



# Urban Transformation and Experiences of ‘Becoming Marginal’ in Russia

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## Abstract

Urban transformation in the post-socialist city is connected to comprehensive debates. This paper steers the reader through these, emphasising three contentions that serve to clarify the approach to two interconnected questions: How do people give meaning to urban transformation? In which ways does an analysis of societal change in a peripheral city in pre-war Russia contribute to debates on global urbanism? The paper is structured in three main parts, beginning with the review of the post-socialist city literature. The focus in this study is on experiences, bringing a more human perspective on urban transformation in combination with analysis of structural dimensions impeding on the everyday. In the second part, Togliatti is introduced as a research site and details on data collection are provided. The paper contributes empirically with a study of urban transformation in the auto-town Togliatti in the Samara region southeast of Moscow, Russia. The third part is devoted to interlocutors’ perspectives and the emergence of the narrative of ‘becoming marginal’. In conclusion, becoming marginal is a narrative that gives meaning to the historical conjuncture and the grievances people reflect on as they reason about individual life trajectories. While place-specific, these experiences link to global (urban) discussions on marginality and precarity. The paper underscores that making sense of experiences means to reflect on these in context, and in a final discussion, it reflects how much more difficult such research has become after Russia’s military attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

**Keywords** Post-socialist city · Transformation · Monotown · Russia · Global urbanism · Marginality

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Research on urban transformation in the post-socialist city is connected to comprehensive debates about the changing global political economy, the role of the state and how to make sense of local experiences of change. Some scholars emphasise the structural power of the ‘radical rupture’ following the collapse of the Soviet Union. They explain that global processes of marketization and commodification interlink with socialist legacy to shape new place-specific relations that define local developments (Büdenbender & Zupan, 2017, p. 296; Golubchikov, 2016, 2017; Golubchikov et al., 2014). Other scholars stress the role of the state and explain that national governing regimes define transformation in the post-socialist city (Crowley, 2016; Gunko et al., 2021). Discussions furthermore display conceptual conundrums related to terms such as (socialist) legacy, neoliberalism and post-socialism (Ferenčuhová, 2016; Ferenčuhová & Gentile, 2016; Golubchikov, 2017; Tuvikene, 2016a, b). These contentions demonstrate the relevance of the post-socialist city to research on global urbanism pertaining to a particular global historical conjuncture (Chelcea et al., 2021, p. 71). This paper uses this as an opening to study urban transformation through experiences and addresses a gap in research on peripheral and industrial towns, focusing on Russia. Two interconnected questions are examined: How do people give meaning to urban transformation? In which ways does an analysis of societal change in a peripheral city in pre-war Russia contribute to debates on global urbanism?

The paper studies meaning-making in the post-socialist city and addresses a specific context, in which the experiences of urban change are ‘historicized in lived temporality’ (Humphrey, 1996/1997, p. 71). They are expressions of specific historical conditions and contribute to knowledge on transformation understood as an unfolding process shaped by multiple relationalities. To explain this approach, I steer the reader through the post-socialist city literature, focusing on three contentions: First, the linear approach to (urban) development in the post-socialist city is contrasted to the interest in cities ‘off the map’ in decolonial and comparative urban studies. This opens research to studies of difference and provides a basis for empirical, context-sensitive analyses that deepen and broaden the understanding of transformation (Morris, 2021; Robinson, 2016). Second, the antagonistic view that (socialist) legacy is either absorbed by global processes of neoliberalisation or sustained within a state-centric framework is eluded. The emphasis is on legacy as an inscription of the past in the present, which means it blends with global processes (Golubchikov et al., 2014; Tuvikene, 2016a, b). Third, the dominance of structural and economic explanations over social and agentic dimensions in studies of post-socialist urban transformation is addressed (Gentile, 2018). With the term “post-socialist social”, Collier (2011) underscores that global and local practices and beliefs are mixed as transformation unfolds. Focusing on experiences is a research strategy to examine the complexities of transformation and to narrate societal developments through grounded and often ambiguous data (cf. Humphrey, 1996/1997).

Empirically, this paper contributes with a study of urban transformation in the auto-town Togliatti in the Samara region southeast of Moscow, Russia. Known as “Detroit on the Volga” (Siegelbaum, 2008, p. 2), the post-socialist reconstruction of the city’s car industry has been significant to Togliatti’s development. The analysis accentuates the global interconnectedness of the city before and after the end of the

Cold War. Developments after Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, which led to the departure of the French majority owner of the factory, underscore this as an unfolding process. Togliatti is a city 'off the map' of global urban research and serves as an example of the absence of the post-socialist urban periphery in discussions about global political economic and urban change.

The paper is structured in three main parts. It begins first with a review of debates on the post-socialist city. I explain how the focus on experiences in Togliatti brings a more personal or human perspective on urban transformation in combination with analysis of structural dimensions impeding on people's everyday. Second, Togliatti is introduced as a research site and details on data collection are provided. The third part is devoted to interlocutors' perspectives and the emergence of the narrative of becoming marginal.

I argue that urban transformation in Togliatti can be described as a process of becoming marginal (Lancione, 2016, p. 10), a process shaped by trans-local experiences that interconnect global and local processes and practices. I explain the discovery of becoming marginal in the data and accentuate the experiences of dispossession and displacement in relation to the 'foreign'. Participants express how they learn the city anew in an ongoing process shaped by foreign involvement as ownership of the car factory changes and state practices are altered. The meaning given to societal developments is characterised by experiences of a loss of status and pride in the urban community. Drawing on these experiences, I discuss how people reflect on power, participation and belonging in the city and show how becoming marginal in Togliatti includes a feeling of being alienated and disempowered from participating in processes that affect (urban) change.

In conclusion, becoming marginal is a narrative that gives meaning to the historical conjuncture and the grievances people reflect on as they reason about individual life trajectories. While place-specific, these experiences link to global (urban) discussions on marginality and precarity. The concluding discussion addresses how research on political and societal change in changing historical conditions in Russia is affected after the military invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

## Global Urban Transformation and the Post-socialist City in Russia

Scholars underscore that the post-socialist city does not represent a singular urban form and remains hitherto "a major theoretical puzzle" (Hirt, 2013, S36; Tuvikene, 2016a, b, p. 141). The puzzle has both a spatial and a temporal dimension. Spatially, it is a conundrum that the post-socialist city is found across a vast geographical spread, including Southern and Eastern Europe, and extending to former socialist countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. With such variety, the question is what difference the term 'post-socialist' makes in generating knowledge about urban, political, economic and social developments. The temporal dimension links the present of the post-socialist city to its socialist past, while questioning the delimitation of 'post'. Scholars ask at what time is it not any longer valuable to speak of the post, indicating that the term post-socialist makes little sense as a temporal demarcation in the study of social and urban change (Chelcea & Druta, 2016; Müller, 2019).

