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**CASE OF IRKUTSK IN CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN REGIONAL  
POST-SOVIET CITIES DEVELOPMENT**

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***Abstract***

The article considers the urban development of Siberian city Irkutsk in the post-Soviet space. Neoliberal concepts and critical geography constitute the basis for this article. Each aspect pays great attention to local practices and considers them as important components of the transformation process.

Modern researcher Tuvikene drew attention to the fact that in both urban and sociological studies, post-socialism was not sufficiently developed: «Even though post-socialism outside regional borders is suggested, it remains largely undeveloped in urban research as well as in sociological studies, more generally». Ferenčuhová thinks that searching for a variety among existing theoretical models without recognizing their historical, political, and geographical embeddedness has actually trapped the idea of the post-socialist city in a transitory discourse and a forever-indefinite story.

This article to some extent compensates this gap in urban research in general, and for the city of Irkutsk in particular. This is the first study, the object of which is modern urban development in the context of transition from socialism to post-socialism, and which is based on the results of field research and expert interviews conducted in 2012-2018.

Globalization processes force cities to change in the modern world. There is a transition from industrial to service economy. Modern development is characterized by high dynamics, high competition and new challenges that require fast and high-quality solutions.

Russian cities are also included in this world process. However they still have a radical transformation from Soviet cities to modern ones, which further complicates their modern development.

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**Keywords:** Irkutsk, Russia, urban development, transformation in post-Soviet space



## 1. Introduction

Scholars of post-socialist urbanism lively debate on contemporary cities. Transformation is one of the most discussed topics today. Much of the theoretical work on city-regions is based on the urban experience of North America and Western Europe. Voices are being increasingly raised that it is time to rethink the geographies of urban and regional theory (Roy, 2009; Tuvikene, 2016).

Golubchikov (Golubchikov, 2016) points out that there is actually a fast-growing and already rather sophisticated body of internationally excellent literature that addresses significant challenges and provides diverse accounts on many aspects of post-socialist urbanization, both empirically and theoretically.

Post-socialist cities were studied through more or less explicit comparison with Western cities and through their confrontation with their socialist past. The authors want to make Irkutsk visible on the map of post-Soviet cities. Showing the city through the trialectics of spatiality, historicity and sociality. The authors wish to demonstrate the influence on the post-Soviet city from the most diverse areas of historical Irkutsk.

The concept of transformation is the fundamental basis of the theoretical framework. Through the prism of this concept, selected contemporary local practices of Irkutsk have propelled the city forward in urban development.

## 2. Problem Statement

In our view, Sýkora's and Bouzarovski's concept describes frameworks of the transformation of cities in the post-Soviet space. Sýkora and Bouzarovski (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012) suggest that the transition is proceeding through multiple transformations, breaking them down into three aspects with regard to their time span: institutional transformations (short-term period), social transformations (medium-term period) and urban transformations (long term period). The institutional transformations include the basic changes in political and economic organisation, the social transformations cover "peoples' behaviour, habits and cultural norms", and the urban transformations embrace urban patterns. The example of Irkutsk illustrates that the urban transformation reflecting the trends of post-Soviet urban development occurred only in 2011.

We also note that one of the authors of this paper – Ferenčuhová – said that, «I argue that the socialist past is not just past (Hirt, 2017); its representations are indeed a part of the present day, both in political debates and in academia».

The authors of this article share the point of Ferenčuhová and think that this is especially true for modern Russian cities. Moreover, Russian researcher Pivovarov (Pivovarov, 2014) notes that the Soviet system was the way of transition from agricultural to urban society of Russia. Pivovarov (Pivovarov, 2014) also indicates that the main characteristic of the modern Russia is its «Sovietskost'». That is why, in our opinion, it will be a longer transition of Russian post-Soviet cities to possibly some new model, or to a not "pure" capitalistic model. One thing is certain about Russian cities, that is, it is not correct to say that the Soviet period was only 70 years against the background of thousands of years of our history.

### 3. Research Questions

The authors believe that the basis of the transformation of Irkutsk includes a historical context, a geographical region and a high level of social capital, acquired over the previous historical periods.

In the post-Soviet space, Russia has formed four different types of cities – growth centers – are formed: «the Federal cities of Moscow and St.-Petersburg; other cities – «millionaires» that lag far behind the Federal capitals; cities – centers of regions; and single-industry cities with large leading companies, mainly export oriented». (Zubarevich, 2006). According to this classification, Irkutsk refers to the city-center of the region.

