally. <...> The only instrument of these organizations are protests, but these won't lead to social change (Moscow, expert and researcher, November 2020).

According to the literature on anti-corruption, civil society is expected to monitor the implementation of anti-corruption policies, strengthen accountability, and participate in the decision-making process (Ackerman 2013). However, in the case of Russia, the role played by anti-corruption organizations in engaging citizens and reinforcing democratic skills and social accountability, beyond more politicized initiatives that use mainly protests as call for action, is limited. I propose here to investigate how urban activists frame both the problem of corruption and the solution to counteract it, to understand how these initiatives can represent a different approach that puts the 'victims' of this corrupt system at the centre of the action, strengthening social accountability, by emphasizing the importance of educating and responding to the decisions that appear to them unjust and the consequence of a corrupt system with knowledge and citizenship skills.

### **Framing corruption and anti-corruption**

From the interviews it emerges how activists associate the lack of transparency in the decision-making process to the corrupt behaviour of public officials, reflecting an understanding of the problem supported by the anti-corruption discourse of both the government and the opposition that focuses mainly on high-ranking officials (Pavlova 2020). Discussing the situation with the Dvukhyarusny Bridge in Kaliningrad, an activist of an urban initiative explains:

All these stories unfold because some gigantic money is looming, which some people can take possession of and they are fighting for it. <...> When they talk about tearing down a bridge or build something, they are actually talking about cutting the dough.<...> This is how the pyramid of corruption is built in this country (Kaliningrad, grassroots initiative, February 2021).

The scarcity of information available concerning the decisions taken, the low level of public participation in these processes, and the fact that decisions are often retracted are framed as corrupt behaviour. As explained by the same interviewee when discussing the difficulty to gain access to the expert appraisals used by authorities to make decisions concerning some historical buildings, *'if you don't show the information, it means you're swindling.'* Thus, the feeling of being cheated and of being deprived of the right to influence the

decisions that concern their place frames the idea of injustice and corruption. Studies on social movements emphasize the role played by the feeling of injustice which 'triggers moral indignation' (Gamson 1992: 7). Often at the basis of urban initiatives there is a sense of injustice for being excluded from the decision-making processes that concern public spaces (Fröhlich 2020). And it is through collective action that individuals respond to this problem by trying to exercise their rights and building an active citizenship and community.

The claims about the supposed presence of corrupt mechanisms in the decision-making processes that concern urban projects were also discussed in other studies on Russian social movements (Tykanova, Khokhlova 2020). However, it is interesting to notice how in this case the understanding of corruption acquires nuance that goes beyond the universal definitions of 'abuse of public office for private gains' (World Bank 1997) or 'abuse of entrusted power for private gain' (Transparency International 2020) proposed by international organizations, becoming a synonym of unprincipled and immoral behaviour:

We don't use any longer the word 'corrupt' only in the Russian meaning, such as bribes, but in the English meaning as well. The government is corrupt because it does not know how to communicate with the population, it is guided by the wrong principles (Kaliningrad, grassroots initiative, August 2019).

Corruption is framed as a problem that does not concern only the enrichment of public officials, but their attitude towards citizens and their grievances. The lack of transparency and openness of the decision-making processes is framed as corrupt behaviour, and those who are supposed to work in the interest of citizens are accused of showing little respect for their opinion. Criticisms to the neoliberal approach to urban planning often emerge from the analysis of the interviews collected, together with the feeling of being treated with disrespect. Discussing the strategy of urban planning proposed by local authorities, an activist says that she/he stopped using the word 'improvement' (*blagoustroistvo*) because she/he considered it to be 'insulting.' As remarked by Anna Shatalova and Elena Tykanova (2018), the instruments, such as public hearings that should enable a dialogue between citizens and local authorities are perceived as an 'imitation' of collaboration, and the attitude of local authorities, especially on social networks, is seen by most activists as patronizing:

They have a public page on social networks where they use an inappropriate way of talking with citizens. Sometimes it is clear who they are talking to... 'There are some activists who blah blah.' It is awful. It is disrespectful (Kaliningrad, grassroots initiative, February 2021).

Another activist added: *'The communication format is arrogant, it does not make you want to talk with them. On social networks they often use wordings that are in between a joke and rudeness'* (Kaliningrad, grassroots initiative, February 2021). By defining representatives of local governmental bodies as corrupt and

without principles, activists create the opposition us/them that enables the construction of a collective identity, the 'we-ness,' fundamental for the development of a sense of collective agency, the action component of collective identity (Snow 2001: 198). Identity is directly linked with movement participation and its construction is crucial in the framing process; in fact, by situating actors within the context and attributing specific features and characteristics to them, activists can legitimize their role (Hunt, Benford 2004: 185; Benford, Snow 2000). In the case analysed here activists frame as 'others' not only representatives of the government but also part of the civil society that collaborates with them, who are defined as 'pocket activists' (*karmannye obschestvenniki*) for they do not defend the interests of society but actually support authorities:

Once in a post they wrote that they were actively working with society to solve a problem. We asked who these people were as no one had invited us. It turned out that they were some pocket activists and we told them so. They answered they would ban us from the (social network) page. They always try to sully our reputation. <...> These people are elected to work in our interests but they are so corrupt that they don't even realize they have such role (Kaliningrad, grassroots initiative, February 2021).

In this way activists construct for themselves a collective identity that is based on high ethical standards and moral behaviour, towards both authorities and other civil society actors. As mentioned before, the meaning attached to the historical symbols of the city plays a crucial role in defying their identity. An activist explains:

At the meeting there was a person who fights for germanization and he said that the bridge has to be destroyed as it is not an historical object. But this is ridiculous, because the bridge is the battlefield where our soldiers fought and then Soviet engineers gave it a new form (Kaliningrad, grassroots initiative, February 2021).