The post-socialist city concept remains an expression of the move away from the socialist past with its blurred spatial and temporal boundaries. The concept is a centre

of theoretical debates about how transformation away from socialism unfolds, which include critical reflections on representations of the socialist past. I emphasise three contentions that express core learning points about global urban transformation generated in the post-socialist city debate. The first contention highlights linearity versus relationality in thinking about development. In a perceived linear path to global development, the post-socialist city is approached in terms of efforts of ‘catching up’ with the ‘capitalist city’. This has informed attempts to diagnose deviance and provide suggestions on how the post-socialist city can become “normal” (cf. Gentile, 2018; Wiest, 2012). The juxtaposition of the post-socialist city to its past and to its ‘capitalist other’ has the effect that it produces an idea of the post-socialist city as if it was a singular form. This linear and singular perspective is contested by critical scholars. They emphasise this view as an expression of hierarchies in knowledge generation that remains focused on cities in the Global North, e.g. the ‘Global City’, and excludes cities ‘off the map’. The decolonial and comparative turn addresses the need to engage with experiences ‘beyond the centre’ to generate knowledge of our global political world(s) (Gugler, 2003; Robinson, 2002, 2011). They emphasise a multiplicity of experiences and argue cities ‘off the map’ should be targets of a ‘comparative gesture’ (Robinson, 2011) to empirically explore (global) urban developments elsewhere (Simone & Pieterse, 2017). This challenge to linear ideas of transformation opens research to studies of difference. It provides a basis for empirical, context-sensitive analyses that deepen and broaden the understanding of transformation (Morris, 2021; Robinson, 2016). The post-socialist city is situated within this comparative research program and is a marginal or peripheral location in which to study (global) urban transformation.

Research on experiences of post-socialist urban transformation is shaped by a second contention between an emphasis on global processes of neoliberalisation or the domestic political regime. A national context of research on the post-socialist city has been discussed specifically regarding studies in Russia. The dominant state and re-centralisation since the 2000s provide scholars with a backdrop for examining urban transformation as effects of domestic politics (Crowley, 2016; Gunko et al., 2021, p. 222). The problem with such methodological nationalism is its failure to approach urban transformation as shaped by broader social forces that individuals are both enabled and constrained by (Çaglar & Schiller, 2018). Legacy concerns, for example, how people remember socialism and carries the inscription of the past in the present. People’s memories can be nostalgic and idealistic about the past, or they may reject what was once a core dimension of their lives. Young people do not remember the socialist experience from personal experience, yet they learn about it from the older generation in their family, in school, on the internet or from other sources. Both idealisation and rejection of the socialist past speak to the continuation of legacy in the present as a means of symbolic orientation. As legacy carries the inscription of the past in the present, it acts as infrastructure for the ‘domestication’ or translation of global processes of neoliberalisation (Golubchikov et al., 2014; Tuvikene, 2016a, b). The processual and changeable character of legacy is underscored. Tuvikene (2016b) made analytical sense of this with the terms ‘continuities’ and ‘anti-continuities’.

Continuities, Tuvikene explained, can be seen in the continuation of government technologies of the socialist era into the new era. These are visible, for

example, in the socialist mass-housing complexes which are spatial symbols of the centralised planning and how social questions such as housing were solved (Attwood, 2012; Gentile, 2004). The large housing complexes convey the history of the control of land that socialist authorities held and how they used this power to secure housing for the urban population. In essence, the socialist mass housing complexes expose the ideal of social redistribution as a continuity in the post-socialist city. Anti-continuities are, on the other hand, expressed through a desire to accentuate and be different from what was dominant in the socialist past. Tuvikene (2016b, pp. 140, 141, 143) describes this as a practice through which the socialist past is inscribed as a “constitutive outside”, that is, as external to that which constitutes the (post-socialist) ‘self’. The shift from state-led to market-led urban planning is an example of an ‘anti-continuity’ and had the effect of discontinuing socialist ideas. For example, the publicness typical of the socialist city was discontinued with the erection of gated communities, which constituted a break with the ideals of social mix and equality of Soviet urban socialism.

The dialectic of continuities and anti-continuities is analytically interesting because it underscores that the past is inscribed in the constitution of the present, even when it is attempted to be excluded, rejected and forgotten. Socialist legacy can continue its presence as an ‘excluded other’ and exert influence on how people make sense of the contemporary, how change has come about, what is lost and what is preserved of past practices. The (socialist) past is shaping and being shaped in the present in a constant process through which legacy acquires new meanings and is “co-produced by the present” (Golubchikov, 2016, p. 616; Golubchikov et al., 2014, p. 622). Thus, the post-socialist city debate makes urban transformation visible as an unfolding process shaped by multiple relationalities cutting across national and global scales. It defines the hybridity of societal change as the conceptual core of the post-socialist city (Golubchikov, 2016, p. 609; Golubchikov et al., 2014; see also Tuvikene, 2016a, b). Engaging with experiences of urban change is thereby a means to examine how people make sense of the effects of the relationalities shaping appearances and rhythms in the post-socialist city (cf. Golubchikov & Phelps, 2011, p. 428).

The third contention is the dominance of the narrative of neoliberalism in explanations of change. It is criticized for exerting a shallow, all-encompassing approach and a partial analytical perspective that needs to be supplemented with social, political and cultural factors (Gentile, 2018, p. 1148; Golubchikov, 2016, p. 608). The two studies of transformation in small industrial towns conducted by Morris (2016) and Collier (2011) emphasise everyday experiences and place-specific analysis to ground experiences with neoliberalisation. Collier (2011) introduced the term ‘post-socialist social’ to emphasise the multiplicity of relationalities at play. Studying a small industrial town, Collier (2011) explained how government reforms of the welfare system in Russia in the 2000s were balanced against persistent (socialist) narratives of social provisioning (Collier, 2011, pp. 157–9). The reforms were not simply about dissolving the old system, but about an emergent social order. In this new order, the post-socialist social expresses how mechanisms of neoliberal biopolitical governing of welfare, through commercialization and calculative choice, were integrated with situated normative expectations connected to the socialist past (Collier, 2011, p. 26). It expresses (urban) transformation as unfolding through a mixing of global and local practices and beliefs.

