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From Systemic Underdevelopment to Basic Urban Maintenance: National Priority Projects in the Russian Periphery

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ABSTRACT

The case of urban development in the Russian periphery is often overlooked in the scholarly efforts to theorize the center-periphery dynamics characteristic of the post-socialist contexts, not least in the case of Russia. Consequently, the analysis of urban development initiatives in the regions and provinces defies the logic of large-scale urban projects with characteristic subdominant relations between the state and the private sector, since the latter and the former are tied in competition for limited federal resources. We delve into the particularities of the center-periphery dynamics through the case of the Vologda River embankment renovation project, paying particular attention to the decision-making processes, lack of transparency, and bureaucratic hustle in response to the civil protest—all characteristic of a distinctive, though common across Russia's peripheral towns, dilemma of systemic underdevelopment vs basic urban maintenance. We rely on discourse analysis of legal and regulatory documents, project plans, meetings proceedings and official correspondence between departmental agencies, and media posts created by the local protest groups during the period of 2018–2019. Through this analysis, we showcase not only the asymmetries of power relations in the post-socialist periphery, but also bureaucratic constraints and uncertainties that often amount to a standstill situation with uncertain prospects for future improvement.

KEYWORDS

underdevelopment, urban renewal, urban conflict, center-periphery relations, Russia

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Introduction

The nature of the post-socialist transition left urban planners wondering about how to explain its dramatically divergent regional outcomes. Much has been written on the logic of post-socialist urban planning in large cities across Central and Eastern Europe, contributing greatly to the global debates in comparative urban studies (Hirt et al, 2016; Müller & Trubina, 2020; Tuvikene, 2016). While focusing on the neoliberal nature of post-Soviet urban governance, local stories from the peripheries were often left behind the scenes. As common urban development trajectories tend to result in the mass privatization of public resources, extraction and concentration of the wealth in the hands of the few, the commodification of urban space within the major urban centers, or prevalence of urban mega-projects and mega-events that prioritize large-scale private investments over democratic processes (Büdenbender & Zupan, 2017; Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2019; Kinossian & Morgan, 2014; Müller & Pickles, 2015), peripheral regions and smaller towns are seen to lag behind, without the prospect of even reaching such “high developmental” outcomes (Zubarevich, 2013). This contrast between the center and periphery is particularly characteristic of contemporary Russia. Regions and municipalities lose some authority over decision making in urban development due to a lack of an independent budget base as a result of the centralized taxation system. The setting of priority tasks and agendas, within such a scheme, is formed centrally and remotely, which inevitably leads to the overinflation of design objectives and puts regions in front of the choice between “volume” or “quality”.

Driven by the need to fulfill social demands within the context of economic and political constraints, the dependence of regions on the center is deepening (Zubarevich, 2018). Due to a lack of independent resource revenues and erosion of the political mechanisms for self-governance, they are left with a dilemma—to fall into the path of systemic underdevelopment or to seek minimal resources for basic urban maintenance, instead of undertaking long-term and forward-looking developmental trajectories. This dilemma illustrates some of the typical cases outside of the country’s capital and large metropolitan areas (Trubina, 2015), often characteristic of the

systematic drying out of local budgets, reliance on the federal programs for acquiring financial and political support, inability to recast corrupt market mechanisms for the implementation of the programs, and erosion of public support throughout this process (Chirikova, 2015).

In this situation, federal target initiatives, national priority projects, and other country-wide schemes emerge as the unproven panacea to both, crumbling infrastructure in the regions and weathering political support and allegiance towards the center. Competing in the federal programs to obtain means for basic urban services highlights a partial return to the somewhat modernized Soviet methods of management (Gun'ko & Batunova, 2019a; Gun'ko & Batunova, 2019b; Zupan & Gunko, 2019). With the looming economic crisis, inflation, and political instabilities, financial benefits from these programs become insufficient, hence requiring symbolic resources for maintaining the established power relations (Zupan et al., 2021). In such constrained conditions, urban initiatives have to adapt to the situation. Hence, they often form a set of tight-knit governance networks made of local politicians, administrators, professionals, business, and civil society, ready to maintain and deliver urban projects with federal support. This creates a situation, where participation in federal programs is not necessarily mandatory, but unavoidable. It is this setting of political processes surrounding national priority projects that we review in the paper.

