Bring Your Own Politics: Life Strategies and Mobilization in Response to Urban Redevelopment

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Abstract
This article contributes to social movement literature and theories of strategic action by making the case for an analytic distinction between habitual and intentional life strategies, namely the ways in which people pursue what they value in life. Housing strategies are one example of life strategies. The distinction helps explain how political players, including social movements, bring about social change (or preserve the status quo) by changing or reinforcing people’s minds and their preferred ways of action. They can achieve their goals by first recognizing these habitual strategies, and then prompting people to articulate or adjust them during interactive, group-level situations. My analysis relies on a qualitative study of Renovation, a controversial urban renewal project in Moscow. I examine how Muscovites revisited, articulated and sometimes revised their housing strategies in response to the surprising, and for some, shocking announcement of the relocation project.

Keywords
housing strategy, mobilization, Moscow, Renovation, strategic action, urban redevelopment

Introduction
In the summer of 2017, a covert war developed in Moscow. There were (almost) no street fights and no weapons involved, but it seemed like the whole city was divided and traumatized. A few months before, the Moscow government had announced Renovation, a proposal to demolish thousands of Soviet apartment buildings across the city and relocate their inhabitants to new high-rises that were yet to be built. The residents were invited to vote and decide the fate of their buildings, which provoked street rallies,
debates in official arenas and bitter fights among neighbours. The new identities that supporters and opponents of Renovation developed became a notable factor in Moscow’s politics. From Muscovites’ clashing visions of desirable housing and the appropriate relationship between state and citizens grew political divides and political action.

Housing is a matter of private aspirations, needs and rights; it is central to personal dignity, social standing and citizenship (Murphy, 2015). But despite being ‘always about the private accommodation of individuals and families’, it is also a political issue (McLeay, 1984: 86): housing is an object of state policies that aims to achieve various kinds of public good. This peculiar public/private nature of housing makes it an advantageous domain to explore the continuity between private lives and public politics. I examine this nexus based on the example of the housing controversy in Moscow during which residents of the condemned buildings articulated their implicit housing strategies and aspirations to decide whether to support or oppose the Renovation programme and engaged in strategic action in public arenas to influence the decisions of their neighbours.

This article makes the case for the analytic distinction between ‘habitual’ and ‘intentional’ strategies based on the sociological theorizations of strategic action. This distinction helps explain how political players, including social movements, can promote social change (or preserve the status quo) by changing or reinforcing people’s minds and their preferred ways of action.

The habitual dimension of action has been at the centre of sociological analysis of life strategies (Bourdieu, 1977; Swidler, 1986). These studies have shown that habitual, implicit strategies result from people’s socialization and previous experiences which, although often unconscious, nonetheless direct human action. Habitual life strategies and goals are normally latent but can manifest themselves through strong emotional responses to external events, such as urban renewal proposals. These disturbances or ‘moral shocks’ (Jasper, 2011: 289) can motivate people to interact with others in public arenas and develop, articulate and even revise their aspirations, strategies of action, values and beliefs.

Social movement scholarship usually focuses on these intentional and articulated forms of collective action. It has been found, for example, that to mobilize people for action and maintain their commitment, organizers need to frame and ‘package’ their ideas and goals (Benford and Snow, 2000; Jasper, 2006b). Bringing theories of habitual action and research on goal-oriented strategic action into conversation, I argue that to achieve their goals, movement players need to work with habitual strategies, prompting people to articulate and adjust them.

I analyse the Renovation controversy from this theoretical standpoint and show how the announcement of renewal plans prompted Muscovites to articulate and rethink their habitual housing and civic strategies in interactive public arenas. Early reactions to the announcement of the programme were based on people’s perceptions of their individual interests, their socialization and their perceived appropriate strategies for achieving life goals. These factors were influenced by the specific history of property and citizenship in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Gut-level reactions to the urban renewal plans were indications of people’s habitual life strategies, which they articulated and sometimes revised in the light of the new situation. Some were also motivated to mobilize to protect
or promote their housing and civic strategies. These activists turned familiar spaces into interactive political arenas and expanded their persuasion strategies to include some rhetoric of the common good, thus creating crucial platforms for group-level processes of identity formation, discussion and politicization.

Based on observation, interviews with opponents and supporters of Renovation, and digital ethnography of online neighbourhood communities over the period of two years (2017–2019), I explore the role of habitual life strategies and aspirations in the mobilization of the first activists, and then demonstrate how they created and maintained control over interactive arenas, where they articulated and adjusted their arguments to recruit undecided neighbours or even sometimes their own opponents. I look at mobilization as an interactive process of linking personal experiences with political issues, and tie together theories of strategic interaction and mobilization.