The post-socialist social addresses historical circumstances shaping place-specific transformations. Attending to meaning-making practices is a step away from the constraints of the dominant neoliberal narrative. Drawing on the various life trajectories people shared with him, Morris (2016) used the term “habitability” to explain that people adjust in the context of uncertainty and insecurity, focusing on making life ‘habitable’. Two decades earlier, Humphrey (1996/1997) also used an ethnographic approach and engaged experience-near methods to analyse the production of the dispossessed as part of the changing political economy of post-Soviet space. She explained that dispossession in Russia was created “by the specific post-Soviet political domains of which they were no longer a part” (Humphrey, 1996/1997, p. 72). Lived experiences are continuously informed by the past and ideas of social order that prevail amidst radical change. From the perspective of local actors, the everyday struggles of transformation become part of meaning-making, mixing global and local dimensions. Morris (2021, p. 197) argues therefore research on Russia “should focus on similarities in governance, governmentality and gradations of dispossession”. It underscores that place-based histories ought to inspire theorization across cases (Çaglar & Schiller, 2018; Mohanty, 2003, p. 501).

As ‘radical laboratory of neoliberal change’ (Chelcea et al., 2021, p. 76), the post-socialist city is defined as a place that provides insight on processes occurring elsewhere. It is shaped by the ‘flows, circulations and entanglements’ of the global urban as well as by its past (Chelcea et al., 2021, p. 76). As an effect of these entanglements, it becomes “almost impossible to disassociate the urban from the global” (Lancione & McFarlane, 2021, p. 3). The post-socialist city is an expression of a “global-urban nexus” and underscores the urban scale as important to study new ideologies, social meaning, relations and forms of legitimation (Golubchikov, 2016, p. 608). This is an opening to empirical research, emphasising the urban everyday and people’s experiences of transformation. Experiences provide access to diverse agencies, ambiguities about (urban and societal) developments and people’s own reflections on power relations shaping their life trajectories. In this paper, the focus is on an industrial city and its transformation, which generates questions about empirical data and how to include a variety of experiences. The next part introduces the research site and the methodology.

## Contextualising Research: the Auto-Town Togliatti and Urban Restructuring

The choice to situate the research in the industrial town of Togliatti reflects a global comparative dimension of studying industrial towns and labour relations across contexts (Borges & Torres, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Constructed as a worker’s city in the late 1960s,

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘company town’ is used in international/Western literature when a company has control not only over the workplace, but is more involved in the life of a city, e.g. supervising infrastructure, etc. In socialist urban history, the term ‘mono-industrial city’ has a particular history that I return to below. The short term is mono-town, which is a translation of the Russian language term ‘mono-gorod.’ In this paper, I use ‘mono-industrial town’ and ‘monotown’ which expresses the Russian context I refer to.

the relationship of residents to the auto-factory Volga Automobile Factory, abbreviated AvtoVaz from its Russian name, *Volzhski Avtomobil'nyi Zavod* and often simply referred to as Vaz, is a main concern to the perception of change in the city and the focus of this research. The participants in this research were interviewed ( $n=30$ ) and later selected for photovoice sessions ( $n=10$ ). The data was collected in the period 2020–2022, ending in January 2022, before the start of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> The research participants enunciate the city's industrial history by focusing on personal experiences and their own biography. In the data, they reflect on social relations such as work and their various individual choices and life trajectories in the context of global political, economic and urban changes.

Zooming in on this post-socialist city and engaging people's experiences, the research draws on often subordinated perspectives that receive less attention compared to experiences of leading experts in policy, planning and development. The participants were residents of Auto Factory District (Avtozavodski raion), a city district established in conjunction with the car factory and, to this day, the most populous district in Togliatti.<sup>3</sup> In the narrative interviews, participants explained changes in the city and reflected on social, economic and political developments while introducing their personal life trajectories, including their relationship to the city-forming enterprise AvtoVaz and how it had changed. Amongst the participants, some were current or former workers ( $n=10$ ) at AvtoVaz, while other interviews were conducted with people working in informal business or activists involved in NGOs ( $n=10$ ) and urban experts, e.g. working with planning and development, real estate and architecture ( $n=10$ ). The photovoice interviews utilized photographs to identify specific, material, observable change and engage in deepened dialogue about memories and associations that images from the city brought up for selected participants ( $n=10$ ). With this research strategy, subjective narratives of urban change are studied through traditional and explorative ways of interviewing.

Before I turn to the analysis of the narratives of research participants, I introduce Togliatti, emphasising urban dimensions of socialist history and post-socialist transformation. This concerns the history of Togliatti as an industrial city and as a host of the car factory AvtoVaz. Togliatti came to epitomize the political-economic modernization agenda that defined Soviet development thinking (Collier, 2011, p. 74). In 1966, a decision was announced that Togliatti would be the location of a factory for mass production of passenger cars. This marked a major turning point in

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<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted by a team of local researchers. A field work manual, including interview guide, ethical concerns and security precautions, was prepared by the author and a St. Petersburg-based team in dialogue with the local team. The author's travel to Togliatti to participate in data collection was disrupted due to COVID-19. The case study is part of a comparative research project on four Russian cities, and data management, including ethics clearance, was registered with the Norwegian services for research data. The local team shared interview voice files, transcripts and data collection reports. All research participants are anonymized and referred to with pseudonyms. Informed consent was recorded on voice files and transcribed in Russian. Translations into English are by the author.

<sup>3</sup> The factory was established in 1966 as a socialist era joint venture with the Italian car producer Fiat (Siegelbaum, 2008, p. 91).



socialist car industrial history (Siegelbaum, 2008, pp. 6, 84–85).<sup>4</sup> A new auto-town (“avtograd”) was built on the Volga River, extending the town Stavropol, which was the previous name of Togliatti.<sup>5</sup> Socialist planning of production and social life interconnected, a nexus affixed in the Auto Factory City District, where houses were built to house factory workers and their families (Siegelbaum, 2008, p. 105). Housing was but one example of social privileges connected to industry employment. In Togliatti, more than 60% of urban dwellers still live in Auto Factory District, amounting to 430,000 people.<sup>6</sup>

Togliatti represented a new generation of industrializing towns, different from the industrialization of the 1930s and in the period after the Second World War. Neither associated with the revolutionary nor the Stalinist era, Togliatti incarnated the development of “mass production for ordinary Soviet citizens” and a “Soviet version of Fordism” (Siegelbaum, 2008, p. 123). Furthermore, as an epitome of the industrialization-urbanization-modernization nexus in the Soviet Union, Togliatti was one of the largest amongst the many small- and medium-sized industrial cities described as the uniqueness of urban Russia (Collier, 2011, p. 157). As hosts to the productive sector, industrial cities were part of an urban “landscape of priority” (Sjöberg, 1999, p. 2224) and the investment priorities of the socialist state were linked to employment as a key factor in urban growth. The effect was a hierarchical ordering of space through systemic features that produced relations of power and privilege between cities (Golubchikov et al., 2015).<sup>7</sup> When Togliatti was identified as the new location for Soviet car industry in the 1960s, it was a major strategic decision within this development landscape and came to define Togliatti’s history and status.

