Neoliberalism as space fragmentation: A Lefebvrian gaze at post-socialist urban transitions

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Abstract

Urban studies have recently seen the emergence of perspectives that question the applicability of neoliberalism to the experiences of post-socialist states. This article offers conceptual clarifications in this regard. The work of Henri Lefebvre helps explicate the role of 'the urban' in making neoliberalism a 'hidden ideology' governing everyday consciousness and subjectivities. This argument is illustrated by a study of residential space fragmentation, empirically addressed through three themes: (a) housing governance fragmentation, (b) enclosure of common spaces and (c) aesthetic differentiation of residential space and the spatialisation of class. The study demonstrates how the integrated system of urban welfare infrastructure built in the Soviet city has been fragmented, enclosed and repurposed in order to be compliant with commodification, privatism and insulative particularism. The spatial fragmentation is argued to be an active practice that helps internalise the neoliberal 'common sense' in everyday life.

Keywords

city, differentiation, enclosure, fragmentation, neoliberalism

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摘要

城市研究最近出现了一些观点，质疑新自由主义对后社会主义国家经历的适用性。本文对此作出了概念上的澄清。亨利·列斐伏尔（Henri Lefebvre）的作品有助于阐明"城市"在使新自由主义成为支配日常意识和主观性的"隐性意识形态"方面所起的作用。我们对居住空间碎片化进行了研究，以此来阐明这一观点。我们通过三个主题对其进行实证研究：（a）住房治理碎片化，（b）公共空间的圈占，（c）居住空间的审美差异化和阶级的空间化。我们的研究表明苏联城市所建设的城市福利基础设施综合体是如何为了符合商品化、私有主义和孤立性特殊主义而被分割、圈占和重新利用的。空间碎片化被认为是一种活跃的实践，有助于将新自由主义的"常识"内化到日常生活中。

关键词

城市、分化、封闭、碎片化、新自由主义

Introduction

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Central-Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states underwent a radical transition from 'state socialism' to market capitalism, which is widely regarded as a key moment in the establishment of a global neoliberal hegemony. From the early 1990s, spatial scholars helped reveal the problematic, non-linear and messy nature of the post-socialist transition, highlighting path-dependencies and the contextual diversity over post-socialist space and questioning the teleological assumptions underpinning the transition project (e.g. Marcuse, 1996; Pickles and Smith, 1998; Smith, 1994). These foundational ideas later crystallised in post-socialist *urban* critique – which further clarified the effects of neoliberalisation on the transformation of urban and spatial governance and the reorganisation of urban economies and society (e.g. Chelcea and Druţă, 2016; Golubchikov et al., 2014; Grubbauer, 2012; Kusiak, 2019). Neoliberalism has become a key descriptor for understanding post-socialist urban change in this critical urban scholarship that supplanted the empiricist, descriptive and idiosyncratic accounts that had dominated the earlier post-socialist urban studies.

More recently, these critical approaches have, however, come under criticism themselves – particularly from the academic quarters that find themselves discontent about the 'grand narrative' of neoliberalism. Similarly to the earlier critique of the hegemonic political project of neoliberalisation, these more recent studies foreground the piecemeal nature of urban 'transformations', multiple pathways of urban change and the significance of local legacies and specificities in cities. However, these conditions are now presented not as the evidence for the misleading teleological foundation of neoliberal reformists, but rather as the absence of the (continuing) relevance of neoliberalisation as such. According to the proponents, alongside a highly differentiated spectrum of national and urban political regimes, these conditions contradict generalising assumptions about neoliberalism and its structuring role in socio-spatial orderings (Gentile, 2018; Gentile and Sjöberg, 2020; Gentile et al., 2015; Kinossian, 2022). These arguments also feed on empirical particularism that contrasts post-socialist experience with 'canonical' Western neoliberalism, such as, for example, in the purportedly 'insular' forms of gentrification in post-socialist cities – with a prevalence of socially mixed

neighbourhoods (Marcińczak et al., 2013) – leading to a dismissal of ideological and profit-related determinants of socio-spatial inequality (Gentile, 2018).

Converging arguments are also presented by poststructuralist scholars that focus on the economic/technical rather than ideological/political dimensions of neoliberalism, and emphasise the situated and contingent nature of reforms in the post-socialist space, which are seen by this scholarship as often leading to the preservation rather than dismantling of urban social welfare and the norms and forms of inherited social modernity. These authors thus question, implicitly or explicitly, the relevance of conventional assumptions about neoliberalisation in post-socialist space (Collier, 2011).

More recently, criticism based on political science orthodoxy has also emerged, highlighting the discrepancies between neoliberal ideals and the actual national political economies in post-socialist countries, including the extent of the involvement of the state/non-market forces in running the economies. For example, mineral-rich states such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have been described as 'state capitalist', in contrast to neoliberal regimes, on the basis of increasing dirigisme in industrial policy, developmentalist rhetoric and attitudes, political authoritarianism and the growing role of the state (as embodied in its leadership) in managing spatial change and distorting free market forces (Kinossian, 2022; Kinossian and Morgan, 2023).

Indeed, these trends have a strong presence in the post-socialist world, while in the context of the recent geoeconomic and geopolitical shifts shaped by factors ranging from populist democracy, to protectionist policies, to trade wars, to energy transition, to the COVID-19 pandemic and, particularly, to the war in Ukraine and mutual sanctions, economic policies across the world more broadly are increasingly reorganised along processes extraneous to competitive market mechanisms. In what follows we insist, however, on the continuing epistemological and ontological validity of the argument that it is the *processes of neoliberalisation* that have shaped post-socialist urban transitions and make their continuing structural presence in shaping cities and their governance (see also Bernt and Volkmann, 2024). Acknowledging the post-Soviet urban governance as decisively neoliberal (Golubchikov, 2010; Morris, 2021) is not to ignore, however, the role of factors disrupting and undermining neoliberalism – in post-Soviet and Western contexts alike – which is, if anything, a symptom of a deepening crisis of neoliberal hegemony (Davies, 2024) rather than its absence. Yet we acknowledge another criticism: the tendency of post-socialist critical approaches not to define neoliberalism in a consistent way (Gentile and Sjöberg, 2020). We therefore clarify our understanding of the concept.