Background

In the spring and summer of 2017, residents in thousands of socialist-era apartment buildings in Moscow were invited to vote at polling places or homeowner assemblies whether their building should be included in Renovation, a demolition and relocation programme planned for 2017–2032. The quality of the included buildings varied greatly, as did the level of effort the residents of individual apartments put into renovating them. Regardless of these differences, Renovation proposed to demolish whole neighbourhoods of socialist-era, five-storey buildings and replace them with high-rises. The vast project affected more than 5000 buildings with approximately a million inhabitants. The residents of the condemned buildings were promised better, modern apartments in the new high-rises, which would supposedly have better layouts and construction quality.

Not all Muscovites believed these promises, and questioned the motivation of the city administration, whose neoliberal, profit-maximizing approach to Moscow’s urban environment was notorious (Büdenbender and Zupan, 2017; Golubchikov and Phelps, 2011). The media and local activists criticized the quality of new mass housing, raising doubts that new high-rise buildings would be a good replacement for low-rise, carefully designed, socialist districts.

The programme sparked a variety of responses. Some residents of the eligible buildings rejoiced at the prospect of moving into new high-rises instead of what they believed was substandard housing, while others were terrified. Mobilization happened on both sides of the controversy; supporters and opponents of Renovation were often immediate neighbours who had to fight over the fate of their building and the minds of their undecided neighbours. The persuasion tactics revolved around fundamental issues: who is responsible for people’s housing, what are the appropriate tools of achieving it, what are the rights of homeowners and the responsibilities of government?

To understand the diversity of Muscovites’ responses to the proposal, it is important to examine the habitual civic and housing strategies that guided the urbanites’ actions in the urban political field before the controversy. These strategies inherited some of the Soviet views on housing and the role of the state in its citizens’ lives; they also developed from the experiences of the turbulent post-socialist transition. Specifically, these habitual housing and civic strategies primed people for political avoidance and withdrawal from
collective action, including the collective affairs of housing maintenance and local activism.

Habitually, few residents in apartment buildings were interested in local politics or even in the maintenance of their own buildings. Many Russians prioritize private life over public issues, following decades of forced communal living and mandatory political participation. Having left the Soviet ‘world without privacy, where everything was public’, former Soviet citizens embraced the ‘life, which had no external environment’ (Trudolyubov, 2018: 137). In this life, it was possible to hide from the depressing political events and economic hardships of the radically shifting post-Soviet economy within private bubbles of family and friends. The same sentiment made people arrange their private apartments in the best possible way, while turning a blind eye to the decaying public and communal spaces. This attitude also manifested itself in an atmosphere of political disavowal and rejection (Clément, 2015; Zhelnina, 2020). While protests of different scales emerged regularly in big Russian cities to protest national policies (Robertson, 2013), few urbanites were getting involved in routine participation in municipal politics and housing maintenance in their apartment buildings (Fröhlich, 2020; Zhuravlev et al., 2014).

People’s housing strategies were also influenced by the post-socialist transition. There are at least two conflicting ways of thinking about housing: as a right that the state must provide (legacy of the Soviet housing distribution system) and as a privilege to be earned, which guarantees homeowners autonomy and protection (the new ideology of market economy) (Trudolyubov, 2018). During the Soviet decades, all housing was state-owned and ‘provided’ to people according to the formalized norms and regulations of housing allocation. Building maintenance was also the responsibility of the state. This shaped the habitual understanding many Muscovites have today: they expect the government to take care of and improve the housing conditions of its people. Privatization processes, which began in the 1990s, allowed residents of state-owned buildings to become owners of their apartments. People took responsibility only for the space inside their apartment walls, mostly ignoring the shared tasks of building maintenance, assuming that ‘the government’ would take care of them.

The government, however, was trying to transfer maintenance responsibilities to the homeowners (Clément, 2008). Formally, existing housing legislation gives homeowners and residents a variety of tools to make decisions about repairs and overall maintenance in their buildings (such as homeowner assemblies and house councils). Moreover, the elected municipal councils, self-governance bodies at the city district level, give people control over the maintenance and development of the physical and social infrastructure of their neighbourhoods. All these tools are underused, and many Muscovites are not aware of their existence or significance.