Furthermore, city-building in Togliatti coincided with a period of opening of the socialist regime to more interaction with other countries in areas such as education and trade. In 1966, the deal reflected the greater openness that characterised Soviet leadership in that decade, which was also evident in international collaboration in education and culture (Siegelbaum, 2008, p. 92).<sup>8</sup> Togliatti expressed this era’s opening to global impulses in how the car factory relied on

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<sup>4</sup> The decision to build a car factory in Togliatti was the result of a competition that began with more than 100 contenders and had six locations in the final stage, which was decided in Moscow (Siegelbaum, 2008, pp. 88–92).

<sup>5</sup> Togliatti was known as Stavropol-on-Volga (founded in 1737) and re-named in 1964 to honour Palmiro Togliatti, one of the founding members and long-time leader of the Italian Communist Party, who died in 1964. The settlement of Stavropol was in the 1950s relocated due to the construction of a hydroelectric power plant. While the plant dismantled the old town, it provided basis for expansion of industry in the region (Siegelbaum, 2008, pp. 81–83). The construction of the avtograd Togliatti was one of the most ambitious urban planning projects in the Soviet Union after the Second World War (Cera & Sechi, 2020, p. 20).

<sup>6</sup> Data from Federal Statistics Bureau of Samara Oblast (accessed 1 November 2021): [http://samarastat.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat\\_ts/samarastat/ru/statistics/population/](http://samarastat.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_ts/samarastat/ru/statistics/population/).

<sup>7</sup> The (regional) capital cities, with strategic or administrative tasks, were on top of the hierarchy as they received large public transfers and were particularly attractive for people to live in.

<sup>8</sup> The deal was signed in 1966. Several cities competed to become the host of the car factory, and in the final stage including six contenders, Togliatti won. In 1967, the recruitment of professionals to this new factory began (Siegelbaum, 2008, p. 91, 94).



collaboration with Italian car producer Fiat and utilized their model in setting up the new industry.<sup>9</sup> The first car produced in Togliatti was finished in 1970, and it presented a Zhiguli, named after the hills on the opposite bank of the Volga, and was a Soviet version of the Italian Fiat 124 that became known internationally as Lada (Siegelbaum, 2008, p. 99).

Togliatti, Russia's largest mono-industrial city, experienced that the radical rupture following the end of the Cold War led to changes comparable to many other industrial cities, such as privatization, marketization and internationalization. Overall, urban restructuring defined a broader landscape of post-socialist uneven urban development in Russia and mono-industrial cities attracted particular attention because of the risks associated with transition in these cities. The metropolises Moscow and St. Petersburg, with their developed post-industrial (service) economies, were at the top of the hierarchy of reconstructing, diversifying and developing urban economies that set them apart from other cities. Cities related to oil and gas production integrated well into the global market, as did cities extracting mineral resources, producing aluminium, cellulose and fertilizer. Cities with export-led industries were exposed to fluctuations in world market prices that affected industrial decisions and urban dynamics (Golubchikov et al., 2015, p. 272). While these challenges of mono-industrial cities were well known, it was the global financial crisis 2007–2008 that made visible how political economic grievances can inform social protests (Clément, 2019, 159f.; Crowley, 2016, p. 400; Crowley, 2020, p. 373). Protests in Togliatti were diverted through government intervention and the provision of support to the factory (Kusluch, 2016). In international media, Russian mono-industrial cities were subsequently described as problem areas, as “dark areas” and “time bombs” (Aron, 2009; Crowley, 2015). Following this crisis, the Russian government subsequently initiated a monotown development fund to facilitate urban transformation (Stuvøy & Shirobokova 2021). The reform program identified societal risk factors and set criteria for financial transfers and development funds to modernise and diversify urban economies. Urban decay, especially in monotowns, had become a source of national political concern in the context of the global financial crisis (Zubarevich, 2010). It was part of a broader “metropolitan turn” in Russian governance in the 2010s, which showcased a mix of state policies with innovation and technological advancement to elevate Russian competitiveness in the global economy (Kinossian, 2017, p. 468). This underscores global processes as integral to Russian state policies of urban transformation.

In Togliatti, changing ownership of AvtoVaz is an expression of the process of post-socialist change and a response to the global financial crisis in 2008–2009. The French car producer Renault became the main foreign stakeholder of AvtoVaz in the 2010s, and gradually, the Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi alliance came to produce the Lada models Granta, Largus and XRAY as well as Renault Logan and more at the

<sup>9</sup> The deal with Fiat was a “megadeal, the largest of all commercial agreements concluded by the USSR” (Siegelbaum, 2008, p. 88). Several foreign companies, in the USA, Germany and France, were in dialogue with the Soviet before the deal with Fiat was signed (Siegelbaum, 2008, pp. 88–92).

Togliatti plant. This lasted until the start of Russia's military invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, when Renault withdrew from Russia.

These trends in urban development underscore that there is value in focusing on multiple relationalities and reflect on the global urban nexus when approaching political economic change in Russia. In Togliatti, the company restructuring is connected to many people's life trajectories, and they share their experiences of, for example, changing work relations and effects on their personal life choices. Making subjective experiences visible illustrates people's agencies amidst structural political-economic change. Focusing on AvtoVaz and Auto-Factory City District is therefore a research strategy to provide empirical grounding of the analysis of multiple relationalities of urban change. In the following step, I explore how people observe, reason and give meaning to changes they experienced in Togliatti.