Place-identity is what Åshild Lappegard Hauge defines as a 'a substructure of self-identity', and it can consist of beliefs, values, perceptions, memories (2007: 46). In the case of Kaliningrad, activists position themselves as those who have the commitment to defend the history and identity of their city against the personal interests of the authorities. The sense of injustice arises also by the confrontation with the experiences of neighbouring countries that share with Kaliningrad a multi-layered cultural background. In the interviews, activists often refer to examples of urban renewal of historical places that were conducted in Poland and the Baltic republics. Furthermore, the proximity with Scandinavian countries and the possibility to visit them and to participate in joint projects are experiences that frame the perception of 'how things should work' in terms of urban projects but also the understanding of the activities to carry out within their initiatives. This aspect was already discussed by Karine Clément (2015) who argued that the possibility to compare living standards

with neighbouring countries is the main reason that led to the mass protest movement in the city in 2009–2010. Describing the exchange programs between the Kaliningrad region and Sweden, an activist says:

They had a lot of programs aimed at getting acquainted with their countries and with their approach to any kind of problems. That is, environmental, transport, and educational. <...> They are educational projects. We were taught how to live. <...> But they have a completely different system, they [organization and initiatives] receive directly the money... here it depends on the top, on their personal interests (Kaliningrad, grassroots initiative, August 2019).

The framing of the problem is directly linked to the solutions to counteract it proposed by activists. As mentioned above, the literature on anti-corruption emphasizes the importance of civil society in monitoring state bodies, evaluating policies adopted and their implementation, enhancing awareness within society and developing citizenship. Although urban movements and initiatives are not directly engaged in anti-corruption, their activities are important to increase the awareness of citizens about the decisions taken, to educate people about what could be done, and to strengthen the involvement of individuals. Discussing the above-mentioned decision to demolish Dvukhyarusny Bridge, an activist explains:

Our project in origin was started as a citizen initiative, but now it has become professional. <...> They [local administration officials] don't do what we do. They can't, they are incompetent. We asked different experts to provide a balanced report on the state of the bridge. They [the administration] ask one company, the one that says what they want. But you need to compare different expertise to make a decision and our expertise says the bridge can stand. <...> We create questionnaires where people can say their opinion on how they would like the city to be. We have become much more competent than they are in different fields, from urban development to historical heritage. <...> Now we have developed the skills necessary to make our voice heard and to respond to their decisions adequately (Kaliningrad, grassroots initiative, February 2021).

The production of knowledge fosters the coordination of disconnected personal experiences and provides with a common orientation for making claims and produce change (Della Porta, Pavan 2017: 305). In these ways initiatives develop participatory practices and replace the role played by more institutionalized organizations engaged in the promotion of democratic and anti-corruption principles. Moreover, they frame the way their message is perceived by their (potential) audience (Benford, Snow 2000: 630), strengthening the feeling of injustice and lack of transparency that reinforces their collective identity, the opposition to 'them,' positioning themselves as the legitimate actors in the urban space. By conducting surveys, organizing workshops, engaging experts, and doing research, activists react to the decisions taken and the barriers that exclude them from the decision-making process, forcing local authorities to be more accountable and transparent. The framing of the representatives of the

authority as incompetent legitimizes and reinforces their role, positioning themselves as those knowledgeable and competent. Discussing the work of local authorities, another activist says:

They don't do any research, they don't have specialists who could collect data, they don't ask citizens what they like. <...> All they do is cut down trees, instead of planning any strategic things for the city... to discuss, to educate people. <...> There I don't see people who we could trust, people with the concept of the common good, they only think about the dough. <...> We are planning to try to widen our audience, to involve less 'prepared' people <...> but the question is how to maintain the educational component, so that people can also reflect about something and begin to think about it (Kaliningrad, grassroots initiative, February 2021).

By getting more professionalized, these initiatives have begun to play an important role in strengthening citizenship skills, creating the conditions to respond to the decisions taken by local authorities not only through protests, but counterbalancing their power with competences and knowledge.

## Conclusion

This article has explored urban activism from the point of view of anti-corruption. Focusing on how the problem of corruption is framed, this study explains that, in the context analysed here, corruption acquires a more nuanced meaning being associated not only with a rational choice, the enrichment of government representatives, but also with immoral behaviour, with a lack of respect for citizens and their rights. Through the analysis of the framing of the activities carried out by activists, it emerges how their work is presented as a response to the accusations of incompetence and irreverence directed against the authorities. By developing the skills necessary to engage citizens, conduct research, teach citizenship skills, and produce knowledge, these initiatives try to contrast themselves favourably with the authorities, and legitimize their role and grievances. Thus, by becoming more professional, these urban initiatives transform into spaces that aim to counterbalance local state bodies, exercising pressure over them, trying to keep them more accountable and transparent, playing an important role in strengthening anti-corruption.

Therefore, with this article, I argue that anti-corruption scholars should broaden their approach to the study of civil society by including actors that, although not directly engaged in this field, strengthen anti-corruption and democratic principles within society and hold authorities accountable, increasing the transparency of policy-making processes. Scholars should approach the field of anti-corruption by trying to broaden their understanding of the actors that can counteract corruption, by looking beyond more institutionalized organizations that, in contexts such as Russia, are limited in their activities by government pressure and do not hold the trust necessary to become mediators between citizens and authorities.

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