As a result, residents expect the state to be responsible for buildings and public spaces beyond their private apartment walls, whereas the state expects residents to take on responsibilities for maintaining their own homes, including the buildings and common areas. The mobilization during the Renovation controversy has foregrounded some of these problems and habitual strategies of living in Moscow, and, as I demonstrate below, made some people rethink their approaches to housing and responsibilities. The articulation of their life strategies helped people make sense of the situation, strategize, form
collective players and strategically intervene in the articulation processes of their neighbours. To understand the mobilization around Renovation and the ways people made up and changed their minds, below I introduce and justify the analytic distinction between habitual and intentional strategic action and the notion of the plasticity of strategies.

**Habitual and Intentional Strategic Action**

To analyse the role of strategies in political mobilization, I suggest distinguishing between habitual and intentional strategies of action, which differ in the level of articulation of both goals and the ways of achieving them. People’s strategies may be positioned somewhere on this spectrum, tending towards one of the poles. Habitual strategies make use of the routine and usual tools people have at their disposal to achieve their personal goals. Intentional strategies are more articulated and can involve innovation and challenge the status quo. Not only private strategies take these two forms: political strategies, too, can follow routine practices, without articulating the goals of each course of action in public arenas, or they can elaborate on goals and means.

The articulation of habitual strategies is key to the mobilization process. Because social movements are collective endeavours, at least partly in public arenas, participants must elaborate, justify and package their goals and strategies in order to persuade others. The meaning-making activity which foregrounds the connections between people’s private strategies and social and political developments is at the core of the mobilization process. Surprising and shocking events and other moments of uncertainty, as well as the strategic work of social movements and politicians, can motivate people to reconsider and reimagine these connections.

Private life strategies help people navigate social reality and decide how to act upon it. Aspirations and goals can be more or less articulate, specific or general, trivial or significant, and can include moral orientations, such as doing the right thing, being happy, following religious values, but also practical things, such as being safe and having a home. These goals and orientations define not only thoughts but also emotions: even before people can articulate how they are doing in relation to their goals, they can feel it (Nussbaum, 2001). Private goals and strategies are determined by a person’s socialization, a process of ‘learning to act appropriately’ to one’s situation (Fine, 1992: 103). People can devise their own goals, but some goals can be ‘offered to us by the large organizations that dominate life in modern society’ (Jasper, 2006a: 159).

Implicit, unconscious strategic choices are at the centre of Bourdieu’s theory of practice and practical knowledge. Even when guided by an explicit goal or plan, Bourdieu argues, the practices are ‘produced by the habitus, as the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Habitus, ‘the way of being, a habitual state’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 214), is a source of inclinations to organize action in a particular way. Similarly, Swidler emphasizes the habitual dimension of strategy in her notion of culture as a strategy: it provides tools and ways of doing things and living a life. Strategy is not merely ‘a plan consciously devised to attain a goal’, but a more ‘general way of organizing action (…) that might allow one to reach several different life goals’ (Swidler, 1986: 277). People act in the way they do because they have learned to do so, having acquired a “tool kit” of symbols, stories,
rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems’ (Swidler, 1986: 273).

In many situations, however, people can clearly articulate their goals and intentionally organize their action to achieve them. This explicit, intentional dimension of action is the focus of a separate body of research, namely social movement scholarship and interactive perspectives on politics and contention. This research shows that social movements can strategically prompt people to articulate their life strategies and see the connections between their personal aspirations and the goals of the movement. The framing perspective conceptualizes the interpretative work that social movement players perform and centres on ‘meaning work – the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings’ (Benford and Snow, 2000: 613). Social movements, in this perspective, are active players who try to recruit supporters and allies by creating meaning, generating new interpretive frames, ways of seeing and acting upon reality, that can challenge the existing interpretive frames.

How do these revisions and adjustments of interpretive frames, identities and strategies happen? While some of this change can result from the strategic and purposeful work by social movement organizers, the interaction with peers can lead to changes in people’s ‘cultural’ (Swidler, 1986) and ‘cognitive toolkit’ (Passy and Monsch, 2014). These micro-level processes during mobilization can facilitate change in the ways people think about social reality and act upon it, even when the activists do not reach their immediate goals.

**Group-Based Processes, Plasticity of Strategies and Micro-Change**

Micro-level interactive processes are key to the articulation and adjustment of private life strategies. Interactions with friends, family, neighbours and organizers can help people formulate their aspirations and desires, devise plans and form collective players in situations when group action is necessary. These situations can be transformative, as Tilly (1998: 507) has pointed out:

\[\text{conversation in general shapes social life by altering individual and collective understandings, by creating and transforming social ties, by generating cultural materials that are then available for subsequent social interchange, and by establishing, obliterating, or shifting commitments on the part of participants.}\]

Social movements and political campaigns, as well as ‘moral shocks’ of external events can draw people into these consequential interactive situations, which can prompt people to change their minds about what is valuable, and what means are appropriate to achieve it.