### Discovering Becoming Marginal in Togliatti

In Togliatti, interlocutors characterise urban change as a series of crises, but also describe how they have adapted to them. This reflects a well-known post-socialist trope of endless crisis. In this analysis, I emphasise individual life trajectories and how people explain they have manoeuvred to make a living in the shifting urban economy. Analysing urban transformation through the lens of experiences implies grappling with the messiness and thorny realities of qualitative research. Part of the challenge is to do justice to research participants when it comes to writing up the research and provide space and voice to research participants (Thieme et al., 2017, pp. 128–130). I begin this part by sharing a quite extensive quote, which is an example of how a participant reflects on the interview situation and the research approach to learning about Togliatti and urban transformation. It is an example of a meta-reflection that interviews of this type can entail, which is from an interview with Konstantin, an urban activist in Togliatti and a resident of Avtozavodski city district. He reflects on questions that were asked during the interview and summarises his point of view in the following way:

The questions mainly concerned life at AvtoVaz and links to residents of the city, the administration of the city, participation in urban life, and the solution of this or that problem in the city. I summarize what I said. The city of Togliatti is not a simple city, not a provincial city – it's a city amongst the ten strongest industrial cities in Russia, amongst the twenty largest cities in terms of inhabitants. It's a city, in which the residents, who once came to the city and were the best professionals in the entire Soviet Union to build AvtoVaz. They built AvtoVaz and the chemical industry in our city. It's a city with highly competent people, a city with people, who in a good meaning of the word are the inheritors of the older generation, the adventurers, who came to build the city and live in it. Today this city, which had a glorious past, which in the 1990s, despite the general crisis in our country, was a relatively economically successful city. Today the city is not going through its best times, as not all the large industries of our city are focused on work, on earning money

and spending these resources in the city, for the city, for the residents, for the modernisation of the industry. The majority, unfortunately, for this or that reason, disperse the resources elsewhere, they do not stay in Togliatti, as they pay this money to the budgets of other institutions or transfer them elsewhere. This leaves a feeling in the city of insufficient development, a feeling that the city is just adjusting and not dynamically developing and moving forward. (...) I remember the times in Togliatti when there were very many businesses related to automobilism (car-related businesses). There were a lot of car dealerships. These days there are a lot fewer. This is also felt. I wish the city trusted that it has attractions, [that there were] more dynamic [development], more positivity, more interest, brightness, good things, and a belief that things are going to get better, and more reasons for being proud (Konstantin, 23 October 2020).

In this part of the interview, Konstantin presents a snapshot of the present in the city while also narrating the city's history. He reflects on a past in which Togliatti was attracting a whole generation to move to the city, to build and to live in the city. He reflects on what made up the city's greatness in the past and explains his dissatisfaction with the current development. While he wishes to believe in the city, there is a lack of impulses and dynamic development in the city, Konstantin finds. The city has lost its status as an automobile capital, he explains, and the city is turned into a provincial town characterised by decay.

Konstantin and the other research participants are embedded in urban realities located off the map of global political economic research. Their experiences nonetheless provide a vantage point for reflecting "on broader systems that both produce marginality but also become stages on which 'marginalised subjects' continuously contest and renegotiate their place in the city" (Thieme et al., 2017, p. 132). In sharing their experiences, participants reflect on urban transformation in Togliatti and situate their experiences in relation to the past as well as to processes that produce contemporary urban realities. As part of these narratives, they reflect on how their personal trajectories have been affected and how they have manoeuvred, and made a living for themselves amidst continuous crises and fluctuations but also opportunities in Togliatti's urban economy. The interviews provide a base for exploring experiences with attention to context and to reflect on structural dynamics as well as individual choice shaping people's life trajectories. The approach provides a lens on the multiple relationalities shaping the city.

When the post-socialist crisis trope is applied to Togliatti, interlocutors usually recall the troublesome decade of the 1990s, the economic hardship it implied for almost everyone and how they sustained through barter. It includes mentions of barter trade in car parts, including adventures abroad for such trade, but also the "gang wars" that appeared in the city at the turn of the century.<sup>10</sup> According to Lilya, an active volunteer with several years of work experience at AvtoVaz, the so-called "Samara mafia", took control of the factory but kept order as people continued to

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<sup>10</sup> Two journalists, who reported on this violence, Alexei Sidorov and Valery Ivanov, were killed in 2002 and 2003, respectively.

receive salaries without delays and received additional compensation if there were experiences of harm. In 2008, the financial crisis impacted the city severely, and only a few years later, a major downsizing took place at AvtoVaz. In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic was in its early phases when the interviews were conducted and added another layer of crisis to the city. A widely shared crisis sentiment and perception of ongoing crisis is expressed across the interviews, and Alyona, who used to work at AvtoVaz as a painter but went into early retirement due to cut downs, summarises it short and simple: “Well, what can I say... It’s like, you know, the crises never ended” (Alyona, 17 October 2020). Many are concerned with the worsening situation for Togliatti, but some reflect critically on how it might be convenient for some, i.e. the authorities, to blame the former city-building enterprise for the deterioration.

The narrative of continuous crisis is dominant across the experiences and appears as an ongoing process, shaped by multiples stories. Crisis is expressed as a layered phenomenon and is not linked to a clear start and end dates. With ongoing crisis and problems notwithstanding, in 2014, Togliatti was characterised by the Russian government as amongst the monotowns with a stable socio-economic situation (Russian Government 2014). In a 2020 assessment of the quality of urban environments conducted by the Ministry of Construction and Housing, Togliatti was identified as one of several monotowns that are improving.<sup>11</sup> In the narratives examined here, 2015–2017 stand out as a significant rupture in the recent history of Togliatti’s city-industry relations, however. Interlocutors recount a transformation that upset their view of Togliatti as a monotown. A major restructuring was conducted, in which the number of workers at AvtoVaz was reduced from approximately 140,000 workers to approximately 30,000.<sup>12</sup> In addition, continuous subsidiarisation of the car factory created multiple smaller companies, largely engaged in supplying the main factory but also working on demands from other buyers. While registered unemployment rate has been low, the main problems brought forward across the interviews are low salaries and work precarity. The trends in subsidiarisation, precarity of work and low salaries that people emphasised as dominant after 2015 were developments emerging from the process of restructuring aimed at tackling challenges in industrial production. Reducing costs to enhance global competitiveness is beneficial to investment interests. It changed the script for factory workers and for those leaving the factory, about how to make a living. These changing tactics to safeguard economic development are described as a “deepened neoliberalism” (Büdenbender & Zupan, 2017). In people’s narratives, this shift was in Togliatti related to continued experiences of crisis, aggravated decay, uncertainty and growing marginality.

Crisis and decay have, in many ways, been normalised in Togliatti. A depressed assessment of urban affairs is often made concrete in complaints about the car

<sup>11</sup> [http://моногорода.рф/news/bolee\\_70\\_monogorodov\\_priznany\\_territoriyami\\_s\\_blagopriyatnoy\\_gorodskoy\\_sredoy/?sphrase\\_id=18858](http://моногорода.рф/news/bolee_70_monogorodov_priznany_territoriyami_s_blagopriyatnoy_gorodskoy_sredoy/?sphrase_id=18858) (accessed 14 October 2021, now blocked).