We study the particularities of the center-periphery dynamics through the case of the Vologda River embankment renovation project, paying particular attention to the bureaucratic procedures that created a distinctive, though common across Russia's regions, situation. The analyzed case illuminates a complex dynamic—between the lack of local resource revenues and the inability to manage federal funding, between the authority of the country's capital in the decision making, and yet a lack of oversight and regulation from both sides. The project and its implementation show not only the asymmetries of power relations in urban development of the post-socialist periphery but also bureaucratic constraints and uncertainties that mounted to a standstill situation today. We turn to qualitative analysis from a situated position, since both authors took part in mediating the urban conflict that emerged around the project. This involves discourse analysis of legal and regulatory documents, project plans, meetings proceedings, and official correspondence between departmental agencies, media posts created by the local protest groups, and participant observation during the period of 2018–2019. We explore the federal and municipal legislative mechanisms, project oversight, and local and federal decision-making strategies related to the issues with the project's objectification and delivery. This leaves us with two insights. First, though the national government plays a key role in the proposal of the federal programs, it presents no flexibility in accommodating the contingency issues around the delivery of the project, leaving local governments with a dilemma of “deliver the project or perish.” Second, it shows how the local coalitions of state and private actors engage in non-transparent and contradictory measures required to tap into the multiple national funding schema, meanwhile presenting a lack of cooperation and oversight in the delivery of the project, not counting the erosion of civic democratic institutions through the process.

Navigating Bureaucratic Uncertainty Between the Center and the Periphery

The nature of uneven resource redistribution between the center of policy making (Moscow) and the receiving peripheries is also a result of the long legacy of political centralization that took place in Russia since the 2000s (Gel'man, 2015). With Vladimir Putin taking the first term as the president, gubernatorial elections, introduced by Russia's first president Boris Yeltsin as part of the democratization in 1996, were successfully eliminated in 2004 in exchange for the new model of selective appointments (Gel'man & Ryzhenkov, 2011). In this scenario the center started to rely on various stimuli to engage the regions, while the latter were offered minimal space for political maneuver in decision making if their place in the power vertical was secured (Sel'tser, 2014). In addition to the reformation of the Federal Council, local governors lost not only the membership at the Council, but also immunity from criminal persecution, which, though at a first glance a democratic measure, resulted in a reinforcement of the mutually beneficial relations between the center and the periphery. All in all, the new centralization of regional and municipal powers in the hands of the federal state was chosen as a Russian path.

Within the constraints of the system, "the centre's goals included the preservation of a stable economic and social order, in which the ruling group was unchallenged", while "subordinated local actors could pursue a broad range of their self-interests, especially given the poor protection of property rights in Russian regions and cities" (Gel'man & Ryzhenkov, 2011, p. 454). With the recentralization of regional funding structures and taxation systems, which also reinforced verticality in economic relations (Zubarevich, 2018), regions are now in need to compete for financial resources in order to fulfill basic provisioning of public services such as housing, infrastructure, ecosystem management, and the rest. This leaves no room for the emergence of alternative mechanisms of self-governance, instead turning to the top-down systems of "manual control" and "hole patching" (Zubarevich, 2018). Moreover, recent uncertainty in Russia's political and economic trajectory, coupled with the continuous change and reshuffling of cadres in managerial systems resulted in a situation, where regions are compelled to seek federal funding on a short-term basis (Chirikova, 2015). Hence, focus on "short aims," rather than long term modernization trajectories becomes the goal of this power structure. Hence, the motivation to take on risks and find new prospects is weaker than the motivation of political survival, which remains a powerful internal incentive for the daily managerial activities of regional elites (Chirikova, 2015).

Since the early 2000s, various national projects of strategic development have become one of the mechanisms for centralized decision making. The so-called "Federal target programs" were proposed as the first tool for the integrated solution to the centralized tasks, adopted and developed in 1995, followed by their reorganization again in 2002 (Panikarova, 2007). The center started gradually gaining back its leverage over the regions, since the "share of federal funds in the overall budget of the country increased from just over 40 percent in 1998 to 66 percent in 2006, where the proceeds from the most significant tax revenues were [...] only partially

returned to the municipalities” (Gel'man, 2007, p. 9; our translation—V. S., & E. A.). While the Federal target programs focused on social politics in a fragmented and targeted manner, recent iteration of the strategic development goals produced a so-called “National priority project”—a temporary fix to the imbalances between central and municipal budgets (Government of the Russian Federation, 2019).