Conversation is only one type of interactive processes contributing to social change. Group-level processes range from discussions among peers (in-group) to active opposition to the adversaries or ‘others’ (out-group). Hirsch (1990) has identified discussions with peers, or ‘consciousness-raising’, as one of the key group-level processes that support collective action, along with empowerment, polarization and collective decision
making. These discussions increase solidarity among group-members; they also help them develop a shared view of a particular social reality or a problem. People’s values, their preferred courses of action and their identities can change as a result.

While social movement studies often tend to see the relationship between beliefs and actions as unidirectional (people mobilize because they share certain views), the reverse can also be true. The process of transformation of interests and strategies continues during participation in a movement or campaign. Munson (2010) found that participants’ views can develop or change in interaction with others, who influence an individual’s articulation of what is right and wrong. Ferree and Miller (1985) emphasize the social psychological dimension of interests: individual perception of social events can be influenced, or ‘socially structured’, by interactions with others. Kim and Bearman (1997: 74) show that actors are interdependent, and their interests are subject to collective influence: ‘once individuals participate in collective action, their interests are plastic’.

Collective engagement and interaction can change people’s ‘cognitive toolkit’ (Passy and Monsch, 2014), namely the frames and cultural meanings that allow people to interpret the world and see certain things as injustice or wrongdoing. Passy (2001: 176) argues that social networks, defined as ‘islands of meaning’, influence the identity-building processes, connect people to movement opportunities and help them decide whether to join a protest. People can also interpret their personal experiences and deliberately seek new information, educating themselves about social problems, thus enlarging and modifying their cognitive toolkit (Passy and Monsch, 2014: 30). These ‘self-interactions’ (Passy and Monsch, 2014: 30) complement the effects of social networks and ‘external processes’, such as social and political events provoking strong emotional reactions.

The above-mentioned interactions and group-level processes can affect not only immediate decisions and actions but can also have enduring effects – by changing people and their habitual strategies. Vestergren et al. (2019: 76) have looked at intra- and inter-group interaction processes to ‘explore if and how the participants changed through their participation in the campaign’. They distinguish between subjective (reported changes in beliefs, identities and perceptions) and objective (observable behaviour) changes, and demonstrate that people can feel more empowered and confident, ready for more radical action, acquire new skills and relationships, and change their behaviour, for example switch to different consumer practices or maintain their involvement in political action. These researchers have also found that not only ‘discussions’ and similar intra-group interactions are important sources of these changes. Inter-group conflicts, for example with the police, can further foster commitment and group identity (Vestergren et al., 2018).

Thus, enduring change can grow from micro-interactions. Political players and mobilized activists can stimulate these interactions and prompt their interlocutors to articulate or rethink their habitual ways.

**Data and Methods**

This article is based on a qualitative study combining observation, document analysis, interviews and digital ethnography conducted between 2017 and 2019. The study began in spring 2017, soon after the programme made the headlines. I began monitoring the
social media groups that mushroomed on Facebook and Vkontakte, the main Russian social media platform, and archiving the media reports on the programme. I began collecting systematic data later, in August 2017, when the results of the voting became known and the programme lists finalized.

I selected four districts for in-depth study, based on the outcome of the voting procedure. The results ranged from as many as half the buildings in a district voting against inclusion to almost all the buildings supporting it. Based on the voting percentages, I chose one district from the upper quartile (most opposed to Renovation); one from the lowest quartile (least opposed), and two from the middle of the distribution. I focused on the social media communities of these districts, both their regular local groups and the Renovation-related communities. This allowed me to explore the local issues, activist groups and relationships with authorities in more detail.

I selected respondents for personal interviews from these four neighbourhoods, based on the status of their building, so that I included buildings directly affected by Renovation and others nearby. I interviewed people supporting, opposing and sometimes indifferent to Renovation. Some interviews included a walk with the respondent around their neighbourhood. I visited Moscow to collect interview data and observations three times, in 2017, 2018 and 2019. It allowed me to track changes in people’s perceptions of the programme, their neighbourhood and neighbours, as well as the activist careers of some of them. All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Russian; the interview quotes were translated for publication.

I also collected notes and recordings (audio and video) from various Renovation-related public events (homeowners’ assemblies and other formal and informal arenas, where neighbours faced each other with the fate of their homes at stake). I created transcripts and notes for each video and audio document.