<sup>12</sup> AvtoVaz is the largest employer (in 2020 estimated to 36,000), but the city also hosts several other industrial enterprises, e.g. chemical industry, as mentioned by Konstantin above (<https://museum.samgd.ru/mo/tolytt/information/>, accessed 8 November 2021).

factory and how it treats its workers. Research participants reflect on stressors, such as exhaustion, illness and a loss of autonomy in the workplace, and link such experience to assessment of the urban reconstruction in a national context. The narrative of becoming marginal is emerging, which in the words of Kira, an engineer who worked for decades at AvtoVaz and is worried about the fall in the factory's image and the quality of the car production, is expressed frankly: "For the entire country, we are the shame of the state. Specifically, Togliatti is the shame of the state" (Kira, 11 February 2020).

A feeling of shame in the eyes of the nation brings up the Soviet history of the city. In the 1960s, Soviet automobile history became a driving force of the city's development. The Soviet Union struck a megadeal with Italy's largest car producer Fiat "to provide all technical assistance and training in connection with the construction of a factory" (Siegelbaum, 2008, p. 91). Intertwined with the development and modernization ideals of the Soviet Union, AvtoVaz was a city-forming enterprise that shaped relations between the state and individuals in a new era. Returning to the reflections of Konstantin, he explains this co-dependence:

AvtoVaz has always been a city-forming enterprise, it was an enterprise in which practically every family in Avtozavodski city-district (raion) either worked in or was somehow connected to. Either a person worked at the enterprise or at an enterprise that was connected to AvtoVaz or a daughter company (subsidiary) [of AvtoVaz]. One way or another everyone was connected to AvtoVaz. Additionally, AvtoVaz took great social responsibility/burden on itself, maintaining kinder gardens, health clinics, and a great number of social facilities/services. And when AvtoVaz ended its social obligations, in practice all social facilities, of course, this affected everyone, not only in Avtozavodski city district, but this was felt across Togliatti. Today the number of people working (in the factory) is not the same as before. And there is not the kind of social support that people want. People nonetheless adjust, everyone adapts. I wish things were better, but the situation is stabilizing (Konstantin, 23 October 2020).

Miroslava, who previously worked as a painter at the factory and is now self-employed, explains that Togliatti experienced a sudden shift. She reflects the change in this way:

In 1985, I ended school, or in 1986. It was at the end of the eighties. I remember the feeling that Togliatti suddenly disappeared, right? Somehow it suddenly abruptly disappeared, that the city that was clean, calm, you know, (a city to) breath (in). Everything waned, the city became poor, there was not much work, we were all standing in lines (Miroslava, 24 January 2020).

Miroslava's memory reflects on the 'radical societal rupture', the sudden change in post-soviet space, which, in the case of Togliatti, included a loss of status and power amidst the changing political economy of the new era. Interlocutors reflect on the city's change as defined by marginality, which is an assessment based on comparison with the city's prior historical status and wide recognition.

In the narratives of urban change in Togliatti, becoming marginal reflects on the loss of purpose and status associated with the post-socialist transformation. It also illuminates the close connection between the city-forming enterprise and people's individual life trajectories. People identify with the construction of the city because of their individual sacrifice and the contribution they or their family members made to its very construction. The withdrawal from or even disinterest expressed by the company towards the city is, for many residents, linked to bodily experiences of exhaustion and illness, as well as to experiences of a loss of autonomy in the workplace. Compared to its past, Togliatti appears as marginal, as the city has lost its prestige and the social fabric to which people were previously tied has eroded. In the next step, I go in more depth into the changing relations between industry and residents that illuminate experiences of becoming marginal.

### **National Utopia, the Narrative of Foreign and Thoughts on Dispossession**

The city-forming enterprise is a source of many memories in people's lives and is a key point of reference when people express their attachment to the city. In the decades following the establishment of AvtoVaz in 1966, many people moved to Togliatti in order to build the factory and either brought their families with them or started their families in Togliatti. Whether people left unfavourable conditions behind in the villages they left, or were attracted to join the developments in Togliatti, their personal life histories are intertwined with the factory's establishment and development. Miroslava, who used to work at AvtoVaz, explains that she was born in the city of Gorkij, which hosts another signature Soviet car producer Gaz, and that her family's move to Togliatti linked her life trajectory to two car-producing monotowns in Soviet history. Her reflections express that car production had broad symbolic value:

My dad worked at Gaz, and then there was a large project related to the construction of AvtoVaz and a car-producing city (avtograd). This was during the first wave (of Togliatti's city-building), and engineers and workers, they all went to create, in fact, to implement this project, this was our national utopia, you see! That is, the standard of domestic urban planning was realized in the Avtograd (Miroslava, 24 January 2020).

Miroslava's thoughts reflect how Togliatti was a city built on ideas of mass production of cars for the public and the pride of participating in the realization of such a development project. Oksana, who worked decades at the factory, explains that this pride was passed on in the family:

Because my dad always said that it's reliable, it's stable, and the salary is stable [at AvtoVaz]. You see, it was kind of prestigious to work at Vaz. If you work at Vaz—that was cool! That is, then it was cool. It was a city-forming enterprise after all. And there were kindergartens, and there were privileges, (...) there was food, something for free here and there, and there was travel

and excursions. So, there were several privileges with being an AvtoVaz-er (Oksana, 25 October 2020).

As Oksana explains, the enterprise provided opportunities. Yulia recalls how she as a teenager was curious about the chances offered at AvtoVaz and as 15-year old she was able to join the enterprise as a summer job, working the conveyer belt and earning her first money. Later, she was trained to sew covers and experienced that this was hard work for a woman, using a knife to cut through several layers of fabric. Therefore, Yulia explains, she had to take a break but then later she returned for other work at AvtoVaz. A main memory for her as a tailor, Yulia explains, was to be part of a brigade. The attachment to the work collective at Vaz was formative of her professional experience. Due to changes such as the lowering of salaries and a different attitude towards people that she and other research participants dominantly related to foreigners, who acquired ownership, she stopped working at the factory.

Across the narratives, the foreign ownership of AvtoVaz is depicted as an important agentic factor and explanation for the reduction in employment, change at work and changes in the city. The shift to foreign ownership is associated with the provincialization of the city, its loss of status and prestige and, thus, a degradation that produced hardship for people. In the words of Lilya:

(T)he enterprise was completely disjointed. Previously 'daughter companies' were on the budget of Vaz: including kindergartens, schools, pioneer camps, tourist camps, sanatoriums, etc. There were many things, and everything was financed by Vaz. Now, as far as I know, there is some financing at the enterprise, but Vaz does not support these sanatoriums, but simply pays for something, or the union at Vaz pays for a part of the trip. (...) (T)hey pay 15 per cent of the price of the trip, and the rest the enterprise pays. This is apparently, the only thing that the enterprise provides its workers. They erased their support long ago. The museum we used to have... Yes, and in principle there is no enterprise as such now, as it has been divided into a bunch of small enterprises (Lilya, 28 October 2020).