The National priority projects often emphasized “oversized prestige” initiatives with their top-down oversight and often a lack of established mechanisms for project delivery (Wengle, 2015). The idea first appeared in the period of 2005–2009, but its recent iteration in the Presidential Decree of 2018 (Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2018) has gained a greater scope, more specific, detailed goal-setting, and more attention to the management and control over the implementation (Ivanov & Bukhvald, 2019). National priority projects immediately became the darling of Russia's presidential administration, as they were first reformulated in a new form in the presidential address to the federal government, parliament, and regional leaders to denote their strategic national character (Sharafutdinova & Turovsky, 2017; Wengle, 2015). Yet, the absence of a clear legal definition of this instrument of public administration, horizontal and vertical correlations between different programs, and the lack of methodology over the implementation and oversight left room for error and maneuver, despite massive scale of federal spending of up to 70% of the country's federal budget expenditures (Azhluni & Sharygina, 2019; Ivanov & Bukhvald, 2019).

A new project-oriented governance approach, often characteristic of business management practices, was introduced at the federal level to develop key parameters, step by step directions, and a system of checks and balances to ensure that the goals of the federal programs were achieved and the federal resources were spent rationally (Charkina, 2017; Kozhevnikov, 2016). Supported through the newly established Department for strategic management of state programs and investment projects and a set of regional project management offices, project-oriented approach is applied to improve and regulate everyday spheres of social politics, from health, education, and housing, to agrarian development and the environment. Moreover, new project-oriented management tools are proposed to further political persuasion and accountability.

The KPI of regional governors is one such technology tied primarily to the implementation of the federal priority programs. All fifteen indicators of the KPI are directly correlated with the last presidential decree of 2018 (the series of the so-called “May decrees”) and are a reflection of the national development goals set by the president himself. Under the conditions of dysfunctional democratic institutions, when governors are viewed as managers who are assigned certain tasks, the introduction of a mechanism for evaluating their effectiveness is not devoid of objectivity (Butrin, 2019). However, the list of these criteria changes practically every two years, depending on the specific priority projects being implemented and the indicators of these criteria are difficult to calculate (Butrin, 2019). Rather it is the political manageability, accomplishment of the major infrastructure projects, and steady relations with federal agencies that tacitly serve as a decisive factor for evaluation of gubernatorial productivity. This is supported by a fact that the list of criteria starts with one political measure framed as the “confidence in the government” (or *doverie k vlasti*), implying

the confidence in the President of the Russian Federation, the highest officials of the subjects of the Russian Federation, the level of which is determined, *inter alia*, by assessing public opinion regarding the achievement in the subjects of the Russian Federation of national development goals (Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2021). This political indicator is intended to verify the other fourteen, since if the quality of education, the environment, the quality of healthcare, and quality of the labor market is improving, then the political indicator is also expected to improve; but if their dynamics are at odds, it means that something is not right (Butrin, 2019). In accordance with the KPI based evaluations, the state prepares proposals for the distribution of grants, financially incentivizing the work of governors (Gatinsky, 2019; Trunina, 2019).

The trajectory of project-oriented governance, via which specific resources are allocated on a competitive basis, not only balances the relations of power on multiple scales, but adversely affects the development of the long-term trajectories for self-management in the regions. Horizontal connections between the regions are therefore eroded as they compete against one another prioritising federal transfers (Golubchikov et al., 2014; Kinossian, 2013). In fact, in 2011 merely six of Russia's 83 regions received 40 percent of the federal investment (Golubchikov & Makhrova, 2013). The system of checks and balances is also left on the regional shoulders to create visibility of decentralization, hence opening room for corruption and deceit. This leads to an unsustainable situation, where regional actors have no choice but to take part in the process for the sake of their own career, federal support, and delivery of public works in the regions (Lazareva, 2018).

Our case of the Vologda River embankment renovation project lies in the middle of this entanglement over decision making. With the reliance on a number of different federal schemas, the large-scale urban redevelopment initiative found itself in a standstill situation resulting from the inconsistency of objectives between the programs and their structural inflexibility in the course of project delivery. This led to the inability of actors to navigate the system, subsequent violations of laws, spread of undemocratic procedures, and unfortunate outcomes—all of which we review in the following sections.