Renovation-related social media, citywide and neighbourhood-based, both pro- and anti-Renovation, were my main recruitment platforms. Because my recruitment strategy focused on talking to people from different buildings and with different positions about Renovation in the four selected districts, I could only use limited snowball sampling. I collected 45 face-to-face interviews and 10 conversations online via text messages. Only four of the interviewees to whom I spoke in person were directly recommended to me by other interviewees. The social media platforms dedicated to Renovation were not merely my recruitment site, but also a source of data. In these groups, people exchanged news and information, reported on their activities in their buildings, sought advice and engaged in emotional fights. I wrote fieldnotes and archived important posts and conversations (‘digital fieldnotes’).

The interviews and other materials were fully transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti software. First, I coded the interviews, identifying the following: players involved in the Renovation controversy, arenas where interactions took place, the gains and losses made in each interactive situation and the characteristics of players reported by their opponents and supporters. I paid specific attention to emotions reported by the interviewees, as well as the emotion-laden expressions they used to describe experiences, situations or people. Then I reconstructed the processes of identity formation, empowerment and other changes my interviewees reported on or I could identify based on their reported behaviours. I did so by identifying the cross-cutting themes in the interviews, writing
analytical memos and visualizing the relationships between different codes using the networks tool in the Atlas.ti software.

**Private Strategies and Mobilization**

After Renovation was announced, potential participants had to evaluate their own housing conditions, consider the possible gains and losses of participating and estimate whether to trust the city government or their neighbours. People performed this analysis in the context of their housing strategies, both habitual and intentional, as well as in dialogue with neighbours, family members, activists and city officials.

The decision-making process took longer for those people who needed time to articulate their housing preferences and strategies. Those who already had pronounced ideas about their housing and their relationship to the state (as homeowners, citizens or tenants), and what the negotiation process should look like, made up their minds faster. Habitual housing strategies, including implicit ideas about the government’s role in providing and maintaining housing, were one factor in the decision-making processes. So were their intentional strategies, such as their investment in their current housing and neighbourhoods, apartment renovation plans and active mortgages. Some of those strategies contradicted the announced policy, some aligned with it, others were articulated, adjusted and revised in the light of the new prospects.

Among both supporters and opponents of Renovation were people with pronounced goals and expectations about housing who made their decision quickly and engaged in action to make sure that the fate of their building aligned with their plans.

For example, Renovation supporter Alena, an expecting mother in her 20s, did not value her housing much either sentimentally or pragmatically. Renovation aligned perfectly with her aspirations and strategies. Before the announcement of the demolition plans, she had actively and repeatedly asked authorities to fix some structural issues in her crumbling building. Her family had no financial resources to purchase a better home, so for years she had hoped for state-led relocations, based on rumours circulating among neighbours. Despite her previous experience with the authorities, who evaded her requests to conduct the necessary repairs, she chose to trust their relocation promises: she was convinced that nothing could be worse than her current housing. To make sure that the situation developed in the way most consonant with her housing strategy, Alena not only voted yes, but also made sure that no agitators from the opposite side convinced her neighbours to vote otherwise: she monitored their appearance in the buildings’ courtyard and ran out to challenge them whenever they came to speak to her neighbours. Her response to Renovation is an example of an implicit habitual strategy that many Russians follow: even when you do not trust the government, it cannot hurt to try and take advantage of it. Alena and other supporters like her, who had no illusions about the benevolence of the state, still wanted to benefit from what they saw as an opportunity to advance their housing goals.

In contrast to such hopeful responses to the programme, Renovation opponents often described their first reactions to it as a ‘shock’, a feeling that the ground was crumbling under their feet. Others felt outraged. Both emotions indicate a contradiction between
what one believes should happen and what really happens. Strong emotions helped people mobilize relatively quickly.

For example, Kirill, a sales representative in his 40s, was irritated by the announcement of Renovation, and he eventually became one of the most prominent anti-Renovation activists in his neighbourhood. Although his building had a notoriously poor layout, with tiny 5-square-metre kitchens, he had improvement plans, and considered combining the kitchen and one of the rooms to compensate for this shortcoming. Renovation, however, cut his plans short:

And then suddenly Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] announces to [Mayor] Sobyanin that he knows the Muscovites’ wants and needs, and these wants and needs are that their homes be demolished and new ones built in their place. Of course, it made me tense, and I began to follow it all very carefully. All the chronicle of Renovation, how it was being implemented, all the news, all the bills, all the movements of the authorities, all the editions of the bill – I studied it very carefully. Because, of course, it affected me.