The dismantling of the company is associated with the reduction in benefits. In Svetlana's view, the transfer of AvtoVaz leadership to Moscow was a significant event that led to profound changes in the work experience:

All in all, when Moscow began to rule the plant, remote managers that were not present at location, began a complete destruction. And the enterprise was put under scrutiny, wait, reformulating... a system of standards... In effect, an international system of quality standards was implemented at the enterprise by the foreigners, they introduced this quality system, that was valid only when inspected by the foreigners. Meaning, when control was conducted, people were pulled (out) and punished, as soon as the check passed, everyone worked in the same way (anyway) (Lilya, 28 October 2020).

The ongoing changes left an impression of unfolding experimentation that caused one crisis after another, Lilya explains. She notes the role of elites and managers in the dismantling of the factory and found Moscow to be equally foreign as 'real'



foreigners. In her opinion, the commonality amongst them was that they were governing from afar.

Another consequence associated with foreign ownership is the introduction of international standards, referred to as the optimization code, which operates as a regulatory framework in the workplace and incorporates firm control over work and workers. The effects, Lilya explains, are that workers experience a loss of autonomy and feeling of belonging. Petr, who left AvtoVaz after two decades of working there, explains that some of the changes related to the optimization code were good but others were absurd:

I had 22 years of experience. When I started in 1996, I was at first a welder, and then I went to the conveyer belt, and joined a great brigade, even the leaders. After five years, I became the leader of the brigade. Everything was great, and it was great until the French came and sold the majority control of the shares. They (new owners) initiated their innovations, some of them good, others absurd. The good one included that there should be optimization, but there were so many unnecessary and absurd things. Like, I was doing an operation and the conveyer belt moves two minutes. I worked for 1.45, and for the 15 seconds I sat down, and everywhere there were cameras, and within half an hour the boss comes running, and asks for an explanation why I was sitting. Earlier, when the conveyer belt stopped, workers cleaned up, and well, they sat, talked, and now when the conveyer belt stops, you're supposed to take a broom, a rag, to sweep and clean! You should do everything but to sit! [If you sit] everyone will see it and your bonus will be cut. Before the brigade would travel to the ski lodge, we gathered, and now we people get into conflicts, there is not such a friendly collective, as previously when it was like a second family, everyone went together to celebrations, to talk, and now there is no desire to go (Petr, 16 October 2020).

Petr assesses the changes as negative and is concerned with how the attitude towards people changed. This makes him satisfied with his own choice of leaving the enterprise and becoming self-employed. With stable earnings, he distinguishes himself from the “paternalistic-minded factory-workers”, who deal with the optimization that created more regulation of people's work. As the workforce shrunk, people also had less substitution during a workday, with the effect that work is perceived as harder yet with less pay. Ilya, who continues to work at the factory, elaborates a similar experience:

They, you know, say, that in short, a person works as much, twice as much as before, but the salary is ‘optimized’. They call it now optimization. Downsizing, transferring people to different duties/assignments, and, you see, the most interesting thing is that they work the same way. I mean, the same number of cars is produced. What does this mean? It means, 100 thousand people worked previously, and half of them simply didn't do much. I totally understand that they are doing good with French system or Itali..., I don't know, Japanese. But our salaries stayed the same. If they just did their salaries as in the factories in France, then I think everything would be okay, even for those who stayed. Cur-

rently there are a lot of people, who don't work at the enterprise, but also can't find other work (Ilya, 29 October 2020).

The foreign and 'optimization' emerge in the narratives as synonymous with behaviour focused on reaping economic benefits and relatedly, to create more hardship for factory workers. In the image of city-industry relations, Togliatti emerges as a place for exploitation by powerful people from elsewhere through a change of factory ownership and, subsequently, the enforcement of the strategy of optimization. The narratives express feelings of exploitation, exclusion and displacement by foreigners, who captured the role of the former city host without taking on the responsibilities for the community as the previous city host (khozain) did. These experiences are viewed as effects of marketization and as expressions of structural changes defining urban transformation in Togliatti. Becoming marginal emerges as a contextualised experience that is narrated based on subjective experiences, yet also exposes the structural dynamics at play that affect people's feelings of belonging and identity. Furthermore, locals observe that youth leave the city to seek opportunities elsewhere, strengthening the impression that Togliatti has lost out. The feelings of exploitation and loss of status show the experience of becoming marginal. In the next section, the analysis emphasises social relations and deepens participants' reflections on belonging, power and participation in Togliatti.

## Disruptive Power, Urban Decay and Dystopian Imaginaries

With the construction of AvtoVaz and the new Auto Factory City District (Avtozavodski raion), socialist industrial policy and urban planning merged. The city district was designed to cater for social needs, including schools, health clinics and post offices, and the city-forming enterprise provided housing, organised social amenities and was a core unit in people's everyday with its supply of material and symbolic means of orientation (Collier, 2011, pp. 81–82; Shomina, 1992, pp. 223–224). The Soviet modernist architecture in the city district expresses the societal integration between the city and the city-forming enterprise (Cera & Sechi, 2020). It continues to recall the ideal of residential equality of workers and managers, who lived side-by-side in this city district (Siegelbaum, 2008, p. 122). Despite these material continuities, there are disruptions or anti-continuities of social relations that are exposed through the narratives of interlocutors.

A resident of Avtozavodski city district, Oksana, has brought to the interview a photograph showing a poorly lit space of concrete. This, she explains, is a dilapidated playground that has been left unattended for years. The construction of playgrounds was previously planned, she explains, whereas now it depends on the goodwill of the construction company or the proximity to shopping malls or other places for consumption. Decay is associated with other buildings as well, but the main frustration concerns affordable housing. Alina, who is an expert in urban and territorial development in the city, observes that Togliatti is "run-down" and subject to 'ghettoization', a metaphor she uses to underscore the dilapidated state of the city. She notes that in Avtozavodski city district, affordable housing is available, yet the problem is urban decay: "In the city I can see for myself, yes, it

became a dirty, miserable, disgusting city that I live in. Such a sad story” (Alina, 17 January 2020). A similar sentiment is echoed by Oksana, who declares that “the city is dying”, noting the challenge of finding work to sustain a living. She explains: “There is no work in the city. An alternative, to leave from AvtoVaz to somewhere else, to a decent job, which will not be temporary and limited to for example three months, not only for a trial period, yes, for a decent, sufficient salary, unfortunately, that is no such option” (Oksana, 25 October 2020). Alina and Oksana address issues of urban decay in relation to socio-economic decline and dilapidated urban surroundings. These observations are echoed by Timur, who works in the regional administration and is also an urban activist. He lives in the city since the early 1980s and characterises the urban development as a situation in which the city is “choking”. In his view, this is an effect of the governing regime:

(T)he city receives less because the enterprise works here but pays taxes elsewhere, and they erased several social costs that were disturbing its budget balance. And the city seemed to choke a little. And a huge divide happened (Timur, 19 October 2020).