Contra conflations of neoliberalism with classical free market liberalism, we do not identify the core feature of the former with a 'withdrawn' state, but rather with its role in legitimising processes such as territorial competition, entrepreneurialism, financialisation and commodification in both discourses and practices (He and Wu, 2013). We also reject the conflation of neoliberal economy with liberal democracy (although this conflation remains mistakenly influential in area studies) – referring to a long tradition that has emphasised the (more or less explicit) authoritarian components of neoliberal politics: from the embrace of neoliberalism by Augusto Pinochet's military junta in Chile in the 1970s, to Hall's (1979) 'authoritarian populism' interpretation of Thatcherism, to recent conceptualisations of 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (Bruff, 2014; Morris, 2021) and, in a broader sense, to the

insulation of economy from democracy as a defining ambition of the neoliberal project (Davies, 2017; Slobodian, 2018).

More specifically, we demonstrate how transition in the post-Soviet space has been the offensive against the socialist-era welfare 'totality', which is reflected in the fragmentation of the urban experience. To highlight the entanglements between neoliberalism and urban space, we adopt the concept of 'levels of social practice' elaborated by Lefebvre ([1970] 2003). The concept identifies the urban as a 'meso' level that mediates between the level of ideology, politics and economics, on the one hand, and everyday life, on the other. As such, urban experience facilitates the everyday pervasiveness of the (neoliberal) capitalist logic. We apply such framework to the analysis of the formal and functional fragmentations of residential urban space that disrupt the socio-spatial fabric of the former socialist city and, as we argue, reveal how the ideological tenets of neoliberal transition are internalised in the 'common sense' of city dwellers.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, we summarise points of contention with regard to the applicability of neoliberalism in post-socialist urban settings and articulate our understandings. We then start exploring the relations between ideology and urban space in Soviet/ state socialist planning; this provides the context and contrast for a better understanding of the regime that has ensued following the collapse of state socialism. In the sections that follow, we outline institutional and regulatory transformations in the post-Soviet space and focus on ongoing *fragmentation of residential space* which we interpret through the multi-scalar Lefebvrian lens of the levels of social practice, in order to understand the role of the urban experience in mediating between ideology and politics on the one hand and everyday life on the other. The final sections summarise our conclusions and their

relevance for the analysis of neoliberalism and urban transformations both in the post-socialist context and in a global perspective.

Our geographical focus is particularly on the cities of the former USSR. While comprehensive neoliberal transformation has been common to the whole former Eastern Bloc, the ex-Soviet republics share a more homogeneous background in terms of structural and institutional legacies (Hughes and Sasse, 2002), urban planning and configuration of residential property rights and – albeit with some exceptions – a more uncompromising unmaking of the welfare state following the collapse of socialism (e.g. Ghodsee and Orenstein, 2021). Our analysis yet provides insights of general interest for the whole post-socialist region, as well as for the global debate on urban neoliberalism.

Neoliberalising the city

Our conceptualisation of neoliberalism is informed by the conviction that in order to understand the core characteristics of neoliberalism and its varieties, an engagement with the history of ideas needs to go in parallel with political praxis (Bruff and Tansel, 2019; Plehwe and Schmelzer, 2015). The origins of neoliberal thought lie in an attempt to redefine the liberal project against the rise of socialism and its influence on progressive liberalism in the 1920s/1930s (Gane, 2014).

Larner (2000) identifies three conceptual threads identifying neoliberalism, namely governmentality, policy and ideology. 'Governmentality' originates with Foucault's (2008) work on biopolitics and understands neoliberalism as a discourse and a mode of governance centred on the production of new 'entrepreneurial' subjectivities. The 'policy' perspective conceptualises neoliberalism as a political project driven in, and by, the interests of capital, centred around the efficiency and primacy of free markets and the necessity of the state

to retreat from interventions in the economy and from social obligations beyond a minimal safety net. The 'ideology' tradition – deeply influenced by the Gramscian theory of hegemony – originated with Stuart Hall's analysis of Thatcherism's capability to create consensus 'from below' through proposing 'a new form of commonsense' and a narrative appealing to different social groups and classes (Hall, 1980). This focus on 'soft' cultural factors and discursive persuasion has been contrasted with a more 'structural' view of hegemony (Jessop et al., 1985). The debate has influenced critical geographers (Peck and Tickell, 2002) who treat neoliberalism as a 'state form' (Springer, 2012), focusing on the remaking of the state for the sake of 'competitiveness'.

Recent studies of neoliberalism agree about some crucial elements of its ideology, economic rationality and political practice: the view of the market as the most efficient information and knowledge processor; the primacy of economic calculation over political decision-making; and competition and competitiveness as, respectively, the basic normative principle of society and the ultimate virtue of individuals, societies and territories, providing a moral justification to inequality (Davies, 2017; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009).

This has implications for territorial development and the politics of space. The logic of competition and competitiveness applied to cities and regions has led to what Harvey (1989) has defined as the shift from managerial to entrepreneurial local governance – that is, from the focus on provision of welfare services to that on attraction of financial capital. Moreover, the same logic has implied a shift in economic objectives, with a growing lack of discrimination between value creation and value extraction (Sayer, 2016), further exacerbating socio-spatial polarisation at different scales.

However, an understanding of the ways in which the neoliberal logic translates into concrete urban policies needs to consider additional nuances, as follows:

1. Neoliberalism has by now gone through different historical phases – the aggressive deregulation of the Thatcher and Reagan years; the normative, 'third way' forms of the 1990s and early 2000s; the increased financialisation following the 2007–2008 financial crises – that have resulted in policy adjustments at different scales (Davies, 2016). It also goes through interrelated phases of creative destruction (rollback) and building of new institutional modes and governance forms (rollout; Peck et al., 2009).