The officials’ claims to know what Muscovites needed not only contradicted Kirill’s plans but also violated his civic dignity. He expected the city administration to respect the ‘contract’ between the government and himself as a citizen. In exchange for his taxes and maintenance fees, they had to perform some services and protection. Instead of protecting his property, the government encouraged his neighbours to deprive him of it by voting for demolition. When his neighbours voted to demolish the building, Kirill proceeded to monitor and expose on social media every move of the city administration to detect lies, deception and false promises. He felt their actions were disrespectful to him, as a citizen: ‘I don’t like it that my neighbours and I are being made fools.’

While trying to choose a course of action, people articulated their ideas about citizenship as well. Housing strategies are often intertwined with civic strategies, based on various visions of the role of the state in citizens’ lives (Holston, 2008; Murphy, 2015). For Victoria, a medical professional in her late 40s, this process was transformative. Renovation made her revise her views of what it means to be a good citizen and what are the appropriate ways of action for a citizen. Before, she had generally tried to stay away from anything public and political:

I never got into politics; I never tried to understand it. Honestly, I was rather indifferent – I don’t understand it, so I’m not getting into it. But when it [Renovation] happened, I understood that if they take what’s mine, if they decide for me, where [I should live], how, why and what for, without asking me – that’s when I mobilized.

When we spoke in 2018, Victoria clearly formulated her ‘old’ strategy: working, paying taxes, taking care of her own needs, being a ‘good citizen’, which meant not breaking any laws and not getting into politics that ‘you don’t understand’. She took out two mortgages to purchase two apartments in her district, despite being a single mother and a caregiver to older relatives, and never asked the government for assistance. Renovation and the expropriation of property, as Victoria saw it, contradicted her habitual strategy, and she felt frustrated. Still, the experience helped her articulate a new vision of the right
and wrong ways of doing things, mainly, that it was not the state’s business to intervene in homeowners’ plans.

In Victoria’s strategy, ideas about ‘good citizenship’ and homeownership were intertwined. State interference with her housing strategy violated something bigger than just her housing plans; she mobilized to protect her home and general civic dignity. Those who mobilized against Renovation often told me that it was more than just a housing issue for them: ‘I wouldn’t be able to respect myself’, said Alla, explaining why she became an activist against Renovation. Kirill also emphasized the violation of homeowners’ autonomy.

Dignity and autonomy are more general concerns than concrete housing troubles, but they are deeply connected to notions of property and home. Defending their right to keep their property, Muscovites like Kirill, Alla and Victoria stood their ground more generally, defending their agency and their ability to make their own decisions about their lives. They all felt empowered by their fight, even if they lost their buildings, like Kirill: their mobilization helped them realize their standing as autonomous citizens.

Mobilized by strong emotions, formed out of the gap between their private strategies and political developments, these people became the first activists in their buildings. The articulation of strategies and the emotions involved in this process were critical in choosing mobilization or inaction. They had to overcome their rejection of politics, the habitual atomization of urban life in Moscow and their fear of strangers, in order to go out to talk to their neighbours. They were pulled into the political domain. Their next step was pulling others into this domain as well: by going door to door, getting to know their neighbours, attending meetings in local administrations, these activists created new interactive arenas where urban politics could take place. In these arenas, they could intervene and ‘help’ their neighbours articulate their own housing and civic strategies in a particular way.

**The Plasticity of Strategies**

In some of the affected buildings, activists advocating for or against Renovation turned familiar and usually apolitical places – courtyards, stairwells, playgrounds – into spaces of agitation. They walked door to door to speak to neighbours, discussed Renovation in the courtyards with everyone they met, distributed leaflets, exchanged remarks on the DIY message boards at entrances and created online group chats for the residents of their buildings. Activists transformed everyday spaces into interactive political arenas, forcing their neighbours to think about their housing preferences and strategies, the potential gains or risks of the promised relocations and the trustworthiness of the government.