The Vologda Embankment Project

Vologda is a provincial city with economic and cultural functions, its input in the development of the surrounding territories is indisputable. The city claims an unspoken role as the “capital of the Russian North”, due to the ancient history of its foundation and an array of events related to the development of the region and the history of the Russian state as a whole (Shul'gin, 2011). Occupying an advantageous geographical position, Vologda was one of the main actors in mastering the wealth of Zavoloch'e—a historical region formed in the basin of the Northern Dvina River and Onega Lake in 10th–14th centuries. The first mention of the city is associated with the year of 1147 as the fortified Detinets-Kremlin was formed on the site of a previously existing settlement named after the Vologda River. In the pre-industrial period, the river primarily carried a defensive and trade function, being the main transportation

artery of the city. Natural green banks grew alongside it, with five churches, eleven merchant and tenement houses, doss-house and the building of the former diocesan women's school (turned into a military hospital in the Soviet period) built on top. Unique views of the river banks became a key feature of the city for generations of Vologda residents and tourists. The central location of the river made it the main urban artery and determined the early Soviet and even pre-revolutionary planning structure. Historically and today the river serves as the main public space, with lindens, maples and birches planted along the entire embankment, creating a peculiar and inimitable look. Until recently, green shores with architectural monuments and ensembles of the 17th–19th centuries were the cultural hallmark of the entire region.

The prehistory of the Vologda River renovation project begins with the proposal for the tourist and recreational cluster “Nason City” developed and delivered within the framework of the Federal target program *Razvitie vnutrennego i v'ezdnoogo turizma v Rossiiskoi Federatsii (2011–2018)* [Development of Domestic and Inbound Tourism in the Russian Federation in 2011–2018] supervised by the Federal Agency for Tourism (Vologda State Duma, 2014). The purpose of the project was to combine the sights, monuments of stone and wooden architecture, parks, and embankments located along the Vologda River in the historical part of the city, into a convenient network of tourist routes and create a major recreational area in the center of Vologda for its residents and visitors. The initiative served as the basis for the development of a new strategy for tourism on the territory of the municipality of the City of Vologda for the period of up to 2025, adopted at that time by the former city mayor (Vologda State Duma, 2014). This first step served as the official prerequisite for the proposal of a large-scale river bank protection project first initiated in 2011. The 2.8-kilometer-long section of the left river bank was originally announced under the same federal program, but after completing bank protection procedures on a small fragment of the embankment on the right side of the river, the funding for the continuation of the full project was refused, resulting in the need to search for alternatives. The authorities explained the necessity of transforming the banks of the river in its frequent flooding, as well as the systemic neglect of the banks' greenery overgrown with shrubby vegetation that has attracted “homeless people, ticks, and trash” (Kruglikov, 2019; our translation—V. S., & E. A.). The project of the embankment renovation developed by a local organization specializing in the design of road infrastructure facilities without architects, landscape designers, and restorers in their staff received a positive conclusion from the State Expertise Committee on September 16, 2013.

The project entered into the implementation stage through participation in a different Federal target program *Razvitie vodokhoziaistvennogo kompleksa Rossiiskoi Federatsii v 2012–2020 godakh* [Development of the Water Management Complex of the Russian Federation in 2012–2020] run by the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment, with state contractors in the Ministry of Agriculture, Federal Agency for Water Resources, Federal Service for Hydrometeorology and Environmental Monitoring, and the Federal Agency for Fishery. The activities carried out within the framework of this program were subject to co-financing from the regional and federal budgets. The total amount of the contract required 265,181,410 rubles, of

which the municipality received 62 million rubles from the regional budget, while the rest came from federal transfers. The work, launched earlier in the spring of 2017, was to be completed by November 2019, with the full allocation of funds after the contract was signed. After the successful entrance into the Federal target program, an auction was announced on the State procurement portal to determine the general contractor for the construction work. The winner of the auction became a local company that is the largest executor of governmental contracts related to road infrastructure in the region. It is worth noting that the company has never performed the work on the protection of river banks and the project itself was initially designed through another company affiliated with the contractor, which contradicts the state anti-monopoly legislation.

Initially proposed under one federal program, and launched under another, the targets of which were significantly different, the project went into the implementation unannounced to the public. As Vologda residents soon discovered, the project intended the complete elimination of natural landscaping covering the banks with a concrete slab reaching its width of up to 30 meters and the length of 2.8 kilometers in total (Figure 1). With the help of the community of architects, city rights activists, and historical heritage preservation movements that rallied on the basis of the unfolding construction project, many citizens soon learned about the planned changes. As a result of the correspondence with federal officials and a number of meetings between the activists and the city mayor with representatives of the municipal departments, the authorities agreed with the erroneousness of the project and stated the need for a compromise solution to the situation. However, soon after the local administration closed the doors for further discussion, not intending any changes in the project and beginning an aggressive and manipulative communication with the activists in the information space, which caused a strong resentment among local residents and leading federal experts.

Figure 1

Vologda River Embankment Before the Renovation Process



Note. Source: (Sazonov, 2019).