2. In this process of re-invention, cities have increasingly become a strategic scale for the reproduction of neoliberalism through policy experimentation par excellence (Peck et al., 2009). From this it also descends that cities represent sites of political contestation, struggle and negotiation, which can act as obstacles towards commodification, financialisation and dismantling of urban welfare.

3. Concrete neoliberal urban policies and strategies are also shaped/constrained by contextual factors such as legal and financial constraints, social norms and spatial and infrastructural legacies.

Post-socialist – and in particular post-Soviet – transition has constituted a radical case of 'rollback'. This is reflected not only in the fast unmaking of the socialist welfare state but also in the particularly aggressive discreditation of its institutions, reflected in the peculiar label of 'mis-development' (versus Third World 'under-development') attributed to Soviet-style socialism (Wedel, 1998), and embodied in the 're-naturalisation' of economic relations (see Peck, 2004) and a

more aggressive attempt at re-making political subjectivities 'from above'.

Kipfer (2002, 2008) emphasises a strong connection between Antonio Gramsci's theorisation of hegemony and Henri Lefebvre's conceptualisation of the production of space/everyday life as contributing to hegemony by fusing 'the immediate realm of lived space with the spatial practices and spaces of representations of the larger social order' (Kipfer, 2002: 140). The two thinkers share a view of hegemony as 'the contingent process through which capitalist totality is constructed' (Kipfer, 2002: 126) and 'a contingent fusion of macro- and micro- dimensions of reality, a condensation of base and superstructure' (Kipfer, 2002: 127). The urban is the level which mediates ideology and politics and projects them in spatial and aesthetic form, and provides the scaffold of everyday life practices and experiences; as such, it is the level where the production of hegemony and its contradictory elements can be observed in practice (Goonewardena, 2005; Kipfer and Keil, 2002).

Post-Soviet urban transition can be fruitfully analysed on the basis of Lefebvre's (1970) conceptualisation of the levels of social practice: (a) the 'global' level encompassing state ideology and politics; (b) the 'mixed' or urban level consisting of actual forms, functions and (infra)structures; and (c) the 'private' level consisting of ways of living, patterns, cultural models and values. These levels encompass the recognition of the dialectic nature of socio-spatial relations and are central to the understanding of what Golubchikov (2016, 2017) calls the 'urbanisation of transition'. *The macro 'global' level* involves 'the most general, and therefore the most abstract, although essential, relations, such as capital market and the politics of space', encompassing 'society, the state, global power and knowledge, institutions, and ideologies' (Lefebvre, [1970] 2003: 89). It is

the level of political power that 'makes use of instruments (ideological and scientific)' to modify 'the distribution of resources, income, and the "value" created by productive labour (surplus value)' (Lefebvre, [1970] 2003: 78). The *micro 'private' level* involves the practices of everyday life, such as housing and habiting, typically seen as 'somewhat more modest, even unimportant' (Lefebvre, [1970] 2003: 80) but in fact representing the crucial dimension of the lived experience and its contradictions. The *meso mixed/urban level* embodies the critical function of mediating between the distant and the immediate/everyday order of social reality, ensuring the mobilisation of the urban as a productive force in capitalist society.

This framework allows the urban to be seen as both a dialectical terrain open to struggle and dispute and a mediating level between the ideological–political realm and everyday life. In application to the post-Soviet city, it allows conceptual tools to respond to the 'anti-critical' takes in post-socialist urban studies and to weigh in on the global debate on neoliberalism. This approach also resonates with the anthropological studies of socialism that emphasise a dialectic relationship between ideology, space and the everyday (Humphrey, 2005; Rubin, 2016).

Another element to consider relates to the aesthetic and discursive elements that translate ideology at the urban level. As Goonewardena (2005) notes, ideology needs aesthetic representations next to ideas, and the urban is the chief stage of these representations. The study of the urban experience as the mediating level of social practice implies the necessity to reflect on the specific languages and codes that give aesthetic form to this experience and contribute to making neoliberal ideology pervasive.

Postmodernist aesthetics and discourse – with their promotion of diversity, autonomy

and fragmentation – are a case in point. The postmodernist critique targeted at the 'grand narratives' of modernity does not necessarily lead to the embrace of neoliberalism; however, as Hopenhayn (1994) points out, the language of postmodernism can be effectively employed to provide euphemisms for practices of deregulation and dynamics of increased social injustice by replacing modernist development ethics with an 'aesthetic of chaos'. In his work on the 'condition of postmodernity', Harvey (1991: 78) – following Pierre Bourdieu – emphasises how architects, planners and developers have specialised in the production of symbolic capital able to 'conceal, through the realms of culture and taste, the real basis of economic distinctions' by promoting differentiation in urban design. Murray (2004: 142) sees the conjunction between 'postmodern urbanism' and neoliberalism in the adoption of 'new kinds of "privatised planning"' which 'have replaced the grand visionary schemes of high modernism', producing 'an urban landscape carved into fragments, disconnected "microworlds" cut off from one another'.

In the post-socialist context, as Groys (2002: 8) maintains, the postmodern sensibility for colourful diversity formed by markets implies an aesthetic rejection of the 'dull, gray and monotonous' landscape of socialist modernity; this factually facilitates the fragmentation of the integrated logic of socialist modernist planning and the rejection of the egalitarian standardisation and uniformity of its built spaces.

Later on, we explore forms of spatial fragmentation as neoliberal ruptures of the Soviet/socialist urban fabric. As a point of departure for post-socialist research is the experiences of state socialism, we first need to contrast the politics of space of these two periods to better deliberate on the processes of neoliberalisation.

Ideology and urban residential space in the Soviet era

When exploring the socialist system, its ideology is often reduced to its performative function or at best to the instrument of an 'ideocracy', disconnected from actual urban policies and the material aspects of the everyday life. However, as the urban dimension was at the centre of socialist modernity (Smith, 2015), producing a peculiar 'Second World urbanity' (Bocharnikova and Harris, 2018), it should also be a privileged point of observation for the transitional neoliberal shift.