The main goal of the activists was to intervene in their neighbour’s articulation of their housing strategies. In line with research showing the plasticity of interests (Kim and Bearman, 1997), my research shows that changes of heart were possible as a result of such strategic efforts. In most cases, activists targeted undecided or hesitant neighbours, trying first to figure out their overall strategies (what people wanted, how much they trusted the government), and then tapped into these findings to convince people to vote a certain way, or even become activists themselves.
Most of my interlocutors who succeeded in including or excluding their building from the programme first performed this exploratory work, before giving speeches and providing arguments in favour of either decision. They knocked on apartment doors, often meeting their neighbours for the first time and not knowing what to expect or how to act. The Facebook group ‘Muscovites against Renovation’, one of the biggest online platforms dedicated to resistance to the programme, prepared instructions: how to speak to neighbours, which topics to avoid and how to allocate time. These guidelines suggested not investing time and effort in convincing ardent supporters of Renovation who had clearly made up their minds. With those who looked promising, the conversation would revolve around the risks of the programme for the personal housing interests of the interlocutors and the shared fate of all neighbours in the building. Many activists were surprised to find that people liked talking about their interests and were ready to contemplate the risks and promises of the programme. Vera, a young housewife in her 20s, became a successful anti-Renovation agitator after she realized this:

There were many people who you just needed to talk to. [. . .] We have many elderly people, and they turned out to be absolutely fine, and they understood that they don’t need [relocation], they have their park here and all that, that [it’s a bad idea] to move at such an old age. It was just necessary to talk to them, [to lay out] what is what.

The ‘need to talk’ was a recurring theme in my interviews: people liked to have an activist to talk to, to articulate their own needs and preferences. The activists used the opportunity to prompt people to make the ‘correct’ judgement. And they facilitated this important group-level process of developing a shared view on the programme by transforming everyday spaces into arenas of political discussion.

The persuasion techniques worked best with people who were in the process of articulating their strategies and interests, but it was also possible to convince those who seemed to have already made a decision. For example, Ruslan, the owner of a two-room apartment in a solid building, changed his mind and vote after his neighbour Danil, a resident of a communal apartment and a Renovation supporter, persuaded him. Ruslan liked his apartment; he thought it was ‘interesting’ and had the ‘character’ of an old Moscow apartment. He had bought it several years before and liked that the previous owners were ‘intelligent Muscovites’. His first reaction to Renovation was rejection and anxiety: he went to an anti-Renovation rally in May 2017, the first public protest he attended in his life. Ruslan was also very critical of the government and its failing policies, which he experienced first-hand as a healthcare professional. His habitual response was to reject yet another suspicious governmental initiative. When Danil organized a homeowner assembly, Ruslan voted ‘no’ on the inclusion. Eventually, however, he changed his mind, asked Danil to destroy his old ballot and voted ‘yes’:

I met with Danil again (. . .), he emailed me the bill with the 33 amendments (. . .), and I read it all carefully. And I realized that they would relocate us within our Rakitino district, that new, modern buildings would be constructed, and that it was probably not very forward-looking [to vote no]. Our building is from 1959, it is getting older. I decided to take the risk and changed my mind.
While the basis of Ruslan’s reasoning was his personal situation, it was an interactive process: his activist neighbour Danil helped Ruslan redefine his housing strategy, as both of them acknowledged in their interviews. Danil proudly reported that he brought leaflets and other visual materials, portraying the future of the neighbourhood after Renovation, and even took Ruslan to the exhibit of the full-size models of apartments in the promised buildings. Ruslan saw the models, browsed the rooms and began to imagine living there.

Danil strategically intervened in Ruslan’s vision of the future and his housing strategy. He made this future real and visible, and linked the beautiful promised apartments Ruslan saw in the booklets and at the exhibit to the new bill that the Moscow City Council was about to pass to make these promises official. Danil also helped Ruslan see how the programme aligned with his private strategies: a father of a young child, he wanted to expand his housing for his growing family. Overcoming Ruslan’s mistrust of the political system was the key to success: Danil managed to present himself as knowledgeable and well connected, hinting at his involvement with municipal deputies and the local branch of a certain political party.

There is more evidence of such interactive decision making in seemingly private housing issues. The very presence or absence of activists in the building created a different environment for the decision on how to vote and how to act. For instance, Varya was content with her housing, liked the neighbourhood and never wanted to move out. She voted ‘yes’ nevertheless:

Thing is, my building, my stairwell, I spoke to people . . . I kind of wanted to vote against or not vote, I wasn’t sure. But then I saw that all my stairwell is voting for demolitions. And I didn’t. The whole building was voting yes, and I relaxed. (. . .) We don’t have a choice anyway – if we don’t move out now, they will move us out later.

Varya made her decision based on what she thought her neighbours were doing. The online voting process took a month, and residents could follow the voting progress on the website. Varya waited until the last day, watching the ‘yes’ votes increasing in her building, and all these weeks she spent contemplating her options. After speaking to a couple of neighbours, she realized that it was not worth it to ‘stress about’ something she could not change:

And I just started to save money to maybe buy an [extra] room if it would be possible. If it is possible and we like [the new housing], we will stay; if we don’t like it, (. . .) we’ll sell and move to a neighbourhood that we’ll like. I just accepted that it was happening, and there was no reason to stress about it.