Golubchikov O. Yu. (Golubchikov & Makhrova, 2013; Golubchikov, 2014) note that in the 1990s with the downturn in industrial production, the flip side of the forced de-industrialization was the tertiary nature of the city's economy. The largest centers in the country with a population of over 500 thousand became its main recipients; this illustrates the increase in their share for almost 20% in retail turnover and housing construction and investment. Irkutsk belongs to these regional centers.

The economic structure of the city inherited from Soviet industrialization was not effective. Irkutsk failed to keep the entire industrial potential inherited from the Soviet Union. During the 90's, most factories were converted to shopping malls. One of them appeared instead of the former machine tool plant, the other – on the site of the driveshaft factory (Kozmin, 2016). So-called de-industrialization of the urban economy happened. The people of Irkutsk began to use the Soviet industrial infrastructure for shopping centers.

Nowadays, leading industries of Irkutsk are engineering and food products; in the structure of GRP, the share of trade accounted for 49%, the share of industry – 21%, remaining 30% include transport and communications, construction and real estate activities. In the Soviet Irkutsk, workers made 63% of the population, in the post-Soviet Irkutsk – only 15% of the population are employed in industrial activities. Almost 13% of people are employed in the field of education, and 12% are employed in the segment "operations with real estate, rent and granting of services", 11% are employed in trade companies and companies of transport and communication.

In 2011 a unique project called «130th Kvartal» was implemented in Irkutsk. It is a living district of the modern city, designed in a traditional Irkutsk wooden style, consisting of more than 70 objects. Houses built in 1830-1870 were reconstructed here, which, however, were not historical monuments, and turned into commercial property – restaurants, shops and cultural sites. Let us note that the 130th Kvartal may be considered as one of the most successful regional management projects in recent years.

There is another project of the local people associated with the preservation and restoration of urban historic architecture. 30 billions rubles were invested into the «Irkutsk Kvartal's» sustainable business. The project has the implementation deadline which was set up to 2021. This is not typical for Russian cities.

Irkutsk has always been a city with high merchant activity (Plotnikova & Koss, 2015). The geographical location contributes to the active inclusion of Irkutsk in the globalization process. Chinese tourism is a phenomenon that is now being actively observed and researched by local scientists (Plotnikova, 2018). Also a new urban space was formed in Chinese consisting mainly of promotional offers. Chinese tourists travel around the city not only in groups, but also as independent tourists. The biggest contribution to the new urban space is the city tourist route called "green line" equipped with information stands in

Russian, Chinese and English. Today Irkutsk is the third city most visited by Chinese tourists after Moscow and St. Petersburg.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the transformation and transition of urban space development of Irkutsk from Soviet to post-Soviet. The aim of expert interviews was to study opinions of successful people about their city and its development prospects.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The paper presents the findings of one empirical in-depth case study, the object of which is Irkutsk, interviews with experts and the results of the sociological research conducted by the Laboratory of Urban Development and Social Innovation of the International Institute of Economy and Linguistics of Irkutsk State University (IEIL ISU) in 2012-2018.

The qualitative research, devoted to the «130th Kvartal», was carried out separately; architects – the authors of the project, representatives of the authorities who supervised the project and businessmen who ruled the course of the project, were among experts in this research.

A mix of qualitative research methods was used in this study. We also used content analyses of government, practitioner and media publications and observation as information sources.

#### **6. Findings**

Modern Irkutsk has not inherited the benefits from an effective economic structure. Valuable experience of project management was gained in the process of creating the «130th Kvartal», when investors invested their money in the restoration of wooden architectural monuments and then transformed the monument into commercial property. It was the result of modern urban development. The «Irkutsk Kvartal's» project is implemented now using the same principles. The federal government sets such pace of development; therefore the accumulated social capital in the previous 2 centuries became one of the foundations for the successful incorporation of the city into modern processes.

#### **7. Conclusion**

As a result of the transformation from the Soviet to post-Soviet Irkutsk, de-industrialization of the urban economy occurred, which makes it tertiary. At the present stage of its development, the city managed to implement the project called «130th Kvartal», which made it attractive both for tourists and for the townspeople themselves.

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