Murawski (2018: 910) identifies a 'failure-centric' perspective in post-socialist urban studies, which encompasses two narratives, the first holding that state 'socialism failed because it was exaggeratedly obsessed with the [macroscale] economy and industry and neglected every other aspect of social life', the second blaming failure on 'socialism's alleged fixation with the aesthetic, spectacular, epistemic, or ideological realms, and its corresponding neglect of the [everyday life] economy'. Both narratives embody an understanding of disconnection between political ideology and the everyday life. As Harris (2013) points out with regard to Soviet housing policies, many historians have postulated either a 'weak' ideology and lack of coherent plans, or a subordination of urban welfare to the goals of social control and labour discipline. Post-structuralist scholars, possibly motivated by disdain for ideology (Prozorov, 2014), have come to strikingly parallel conclusions from the angle of governmentality and biopolitics. If for Foucault (2003, 2008) the USSR basically borrowed Western biopolitical rationality, for Collier (2011: 67) urban welfare in Soviet planning simply descended from the understanding of the population as a 'collection of

individuals as labour power and subjects of need'.

Recent historical works on late Soviet urban planning, however, emphasise a more genuine and much more far-reaching commitment to the Marxist–Leninist ideology at all levels of society-building, either in terms of addressing the 'housing question' or attempting a total transformation of society (Harris, 2013; Smith, 2010). This view is complemented by anthropologists, who emphasise the socialist built environment as a material embodiment of political ideology (Golubev, 2021; Humphrey, 2005). *Contra* failure-centric perspectives, Murawski (2018: 907) maintains that the socialist ideology did translate into radically transforming property relations and 'actually-existing success' and the endurance of urban socialism and its legacies. Certainly, socialist urban policies and planning practices had significant effects on the citizens' way of life and culture (Varga-Harris, 2015; Zarecor, 2018).

The peculiar characteristics of Soviet urban planning were most fully devised in the wake of Destalinisation in the 1950s. The post-revolutionary 1920s decade – following the major institutional change of the abolition of private property – saw mostly theoretical debates about the ideal form of the new Soviet city, which were meant to provide a new space for a new society by embodying the ideals of egalitarianism and collectivism. These avantgarde planning tenets were rejected during the Stalinist years, which witnessed relevant urban transformations but along the lines of a more traditional urban hierarchy. The Soviet city remained highly segregated and afflicted by chronic housing shortage, further exacerbated by the devastations of the Second World War. The practical necessity to address this shortage, and the ambition to revitalise the Soviet project by recovering the egalitarian idealism of the 1920s, converged in the devising – in the

mid- to late 1950s under Khrushchev – of a massive mass housing programme that would radically transform urban landscapes in the USSR. The core element of this programme and urban planning concept was the *mikrorayon* (micro-district or neighbourhood unit): a new type of residential district based on prefabricated and standardised residential housing organised in blocks around courtyards (*kvartali*), with a significant share of green space and the presence – at least in theory – of educational, social and recreational services and other comprehensive social infrastructure. The socio-cultural implication of the programme was to assign private space to families while at the same time creating a collective egalitarian environment with an abundance of common spaces for collective use (Harris, 2013; Smith, 2010; Varga-Harris, 2015). These spaces – especially courtyards – were meant as the key site for the cultivation of the new communist *byt* (domestic life), based on an everyday activism which included practices of good maintenance and the development of amicable social interactions (Varga-Harris, 2015).

According to Zarecor (2018), this urban planning model devised the core distinctive aspects of the socialist city, developing an integrated network of welfare infrastructure (a 'socialist scaffold') embodying at the urban level the principle of universal welfare. The 'socialist scaffold' concept highlights the integrated infrastructure as a distinct characteristic of the late socialist city and is fundamental in understanding the characteristics of the urban socialist legacy and its potential to be 'repurposed' into the new circumstances of market capitalism (Golubchikov et al., 2014). In Zarecor's (2018) conceptualisation, planners under state socialism developed an 'infrastructural thinking' based on integrated logic, which manifested itself in the strict interconnection of all components of urban welfare infrastructure. This turned

the socialist city into a unique 'unified space of social transformation and material production' (Zarecor, 2018: 101).

The Soviet housing reform also implied the restructuring of property rights (Smith, 2010). In the late Stalinist period, the acknowledgement of the shortage issue had led to favouring of the significant development of individual housing, which led to an increase in the share of 'personal property' with unlimited right to use and right to transfer but no right to profit. The construction of mass housing micro-districts, on the other hand, led to the restriction of personal property – which Khrushchev deemed incompatible with the imminent transition to communism – but in a way extended de facto individual ownership through strengthening security of tenure. This was done in the context of an extremely extended welfare system, where protections were expanded to the extent of substantially minimising social risk (Smith, 2015). Welfare-inflected ideology also gave a particular 'aesthetic' form to the Soviet city through the practice of 'monotonous', large-scale standardisation, where uniformity came to embody the practice of equality (Smith, 2015).

Adopting the Lefebvrian framing, we can describe desegregation and universal social rights and welfare as the ideological underpinnings of the late Soviet city. In terms of planning logic, this translated into an integrated infrastructure system based on a totalising concept of urban planning and social welfare and on the devising of standardised, uniform and egalitarian spaces. The resulting urban spaces strongly influenced the everyday life of Soviet citizens. The transition to market capitalism brought significant economic, social, political and cultural transformations that affected all the levels of social practice; the spatial fragmentation it produced can be interpreted as both symptom and active practice of the rollback of universal welfare and desegregation.

Neoliberalisation and space fragmentation

Post-socialist transition has been widely described as a radical regime shift characterised by a remaking of political and economic/financial institutions, with the establishment of market capitalism and liberal democracy as normative goals (Jessop, 2019). These reforms were deeply underpinned by the rationale of the 'inefficiency' of socialist economies and a strategy of Schumpeterian creative destruction (Ghodsee and Orenstein, 2021) which has, at times, privileged an emphasis on fast 'rollback' over 'rollout'. While institutional economic and political transformations in the post-Soviet space have not been uniform – with some countries rejecting multi-party democracy and with different timelines and paces of market reforms – the unmaking of socialist institutions and the transition to the principles of market capitalism have been implemented in most former Soviet countries. Some of them, like Belarus – which followed for at least two decades a state capitalist developmentalist path – or Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, opted for a less radical institutional and economic remaking. However, as Kandiyoti (2007) remarks, even countries like Uzbekistan – where the lasting impact of institutional Soviet and pre-Soviet legacies after 1991 is often highlighted – went through extensive transformations of economic and welfare institutions.