Figure 2*Vologda River Embankment During the Renovation Process*

Note. Source: Varlamov, I. (2019).

The urban conflict in Vologda acquired the scale of a national precedent, where representatives of the Russian professional communities spoke publicly about the project. Leaders of the Russian urban protection and heritage preservation societies, renowned restorers, historians, the director of the Moscow architectural schools and their employees, architects and artists working with different regions of Russia, hydrogeologists, and popular urban bloggers—all contributed to the nation-wide outcry about the sudden elimination of Vologda's cultural heritage with an easy approval or a blunt oversight from the federal authorities (Blagoustroennaia naberezhnaia, 2018; Kazankina, 2019; Kruglikov, 2019; Tarabarina, 2019; Zhiteli Vologdy, 2019).

Undemocratic Decision Making, Violations, and Public Outcry

In the course of a year since the city began decisively clearing out the river bank from trees and shrubs, several urban communities discussed and condemned the process based on guesswork. There was no objective basis for the discussion, since no information about the plans of work on the embankment were available either on the official website of the city administration or in other information outlets. Criticism of the design solution began from the moment when in the fall of 2018 one of the

Vologda architects discovered design plans and legal documentation on the Public Procurement portal in a format only accessible to professionals using specialized architectural programs (Edinaia informatsionnaia sistema v sfere zakupok, 2017). Turning this information into an accessible and visual format for the general public, with an explanation of the design decisions contained in the document, gave the public reasons to worry. The public became aware of the project when it was already in the first stage of the implementation—after acquiring a positive conclusion from the State Expertise, the first tranche of funding from the federal target program was received, a tender for the implementation of the project was drawn, and a contract with the main contractor was already signed. The reasons for the public outrage and the causes of thorough investigation on the state and municipal levels can be divided into several groupings that highlight discrepancies between the objectives of the national funding schemes and their delivery in the regions.

Inconsistency in the Project and Programs Objectives

The technology of a monolithic concrete slab with a cobblestone coating was chosen as the bank fortification method—for many, the decision was unexpected and unreasonable, since there were no data from hydrological and hydrogeological studies substantiating the need for bank protection, as well as the chosen technology itself. First, there was no apparent bank destruction on site, as there were practically no natural landslide processes within the city, which confirms the absence of changes in the configuration of the river bed over the past 200 years, according to an independent analysis conducted by the licensed hydrogeologist, which also concluded that isolation of large areas by concrete and asphaltting can lead to the accumulation of groundwater that will increase the threat of flooding of nearby buildings and the destruction of cultural heritage sites (Adrianova, 2019). Secondly, the complete inconsistency of the ongoing project with the objectives of the originally declared federal program aimed at developing tourist attractiveness of the city were in plain sight. According to the city administration, the “strengthening” of the banks was supposed to facilitate their maintenance, since there were basically no budgetary funds for regular maintenance of the vegetation along the river banks. Zelenstroy municipal agency that used to maintain urban landscapes in the city was abolished due to the replacement of the mayor and, hence, the redistribution of power in 2016. Yet, the real difference in the cost of maintaining the natural banks and the price for building a continuous concrete slab was never calculated. Despite this, experts from the State Expertise issued a positive conclusion for the project.

At the same time, the City Administration, represented by the Head of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning tried to assure the public that the work on the embankment renovation will be carried out in two stages: first, reinforcing the natural banks with concrete, and second, creating a multi-functional public space on top. Discourse about the two-stage process was picked up by the regional media, but was, however, misleading, since the project entered the federal target program in line with the “protection and reinforcement of the banks” and not landscaping or improvement of the tourist potential of the place, which was the goal of the previous

program that municipality used for project proposal. The complete inconsistency with the objectives of the federal initiatives, caused by the necessity to enter multiple programs at once in order to accomplish a full spectrum of works, shows that regions are not able to deliver comprehensive development trajectories, but rather are forced to look for piecemeal solutions.