Varya is an independent single mother, who, as she told me, was used to counting only on herself in life. Renovation was no different: she decided to save her emotional well-being and not worry about what she thought was inevitable. Instead, she began preparing alternative ways of getting the housing that she would like, in case anything went wrong with the new apartments the government promised. Relying on herself and not expecting the government to have her back was in line with her habitual strategy of achieving various life goals, including housing. Renovation did not change much for her because she
was habitually prepared to deal with problems and, importantly, had no other activists in her building to doubt the inevitability of relocation.

Ruslan’s and Varya’s examples demonstrate that their decision making and strategizing were not purely individual: they took into account other people’s behaviour, words and assumed motivations. Their decision-making processes were also influenced by the interactive arenas they entered or were pulled into (like Ruslan): the particular configurations of arguments, emotions and perceived efficacy of action in these arenas influenced each person’s decisions. The re-evaluation of people’s housing strategies was one of the key goals of activists on both sides: people interacted with their neighbours to persuade them about the magnitude of the risks or the potential benefits.

Activists on both sides were essential for these strategic adjustments because they turned the familiar spaces in the buildings and around them into interactive arenas. They helped people articulate their positions, prompting them to take one or the other side. For Renovation’s opponents, another important task was to make people feel they were not in the minority: the government-controlled media proclaimed overwhelming support for Renovation, making the isolated opponents feel doomed. Raisa, who became a neighbourhood anti-Renovation activist, explained to me that when she began talking to people in her residential block, she found out that many of them believed that everyone around them supported demolitions, based on what they saw on the TV and read in the official newspapers. In buildings where activists were present, they had a chance to convince people they were not alone and there was a chance to succeed. Turning home spaces into political arenas also made conversations about housing, rights, and plans possible.

My observations continued during the years that have passed since the announcement of Renovation, and although it is still too early to speculate on the long-term changes in people’s civic and housing strategies, there are some trends that have survived the active phase of the controversy. Some activists have since then left the scene, many Muscovites who mobilized in response to urban redevelopment stayed on their new activist and political paths and ran for municipal and city council seats. New neighbourhood groups and building-level residents’ councils that emerged to resist Renovation shifted their focus to other local issues and routine building maintenance tasks. The habitual strategy of political avoidance has been transformed at least for some activists, who continue to shift the balances and configurations in the urban political field.

**Conclusion**

The announcement of Renovation disrupted the status quo in Moscow’s housing and political spheres. The engagement process had two stages: first, some residents mobilized in response to the alignment or conflict between their private strategies and the Renovation programme. Second, they transformed their buildings and courtyards into political arenas to strategically intervene in their neighbours’ decision-making processes and their revisions and articulations of their personal housing strategies. These actions drew more people into the urban political field, engaging them with one another and allowing some to revise their positions not only about Renovation but about Moscow’s politics and their place in it.
The analysis presented in this article adds a new dimension to studies of mobilization. The focus on interaction and micro-level mobilization allows us to foreground the decision making of individuals embedded in social relations. The decision to engage in political action is influenced by their private life strategies, habitual or intentional, and it revolves around each person’s life goals, their analysis of the present situation, available tools and anticipated constraints and limitations.

People can engage in collective action based on their gut-reactions and emotions, which express their implicit strategies, but further political action in public arenas requires an articulation of their goals and strategies because it involves persuading others. Based on my analysis focusing on private strategies and the revision of strategies during the mobilization process, I can hypothesize that these transformations have implications not only for the future of each engaged individual but also for the relationships and configurations in the strategic action fields and in the ways politics is performed. One limitation of this study is that I can only assess the short-term consequences and transformative effects of the Renovation-related mobilization processes, but the suggested focus on the changes in private strategies and their social and political implications can be a fruitful way to explore long-term effects as well.

Renovation pulled Muscovites into the interactive arenas of the urban political field; setting foot in one arena could also motivate citizens to explore the boundaries of the field further, and engage in interactions in further linked arenas, such as municipal elections. Previously, not many Muscovites used or even knew about the different arenas of urban and local politics, but the shock of Renovation exposed those structures to more citizens than ever before. People learned and tried out different political arenas, learned about the connections between them and created new ones. New players entered the arenas of the urban political field, learned new skills and tools, potentially changing the way this field operates.

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