Major institutional change affected also the spatial and urban planning domain. After a short period of de facto abandonment of planning – mostly due to a strong backlash against the regulatory role of the state (Golubchikov, 2004; Raagmaa and

Stead, 2014) – from the mid-1990s the spatial planning domain in former Soviet countries saw the adoption of policies that promoted competitiveness and 'responsibilisation' of territorial subjects and produced a sharp increase in spatial polarisation and economic and service inequalities insufficiently balanced by redistribution measures (e.g. Kolomak, 2020).

In Russia, following a phase of reliance on foreign models and decision-making decentralisation, the last decade has seen a shift towards knowledge, expertise and resource centralisation (Zupan and Gunko, 2019) which has been interpreted as a shift from 'neoliberal' to 'authoritarian' urbanism (Borushkina and Gorodnichev, 2023). Still, political centralisation measures such as the capital city practice (*Stolichnaya praktika*) governance model – conceived by the Russian authorities since the 2010s to promote the Moscow housing renovation model throughout the country – combine paternalistic and hierarchical principles with an increased responsibility burden placed on municipalities, which are forced to compete for private investment and regional funds (Zupan et al., 2021). At the same time, countries which have pursued a decentralisation strategy – a recent relevant example is the large-scale reform devised by Ukrainian authorities after 2014 – have actually sharpened reliance on the principles of place competition and entrepreneurialism (Fedoriv and Nazarenko, 2021; Ilyniak, 2024).

Sýkora and Bouzarovski (2012) see urban transformations in the post-socialist space as an outcome of social changes influenced by political, economic and other institutional transformations. However, this view underestimates their mediating role with regard to societal change. Transformations of urban space need to be seen as part of institutional change themselves – and as such, as part and parcel of the neoliberal shift.

What is particularly important for our discussion is that the 'socialist scaffold' has experienced significant functional transformations and physical disruptions after the collapse of socialist ideology and the principles underpinning it, particularly as its 'totality' (including planning) has been discredited and obfuscated, while various surviving elements of this scaffold were repurposed for the new politico-economic principles. This means that the 'totality' was replaced with multi-level 'fragmentation'.

Urban fragmentation in the post-Soviet period can be regarded as a spatial translation of two interconnected ideological elements: (a) the (rapid or creeping) retreat of the state from universal welfare provision with the consequent responsibilisation of subjects; and (b) the normative promotion of competition and competitiveness at all levels, reflected in the entrepreneurialisation of local governance and in the (morally justified) production of class/social stratification. Seen against the background of socialist 'totality', these elements express the political–ideological hegemonic tendencies of the neoliberal project. In this regard, the urban level is not just the 'passive' embodiment of ideological tenets but mediates them through its connection with everyday life, providing support to the production of a hegemony that is at times contested, at times reinforced from below.

Space fragmentation is a particularly controversial topic in post-socialist urban studies. Despite emerging evidence of large-scale state-led neoliberal-minded displacement (e.g. Badyina and Golubchikov, 2005; Ogrodowczyk, 2024), the generally piecemeal nature of gentrification in post-socialist cities initially led to dismissing the phenomenon's social significance (Marcińczak et al., 2013) and was taken by some authors as proof of the weakness of global narratives of neoliberalism as a re-enforcer of spatial

inequality (Gentile, 2018; Gentile et al., 2015). The few studies that investigate the social impact of post-socialist micro-level spatial transformations, however, emphasise significant negative externalities. For example, Pojani and Buka (2015) find evidence of deterioration of social cohesion among neighbours following densification in Tirana neighbourhoods. In the broader global urban studies debate, the detrimental effects of micro-level segmentation and polarisation are generally acknowledged as part of negative (even if creeping) effects of neoliberalisation on places and communities (see e.g. Davidson, 2010; Lees, 2008; Maloutas, 2018).

An attempt at framing space fragmentation within the ideological logic of transition is made by Hirt (2012), who, studying gated suburbanisation in Sofia, associates the phenomenon with a grassroots ideology of 'privatism', resulting in private appropriation of public space, and expressing a reaction towards perceived failures of both state socialism and post-socialist capitalism. Hirt's view has two shortcomings: it does not consider the reinforcing role of these 'privatism' practices with regard to neoliberal ideology and politics; and it is shaped by an understanding of state socialism as hostile to private space, which reflects misconceptions directly related to the issue of property rights in the USSR and Eastern Bloc countries, and, ultimately, to the Marxist understanding of personal versus private property.

In the sections below, we focus on three key themes of the fragmentation of residential space as vignettes to illustrate our argument about the naturalisation of neoliberalism as a continuing hegemony spatialised at the urban level, including: (a) homeownership and housing governance fragmentation, (b) gating and fencing of common spaces and (c) the aesthetic production of residential space. In our opinion, these themes emblematically reflect the mediating role of the urban – emphasised by Lefebvre – between the realm of ideology and politics and the practices of everyday life; as such, they exemplify the interrelation between institutional, social and spatial transformations.

Residential property and housing governance fragmentation

As Verdery (2003: xiv) remarked, 'socialism was not a property void; it had its own structure of property rights'. *Contra* Pipes' (1999) claim that the USSR abolished ownership rights, it can rather be claimed that the Soviet system envisaged a peculiar understanding of these rights, which de jure and de facto existed but were hierarchically subordinated to the 'right of use' and did not include the right to profit as central to the capitalist system (Marcuse, 1996; Smith, 2010). Hence, the Soviet urban dweller can be described as a tenant with many de facto ownership rights, except those associated with housing commodification.