Legislative Violations

Violations of the law were detected at all stages of the process, from the incompleteness of the design documentation, lack of compliance with the officially adopted project plan, the organization of the construction work, to the acceptance of works with violations by the representatives of the responsible departments. For completeness of argumentation, we reveal in more detail the essence of violations, each carrying different measures of responsibility. First of all, the project documentation did not take into account and did not assess the possible negative consequences for the safety of the objects of architectural heritage of regional and federal significance: from vibration loads from pile driving or traffic and from changes in the hydrogeological regime of the groundwater. The activists submitted an application for the recognition of the embankment ensemble as an object of cultural heritage to the regional Committee for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in order to assign a single protection status to this section of the river and the architectural monuments located on it. According to the law, construction work should have been suspended during the term of the consideration of the application, but this did not happen. Moreover, the project violated the urban regulation in accordance with *Ob'ekt okhrany istoricheskogo poseleniia regional'nogo znacheniia, gorod Vologda* [Subject of Protection of the Historical Settlement of Regional Significance, the City of Vologda], distorting the most valuable panoramas of the central part of the historical settlement. The subject of the protection of the historical settlement, as mentioned in the document, was exactly “the space of the river” and “natural terrain of the banks,” meaning that it was “prohibited to cut down the greenery, except for the sanitary cuttings, to construct new buildings or permanent structures, to disturb the river banks, and to organize the garbage and soil dumps or other land works without accompanying archaeological support and the later reclamation of the soil” (Official website of the Government of the Vologda Region, 2018; our translation—V. S., & E. A.).

Secondly, the implementation of the project deviated from the approved plan. In fact, the work performed did not comply with the design decisions and the conclusion of the State Expertise. Where the project provided for landscaping fragments, it turned out that the solution implied a monolithic concrete slab. The actual elevations of the supporting structures also turned out to be higher than designed. The working group with a geodesic engineer carried out instrumental measurements showing that the height of the structural grillage was exceeded, significantly changing the contour of the banks and reducing the area of landscaping provided for by the project. This significant and unreasonable increase in the volume of work exceeded the maximum permissible by the public procurement legislation. Also, in the course of the work, environmental legislation was seriously violated, which, among other things,

came into conflict with certain target indicators of the federal program itself, since soil was removed from the river bed in order to build a monolithic grillage with mortars discharged directly into the ground in the middle of the winter affecting soils and their dynamics already in the spring.

Last but not least, when studying the paper documentation, it was found that some lines were smeared and corrected by hand in the consolidated estimate, which is considered a gross violation of law and is under the control of the State Prosecutor's Office¹. At the same time, there were two positive conclusions from the State Expertise, received separately for the estimate and for the project itself. As a result of the identified deviations from the original project, the city administration had to re-pass the State Expertise. However, the State Expertise refused to accept the updated project plans for consideration, which indicates the deliberate arbitrariness of decisions taken during construction. Despite the obvious violations during the implementation and the refusal of changes by the State Expertise, the acceptance certificates for several start-up complexes of the embankment renovation were signed by the Head of the Department of City Services. In the public sphere, this was broadcast as the absence of the need to repeat the procedure of the State Expertise hence the legality of deviations from the project, which, in fact, was a free interpretation of the Section 3.8 of the Article 49 of *Gradostroitel'nyi kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Town Planning Code of the Russian Federation].

Undemocratic Decision-Making Procedures

The fact of the “behind the wall” decision-making process regarding the key public space of the city was no less important and caused great resentment within the community. The residents became aware of the plans when the contract with the general contractor had already been signed. As one of the local professors of architecture concluded,

the issue of designing the embankment, like any other urban planning issue, is, first of all, the issue of power and distribution of very expensive and scarce resources, [...] therefore, if the community does not make special efforts, including those that often require energy, and even a conflict, in defending the interests of the city as a whole, we won't accomplish anything”. (Kiyanenکو, 2019; our translation—V. S., & E. A.)

The closed and non-transparent decision-making processes were not limited to the stage of the development of the project. Already during the full course of construction and the unfolding urban protest, the regional and municipal authorities demonstrated exclusivity in the choice of the public opinion related to the issue. The wave of critical statements by the expert society representing various professional communities was provoked by the refusal of the regional administration to modify the project, calling the representatives of the public and the experts who had spoken earlier “couch

¹ Available at request from the Department of City Services (http://vologda-portal.ru/oficialnaya_vologda/adm_structure/index_v.php?SECTION_ID=5277)

critics” (Kruglikov, 2019). The problem around the embankment renovation project was highlighted not only at the federal round tables and conferences, but also in the regional and national media. Strong contradictions sparked when representatives of the city administration, trying to create the appearance of the involvement of interested parties after the fact, turned to the help of mock-up social media accounts and loyal civil servants to control the situation, as well as using other forms of soft power to undermine the protest movement (Smoleva, 2020). It is worth noting that the situation was unfolding against the backdrop of another powerful and popular national priority project on the *Formirovanie komfortnoi gorodskoi sredy* [Formation of the Comfortable Urban Environment] (Ministry of Urban Development of the Moscow Region, 2021), actively implemented throughout the country, promoting the values of democratic and participatory planning and involving the citizens in the process of urban redevelopment, so that the share of the active population was at least 30%. Despite this, the recent turn towards participatory urban planning in Russia is gaining traction, not without help of being included in the measures of governor’s productivity, since many are starting to realize that “the environment works better if the people who depend on its change are actively involved in its creation and management, rather than perceived as passive consumers” (Sanoff, 2000, p. 306). The case of Vologda is paradoxical in its own nature, where due to the presence of mature and historically developed bottom-up activist communities, any forms of participatory planning, in the eyes of the local government, looks like a marginal protest movement (Smoleva, 2020).