A lack of attention from actors of governance and powerful elites is in Timur’s experience related to the urban decay. People’s everyday struggles with precarity do not get attention and are neglected.

For Kira, an engineer who worked for three decades at AvtoVaz, one of the main effects of this decay is the loss of labour security. She notes how this development affects societal beliefs and trust. Previously, Kira explained, “we trusted Vaz completely. That Vaz – it’s like Titanic – (...) and will never leave us without work”. This provided a basis for believing in tomorrow, and this security was passed on in the family, and the children were told to view factory work as a stable and secure employment, she explained. People struggle to make ends meet, but living costs are rising, and this has effects:

They stopped dreaming. They are overloaded with problems, but they have (in reality) only one problem – to earn an income, to feed the family, pay utility costs (*kommunalki*). *Kommunalki* are crazy here, of course. Very high costs. They crush people. Salaries don’t rise as much as utility costs (Kira, 11 February 2020).

While life trajectories are characterised as a series of disruptions, research participants find their situation to be like the situation in many other Russian cities—not spectacular yet defined by a profound inertia.

Interlocutors in Togliatti are concerned with the withdrawal or disinterest of the company towards the city but also with the decline in civic engagement. A sense of responsibility is implicit in the concerns with the city’s urban decay. The litter problem in the city and the abundance of pubs are viewed as urban expressions of social problems. Compared to its past, Togliatti appears as marginal and has lost its industrial prestige, its pride and the social fabric to which people were previously tied. Interlocutors in Togliatti explain that they distance themselves

from the company due to experiences of derogatory and oppressive work conditions and a loss of liberties through more surveillance and control.

In coming to a close, I want to reflect on the experience of Petr, who found freedom in leaving behind the “paternalistic relation” he associated with work at the city-forming enterprise. Other people left the factory to avoid exploitation through optimization reforms but experienced that they were tied to new dependencies. They had to make-do in the changing city or became dependent on family members’ considerable ‘Soviet pension’, earned through years of service to AvtoVaz. Social reproduction in the post-socialist city continues to be connected to Soviet welfare measures, which shows material continuities that coexist alongside rejections of paternalism and critique of optimization. Whether people withdrew from or stayed at the factory, a common critique was expressed against how the take-over of the city-forming enterprise was accompanied with outsourcing and compartmentalization. These developments were, for some, a freedom to leave the factory, either to become an entrepreneur or to withdraw from work altogether, while others adjusted to new industrial sovereigns. Across these experiences, feelings of dispossession, exclusion and exploitation were central.

## Conclusion

This study of Togliatti and Auto Factory District showed how the social order underpinning city-industry-worker relations was affected by changing circuits of capital. The narrative of becoming marginal reflects the loss of status and feelings of dispossession and alienation related to the political economic changes of the (urban) social order. On a cautionary note, it needs to be added that many experiences obviously remain invisible. Workers at city-forming enterprises in monotowns (generally) experienced loss of privileges that those, who did not work at the enterprise, did not share. This narration of transformation from the perspective of ‘post-socialist subjects’ makes certain people and their social life visible. It showed how they lived through the transit and endless collapse of the previous system. The analysis specifically illustrated grievances related to work, industrial change, urban decay, loss of status and unfolding societal insecurity, which is of broader relevance. It showed people’s various agencies in dealing with and responding to decay and unfolding marginality. Some shifted their dependencies as they quit work at the factory and relied on Soviet pensions of family members. Others developed ‘entrepreneurial selves’ and explored new ways to make-do that relieved them of such dependencies yet creating others. In the context of becoming marginal, this was experienced as a form of freedom. Using irony and humour, ridiculing company restructuring, leaders and elites, people’s experiences shed light on coping mechanisms as well as structural power in urban transformation in Togliatti.

In this case study of Togliatti, I mobilized the conceptual richness of the post-socialist city concept. I emphasised the study of difference and reflecting on comparison, approaching legacy as changeable and approaching the interconnection of global and local practices and beliefs to identify structural dimensions alongside agency. From this study, I contend that the post-socialist city is a landscape on which to observe

situated forms of (capitalist) difference reflective of the global–local nexus. It showed how people make sense of the governing of urban change, relate to the city’s history and reason about their different choices as they display various kinds of agency. The focus on experiences is a methodological tool that works to make people visible, addressing meaning-making and broader social forces that shape (global) urban transformation. It shows that urban transformation is not reducible to structural dimensions, and directs attention to analysis of agencies, ambiguities and power relations.

In illustrating a research agenda on how transformation unfolds, this paper also underscores that making sense of experiences means to reflect on these in context, as ‘historized in lived temporality’ (Humphrey, 1996/1997, p. 71). Such research has become more difficult after Russia’s military attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The possibility for field work and access to informants are becoming more complicated. Loosing access is problematic and will reduce insight on, for example, how marginality is experienced and coped with in Russia. This speaks to the role of the state and state-civil society relations and to legitimacy theorized from the ground up. The narrative of marginality in Togliatti showed a loss of belief in societal order and restructuring. It documented how people withdraw to the family and non-state social networks. These developments are important to the reasoning of state-civil society relations in Russia. The case of Togliatti shows these similarities to other cases, but comparison is more contentious in the context of war. Amidst growing global inequalities and a need for systemic transformation, the question is, therefore, if these insights can provide ground for developing transglobal solidarities. This analysis was possible because of how people were willing to share their reflections and discuss everyday experiences of urban transformation. This access is now more difficult, and antagonisms are significant. The narrative of becoming marginal provides insight into grievances, precarity and insecurity that will continue to define the urban everyday in Togliatti, in the shadow of imperialist warfare and changes in the global political economy affecting industry.

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## Declarations

**Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate** This research is registered with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, which provides ethical clearance for the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. The research is guided by a data management plan in which ethical issues are discussed. Safe storage is ensured through the database Services for Sensitive Data, hosted by the University of Oslo. The transcripts are anonymized before they are exported to the qualitative data analysis program MAXQDA, which is used for coding purposes. Research participants have received a letter of information and had time to ask questions about the project before interviews are recorded. At the beginning of each interview, informed consent is secured orally at the start of the recording.

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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