In this light, the reform of property rights needs to be interpreted as a redefinition, with ideological and political underpinnings and implications, of what 'ownership' means. Marcuse (1996: 156) regards the early 1990s privatisation of housing in Russia as 'a shifting set of compromises between both conflicting interests and the conflicting views they engender', where unrestrained right to buy, sell and rent was introduced, and the 'right to housing' was circumscribed. The 1991 Law on the Privatisation of the Housing Stock and its 1992 amendment provided tenants with the possibility to become owners of occupied units for free, but the costs of maintenance and rehabilitation were left to market mechanisms (even if the original promise was that the state would complete its previous commitments to providing necessary renovation work and improving housing conditions). Privatisation followed similar

patterns throughout the whole post-Soviet space, with free property transfer or voucher privatisation (plus 'restitution' in the Baltic states), whereas the issue of land ownership was managed in a variety of ways shaped by political compromise (Marcuse, 1996). The privatisation process led to a prevalence of owner-occupied apartments (e.g. nearly 90% in Russia as of 2018), with consequently limited resident turnover. Free or low-price transfer of apartments mostly worked in this regard as a safety net, although the universality of 'right to housing' largely remained on paper (Zavisca, 2012) and significant instances of eviction due to unpaid utilities were witnessed (e.g. Alexander, 2007).

These reforms were a textbook implementation of the neoliberal project – the transformation of the tenant into an owner, together with the responsibilisation of the individual and de-responsibilisation of the state, plus residual/repurposed welfare infrastructure acting as a safety net against complete dispossession and absolute impoverishment – in a broader context of transformation of the Soviet universal welfare system into means-tested social safety (see Ghodsee and Orenstein, 2021). This is consistent with the neoliberal process of citizen 'activation' from above – centred on the institutional promotion of self-reliance – that has been observed in Russia (Matza, 2012; Salmenniemi, 2010; Yurchak, 2002) and elsewhere in the post-socialist space (e.g. Dunn, 2004; Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald, 2016).

At the urban level, the rejection of the Soviet ideology explicates itself also in a break with its state-centred decision-making through fragmentation of housing and neighbourhood governance; this also includes an obfuscation of its integrated spatial-infrastructural logic. These elements contribute to a change of meaning and understanding of the other constitutive component of late Soviet residential blocks next to apartment units: the common spaces that were envisaged as the core of social life and socialist *byt*. How should the new individualised/entrepreneurial subjects deal with spaces so ideologically and culturally loaded, in the context of land property fragmentation and the emergence of new, multiple stakeholders? Official discourses, once more, frame the expected new attitudes within the new neoliberal logic. For example, in the mid-2000s, the then governor of St Petersburg hinted at 'taking responsibility' for common spaces as being part of the process of the making of the new, post-Soviet citizen (Dixon, 2013). But what does responsibility for common spaces mean in the context of abandonment of collectivist/egalitarian residential planning and new property relations?

Tuvikene (2019), focusing on Soviet-era housing estates in Tallinn, points to a rather common post-Soviet trend of governance shift: governing responsibilities have been devolved to homeowners' associations, creating evident contradictions with the governing logic that was inscribed into planning, institutionalising and socialising these spaces – courtyard space layouts are not effectively managed by decentralising governance to the single building level. These associations embody the consequence of the neoliberal logic inherent to the remaking of property rights: devolution of responsibility on the basis of ownership gives way to a fragmented form of governance that does not adequately address the issue of coordination to manage the collective use of common spaces.

In Lefebvrian terms, these examples are emblematic of how the retreat of the welfare state – a macro-level ideological and political phenomenon – has concrete effects on

urban governance and the urban fabric. These effects also reflect on the everyday life of residents and their grassroots practices.

Spatial enclosures: Gating and fencing of common space

At the grassroots level, the fragmentation logic and the promotion of self-reliance reflect themselves in the practice of fencing and gating 'open' spaces. In some cases, this phenomenon seems to imply anti-commodification attitudes, such as 'resistance' against businesses willing to keep access open for their clients (Aksenov, 2012). However, it is also revealing of a neoliberal subjectivity. Polishchuk and Sharygina (2016) find evidence of a 'self-reliance' response to perceived governance failures behind the practice of community gating in Russia.

The phenomenon also contributes to socio-spatial segregation. Axenov (2014) emphasises how the restriction of publicly accessible places – driven by the individual or collective initiative of residents – contributes to hidden social segregation in residentially mixed areas of St Petersburg. Pachenkov (2018) examines the case of *Palevsky zhilmassiv*, a historically and architecturally significant Constructivist residential estate of the 1920s in St Petersburg. The estate was saved from demolition by the collective initiative of residents in the 2000s; however, soon afterwards the same residents envisaged gating/fencing and the removal of benches in order to keep external undesired visitors away.

Habeck and Belolyubskaya (2016: 127) identify the function of fences in private sector and dacha settlements in Yakutsk in both security and privacy – a means to 'keep the imponderabilities of social action off the private sphere', whereas common and public spaces are neglected, rather than privately appropriated. Seen in terms of a small-scale grassroots initiative, fragmentation and fencing/gating of space can be seen as manifestations of new subjectivities in an ambiguous but ultimately reinforcing relation with the top-down neoliberal discourse of the elites. Shevchenko (2015: 64) points at individual privatisation and fencing of residential common space in Moscow as an indicator of – and metaphor for – the retreat from political life in Russian society, constituting a 'fortress of the weak' meant as self-protection rather than resistance to neoliberalism, therefore legitimising both the elites' embrace of inequality and the dominant discourse of self-reliance. There are significant parallels in this regard with the understanding of the informal economy in the post-Soviet space as both resistance/defence against neoliberalism and internalisation of its governmentality (see Morris, 2021).