Systemic Underdevelopment vs Basic Urban Maintenance

The project-oriented management of national initiatives in the regions allowed for anchoring the main priorities of strategic development of the Russian Federation through a system of singular and target-oriented programs, but also resulted in straightening of the vertical logics of power. On the one hand, it reinforced already established relations between the federal authorities, regional and municipal actors, incentivising their work with symbolic resources and measures of productivity derived from the business community, thus creating a situation of constant reappointments and political precariousness (Sel’tser, 2014). While on the other, it engineered and reinforced a strict system of rules oriented on an end product, unable to adapt to regional challenges throughout the long process of planning (Glaz’yev, 2007; Panikarova, 2007). This leaves regions in a situation of uncertainty—delivery of the final project “as is” primarily affects regional political stability and strengthens future prospects to secure more funding for other initiatives, disincentivizing any motivation or interest in the long-term development trajectories. The case of the Vologda River embankment appeared at the crossroads of this situation. Drawing from a number of federal programs to patch up a piecemeal solution to the problem of neglected river banks, which resulted from the erosion of the municipal self-governance systems in the first place, the city found itself in a messy situation. Vologda, here, is not a unique case but rather a norm. Recently, the cities of Ufa, Penza, and Ioshkar-Ola also faced a similar situation during the reconstruction of the respective river embankments, while

the city of Velikii Ustiug became a precedent in itself after covering a four kilometer stretch of the historical Sukhona River, carrying the wealth of cultural heritage on its banks, with perforated concrete panels (Kruglikov, 2019).

First of all, the misalignment of the activities of specialized agencies that form and oversee federal programs and the lack of vertical and horizontal interaction between the federal programs themselves, and, more so, between the federal and regional initiatives, is one such caveat. A vast array of specific initiatives that target specific issues have not provided for the co-positioning of goals and objectives, often leading to the duplication of program activities and confusion in accountability and oversight (Batievskaiia, 2007). Moreover, federal initiatives are deliberately poorly coordinated with regional programs of socio-economic development, they do not take into account the specifics and priorities of the formation of the regional economy, based on the advantages of a particular region, hence resulting in the disagreements between the program host agencies and regional actors (Panikarova, 2007). The first iterations of the federal programs in the early 2000's particularly resembled a "grouping of ordinary, routine budgetary measures masterfully arranged with the help of administrative resources" instead of a programmatic approach where federal and regional initiatives would become parts of the whole (Glaz'yev, 2007, p. 32; our translation—V. S., & E. A.). Though much improvement has been made since national projects' iteration in 2018, they are still to integrate into a unified system synched with local networks of decision-making. Instigated and promoted as a holistic approach, federal projects address piecemeal issues compelling regional and municipal actors to tap into multiple federal schemes in order to implement more comprehensive plans and complete a full spectrum of projects.

Secondly, federal priority programs are unidirectional, that is, the funding is distributed from above, without particular checks and balances related to the compliance of the project with the goals and the criteria of the programs. Moreover, mechanisms for reversal and adaptation of the project to changing local conditions are also lacking (Panikarova, 2007). Changing the terms of the contract during its execution is allowed only in exceptional cases, but the exceptions given in the law are not uncommon. The range of possible changes falls under a narrow margin of error, as the Article 95 of the Federal Law No. 44 *O kontraktnoi sisteme v sfere zakupok tovarov, rabot, uslug dlia obespecheniia gosudarstvennykh i munitsipal'nykh nuzhd* [On the contract system in the field of procurement of goods, works and services for state and municipal needs] states that the project can be modified only if the contract price is reduced without changing the contracted scope of work, or if the contracted scope of work is increased or decreased by no more than 10% (Federal Law No. 44-FZ, 2013). At the same time, the authorities do not want to take too much risk, especially when the money is received and withdrawn from the specialized account of the Central Bank. The letter received by the Vologda activists from the Federal Agency for Water Resources, in which it was reported that at that time no requests for project adjustment were made by the regional government, is a clear confirmation. As a result, regions have no interest and motivation to redo and revise project objectives and solutions "as they go" since this would question earlier approved decision, which

can lead to political consequences and possibly criminal trials. These and other rules are laid out in the Federal Law No. 44 *O kontraktnoi sisteme v sfere zakupok tovarov, rabot, uslug dlia obespecheniia gosudarstvennykh i munitsipal'nykh nuzhd* [On the contract system in the field of procurement of goods, works and services for state and municipal needs], which regulates the process of the execution of state contracts, from tendering procedures, selection of contractor, to control over the implementation and acceptance of works. The law is intended to regulate relations aimed at preventing corruption and other abuses, but in fact it often ensures the maintenance of monopoly within different types of public procurement (Maraev, 2020). Despite the fact that some of the indicators of the procurement efficiency written into the Law are the final contract price and the transparency of the bidding process, there are still ways to circumvent them through the collusion between the customer and the contractor and participation of their shell companies in the auction (Nevzorov, 2014).

Lastly, the search for federal funds for the regions becomes an end in itself, since the very algorithm of such a search does not imply a solution to real problems. With drying out of local budgets and an unprecedented lack of local revenues, municipalities enter federal programs to fulfill basic obligations to their constituents. Since federal programs are initiated from above, the regions, in the hope of obtaining funding from the federal budget, pull their problems to those already identified at the federal level. This leads to various mishaps. Or, as an example of Vologda shows through a different case, entering competitive national priority project of the *Formation of the Comfortable Urban Environment* to merely pave the parking lot in the urban courtyards, instead of the comprehensive improvement of urban life in public space as the program implies, becomes a norm (Varlamov, 2019).

Discussion: Prospects for the Peripheries?

Up to this point, the Vologda embankment project has not been completed and, as a result, the contractor and the Department of City Services “amicably” terminated the contract almost two years from the date on which it was supposed to be closed. Meanwhile, the regional Department of Construction has filed a lawsuit over an “unauthorized” departure from the planning documentation and, three court hearings resulted in three orders to the contractor to correct the violations at their own expense. As the civil protest didn’t settle down, the authorities came up with a new “calming maneuver” and entered another National priority project of the *Formation of the Comfortable Urban Environment* in order to “beautify” the concrete river banks. As a result, a new institution, the Urban Environment Lab, was created at the city level to seemingly serve as a connecting channel between the regional needs and the federal programs and to undertake new projects for the renovation of urban space initiated by the city administration. Analogous urban laboratories sprang up around the country and became one example of the mass influence of the capital on regional policy-making. Borrowed from Moscow through the broad educational programs for architects and public officials, specialists from all over the country learn and practice capital’s developmental agenda, initiating cross-regional competition over

federal resources (Zupan et al., 2021). The issue of the embankment renovation has disappeared from most discussions to date, as the established urban institution has calmed down the descent. Although as became known now, it was possible to make changes in the design and planning documentation, and hence improve the original river embankment with more sensitive methods. The city authorities deliberately delayed negotiations through ordinances by the regional government until the moment when making changes could have had consequences with criminal liability for those responsible.

Learning from a narrow, although emblematic case of the Vologda embankment renovation would allow us to tap into the whole complexity of the center-periphery relations in the field of resource provisioning in Russia today. First of all, the vertical centralization of power, often seen in Russia as a stable mechanism for effective and efficient delivery of centralized control, obstructs the development of the institutions of self-management by the curtailing the autonomy of local government in exchange for the loyalty of governors and regional elites (Nechaev, 2005). This leads to an unsustainable situation where servicing and appeasing the center becomes an end in itself, as well as a method for attracting minimal resources for basic urban maintenance. Secondly, it becomes questionable whether allocating certain priorities at the federal level, to which the regions have to fit and adapt, solves the problem of equalizing regional inequalities and delivering quality of the environment according to the needs of each place (Glaz'yev, 2007; Panikarova, 2007).

Vologda became a prisoner of circumstances, trapped between the systemic degrading of local institutions for urban maintenance and hence the necessity to enter federal programs, between the ability to acquire federal help and yet the inability to apply it for more progressive ends. This dilemma has been characteristic of Russia's center-periphery disparities in a long post-Soviet period, but we see it potentially informing other theorizations of urban development in the post-socialist world and beyond its borders, where authoritarian policies and systemic distrust of democratic mechanisms for resolving public issues are pulling the whole spectrum of similar problems, seemingly without prospects for future improvement.

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