The 'retreat' may also serve a governance strategy of political demobilisation of the society, conforming with the 'disenchantment of politics by economics' that has been described as an essential feature of neoliberalism (Davies, 2017: 6). Büdenbender and Zupan (2017: 309) point out that urban development in Moscow under Mayor Sergey Sobyanin's technocratic-neoliberal administration 'is rendered a non-political issue'. Their study focuses on the 'scripting' strategies of the administration, which can be seen as a tool to turn neoliberal ideology into governmentality by promoting the creation of the entrepreneurial, 'responsible' – but fundamentally de-politicised – city dweller. This mode and rhetoric of governance includes presenting decision-making issues in urban space as purely technical/technocratic (Zamyatin, 2019). On the other hand, it can be argued that the re-appropriation of the traditional common spaces of residential everyday life outside of 'scripted' practices constitutes an important step for the development of local grassroots activism (Clément, 2015). Tykanova and Khokhlova (2015: 144) find evidence that 'the crucial factor

determining the involvement of citizens in the protection of urban spaces is the configuration of socially constructed boundaries between "their" and "not their" spaces'. Seen against the broader backdrop of spatial fragmentation, these findings emphasise how the everyday life can breed potentially 'subversive' practices able to break the boundaries of 'induced' particularism, another important element of the Lefebvrian conceptualisation (Kipfer, 2008; Kipfer et al., 2008).

New urban aesthetics and the spatialisation of class

Land commodification, densification and the consequent erosion of public spaces have all been universal phenomena in postsocialist cities, having been observed both in contexts characterised by weak governance, such as Ukraine, and in contexts where aggressive entrepreneurialism is promoted together with semi-dirigiste and semi-developmentalist strategies, such as Russia or the Caspian states. Newbuild residential projects can be assimilated both to aggressive market segmentation strategies in order to maximise land profit, and to 'modernisation' plans that champion 'exclusiveness' and sometimes radically postmodern planning policies, in a more or less explicit contrast with the uniformity and 'greyness' of socialist modernity. At the same time, they are emblematic of the process of post-socialist class stratification through distinctive consumption (Humphrey, 2002) and spatial and aesthetic symbolism (Golubchikov, 2017), in a process of production and consumption of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) where development strategies and a new social taste for distinction meet. The projection of ideology and hegemonic ambitions then translates into the spatialisation of class stratification and social inequality, as a 'rollback' of both of

the main characterising features of the late Soviet city – uniformity and standardisation on the one hand, spatial desegregation on the other. The post-modern aesthetic provides a visual language to this process, at the same time occluding its socio-economic and socio-political content.

Humphrey (2002) first paid attention to this phenomenon by studying the villas of the Russian 'new rich' in the 1990s. These villas – nodding to the 19th-century aristocracy *cottage* tradition – look proactively disconnected from the local socio-spatial fabric, signalling the exclusive social status of their owners. On the other hand, they are not just the expression of New Russians' taste and agency – the 1990s mansions described by Humphrey reflected in their style the grand building projects of the capital city, which expressed the 'profitability and stability' ideology of the Yeltsin administration.

This exclusive/escapist postmodernism embodied in residential 'islands of prosperity' is not an exclusive feature of the 'new rich' class, nor is it restricted to suburban areas. Indeed, it is a phenomenon common to urban and suburban environments and various social strata throughout the former USSR, enabled by both top-down and bottom-up dynamics – entrepreneurial politics of space, developers' drive for short-term profit, societal aspirations. Symbolically, the production of class and status is often outsourced to the symbolism of faraway, foreign places (Golubchikov, 2017, 2019) through toponymies and architectural styles that are alien to the local context. In (pre-war) Kyiv, gated complexes in mock British or Dutch style, targeted at the middle or middle-upper class, have developed as status-conscious alternatives to the surrounding non-renovated and dilapidating mass housing estates (Mezentsev et al., 2019). The naming of new projects after fashionable urbanism trends or Western or local 'prestige' names is also explicitly meant

to emphasise their otherness, exclusiveness and exclusivity (Gnatiuk and Melnychuk, 2024). Bissenova (2012) and Leupold (2023) have underlined the symbolic significance of apartment ownership in such new construction projects in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, associated with becoming 'a proper member of the bourgeoisie' (Bissenova, 2012: 31).

These dynamics are also actively promoted as top-down urban development strategies. In Tbilisi, under Mikheil Saakashvili's rule, an ultra-postmodern, fragmented conception of urban development was elevated to official politics of space, becoming one of the defining elements of urban planning (Salukvadze and Golubchikov, 2016). Roth (2019: 66) points out the megaprojects and exclusive housing estates 'increasingly disconnected from urban life' that characterise the language and imagery of urban modernisation in post-Soviet Baku. These interventions 'unbundle' the integrated infrastructure of socialist modernist planning, affecting the perceptions and everyday life of residents (Roth, 2019). As emblematic outcomes, both fencing and private in-fill developments challenge the openness of the pedestrian circulation system envisaged by late socialist-era planners (Dixon, 2013; Staub, 2005), and urban and suburban gated developments bar non-residents from access to formerly public spaces and roads (Stewart, 2008). Nasritdinov and Schröder (2016: 25) point out how in-fill residential developments and fencing in Bishkek have contributed to turning 'socially active yards and streets' into 'things of the past' in the eyes of long-term residents.

Once more, the Lefebvrian framework highlights the mediating role of the urban. The fragmented and eclectic landscape resulting from neoliberal politics of space translates the neoliberal ideology in aesthetic form, internalises this ideology in new subjectivities and at the same time reinforces the practice of socio-spatial inequality in everyday life.

Discussion

The previous sections have outlined some ways in which the urban experience of post-Soviet transition has provided spatial form to the neoliberal ideology and contributed to its pervasiveness. The ideology of transition in post-1991 Russia and other former Soviet countries, embodied in the state retreat from welfare provision for the sake of the normative promotion of competition, has been directly reflected in the reform of housing property rights and the entrepreneurial shift in urban governance. The spatial impact of these politics and policies has contributed to shape new subjectivities and attitudes towards space and society. Hence, the fragmentation of common spaces through gating, and the segmentation of the once-integrated residential landscape through the development of distinctive enclaves for the rich and the (aspirational) middle class, are related phenomena where ideology and politics on the one hand, and subjectivities and aspirations on the other, interact and ultimately reinforce each other.

The small-scale segmentation of residential space – driven by both top-down and bottom-up factors – is not a negligible phenomenon that explains the limits of critiques of neoliberalism; on the contrary, it is a process that leads to the reinforcement of class divisions (Golubchikov, 2016) while at the same time accommodating particularisms within the logic of neoliberal capitalism (Goonewardena and Kipfer, 2005). Hence, we identify a mutual reinforcing relation between bottom-up dynamics and top-down neoliberalism. The retreat of the state from universal welfare provision and the promotion of competition between entrepreneurial subjects at all levels – from individuals to territorial subjects – goes together with the discreditation of the Soviet welfare state and its integrated, totalising and egalitarian

logic. These elements contribute to the transformation of city dwellers into 'responsible owners' and their acceptance of state deresponsibilisation.

These considerations also help reflect on the authoritarian nature that neoliberal policies can take even regardless of explicit repressive measures. As Bruff and Tansel (2019: 234) maintain, next to repression of the political opposition and more or less explicit restriction of democratic spaces, authoritarian neoliberalism can encompass:

> repeated invocations of 'the market' or 'economic necessity' to justify a wide range of restructurings across various societal sites (e.g. states, households, workplaces, urban spaces) […] and the heightened pressures and responsibilities shifted onto households by repeated bouts of crisis and the restructuring of the state's redistributive mechanisms.

Socio-spatial fragmentation discussed in the previous sections of this article can be regarded at the same time as an outcome of these policies and a facilitating factor in broader processes of de-democratisation, associated with the 'reconfiguring of state and institutional power in an attempt to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent' (Bruff, 2014: 115).

In the context of the debate on post-socialist neoliberalism, our analysis is in line with critical scholars like Bernt (2016) and Bernt and Volkmann (2024) who identify neoliberalisation as a key feature of transition through the study of property rights in former East Germany and Russia. However, we also diverge from these studies in maintaining that neoliberalisation in the former USSR is not independent from socialist legacies – not only because of the subsumption process that creates spatial landscapes with certain hybrid characteristics (Golubchikov et al., 2014) but also because it is ideologically defined in explicit contrast to them. It

may be argued that the contradiction between an extreme rollback offensive and the strong persistence of spatial legacies constitutes the paradoxical peculiarity of neoliberalism in the former USSR.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and increased geopolitical competition, some commentators have hypothesised a global shift away from neoliberalism and a return to some form of Keynesian, developmentalist welfare state. However, it remains to be seen whether this shift will amount to a series of adjustments or a change of paradigm; in any case, it is unlikely that this shift will unmake, at least in the short/medium term, the ways in which neoliberalism has shaped societies and spaces globally and in the post-Soviet space in particular. Moreover, other authors have emphasised a possible radicalisation tendency of neoliberalism towards right-libertarian forms of 'fragmented authoritarianism' (Slobodian, 2023: 206), which would deepen the neoliberal logic of spatial deregulation and fragmentation of the social fabric at different scales.

The adaptation of both the Russian and Ukrainian state to the circumstances of the ongoing war is emblematic of the persistence of neoliberal frameworks. In Ukraine, a strategy of 'warfare without the state' (Tooze, 2022) has been promoted by some foreign advisors and pursued by the authorities, with an acceleration in privatisation processes and de-regulative amendments to labour laws. Post-war reconstruction of destroyed civil infrastructure is imagined to be demanded of foreign, mostly private, investment, also associated with the Zelensky government's promises of giving access to the unique natural resources of Ukraine to foreign corporations. In Russia, strong government stimulus measures targeted at certain segments of the population and certain sectors of the national industry (Trickett, 2023) have been devised. But even those commentators who describe these measures

as a significant 'military Keynesian' turn hypothesise a likely return to fiscal conservatism and welfare cuts in the medium term (Ishchenko et al., 2023; Tooze, 2023). Meanwhile, these years have also seen an extension of the capital city practice model of urban governance to Russia's newly annexed territories (Borushkina and Gorodnichev, 2023) and a sharpening of the top-down neoliberal model of urban planning and development (Pachenkov, 2024).

Conclusions

In this study we have explored the connections between neoliberal ideology and politics and the fragmentation of urban space under post-Soviet transition, through a framework based on Henri Lefebvre's levels of social practice. In particular, we hypothesised an interrelation between neoliberal tenets (an emphasis on the unmaking of the welfare state and de facto promotion of inequality through competition) and the socio-spatial/socio-infrastructural disruptions of the 'integrated totality' of socialist planning.

At the urban level, ideological elements interact with entrepreneurial growth strategies and with constitutive elements of the transition from socialism to capitalism – the dynamics of primitive accumulation, the shift towards profit-driven development – in fragmenting the inherited homogeneous space. At the micro level, the new ideological discourse and politics of space lead to new attitudes towards common spaces and residential choices that reflect both absorption of and resistance to said ideology – but end up reinforcing them by promoting a retreat into the non-political realm, an acceptance of inequality and an embrace of aspirational particularism that echoes Lefebvre's concept of 'minimal difference' (Goonewardena and Kipfer, 2005). At the same time, the segmentation of the residential landscape through the development of distinctive enclaves for the rich and the middle class leads to the spatialisation of class and inequality. Space fragmentation is then intermingled with the promotion of an entrepreneurial city dweller type, contrasted with the 'backward' working class. This type is conceived as individually 'responsible' but de facto depoliticised and alien to organic demands for collective welfare.

Overall, our study highlights the relevance of Lefebvre's conceptualisation in integrating base and superstructure, structure and agency into a 'totality' that may serve to bridge the gap in different understandings of the neoliberal project, and in outlining the role of the urban experience in validating its pervasive, potentially hegemonic 'common sense'.

Even considering the current adjustments and potential transformations of the neoliberal paradigm in the wake of major global and geopolitical changes, the understanding of the pervasiveness of the neoliberal ideology in these decades – and its impact on space – will still be useful to understand its mutations and to identify counter-hegemonic possibilities and constraints.

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