

## Transcript Ep. 64: In Conversation with Vera Smirnova (The Urban Lives of Property Series part II)

[00:00] **Intro:** This is the Urban Political, the podcast on urban theory, research, and activism.

[00:10] **Markus Kip:** Welcome to the Urban Political podcast. Today's episode is a collaboration with the appropriate podcast of the collaborative research centre 'Structural Change of Property'. Today is June 12th, 2023, and my name is Markus Kip.

[00:29] **Hanna Hilbrandt:** And I am Hanna Hilbrandt. And this is the second episode of our series entitled 'The Urban Lives of Property', thinking about appropriation, dispossession, and expropriation in theory and practice. In this series, we are advancing conceptual and theoretical groundwork on the notion of property, how it's shaping everyday urban lives and political discussions about the city. In our last episode, we spoke to Nicolas Blomley, focusing on his conceptualisations of territory and property.

[01:02] **Markus Kip:** Today, our guest is Vera Smirnova and we will discuss her research on territory and property in Russian history and geography. Vera is a human, political, and urban geographer working at the department of geography and spatial sciences and the department of political science at the Kansas state university. Her research explores the relations between land and power and the various manifestations in pre- and post-Soviet Russia. She has recently written a set of important articles on these topics that we will discuss throughout this episode, and you can find the references in the short-notes.

[01:47] **Hanna Hilbrandt:** Hi, Vera.

[01:50] **Vera Smirnova:** Thanks for the invitation.

[01:50] **Hanna Hilbrandt:** Thank you so much for joining us today. We wanted to set off with some conceptual clarifications. Can you tell us a bit more about what the specificities are of thinking about property from within Russia or with Russian geopolitical developments in mind?

[02:11] **Vera Smirnova:** Yes, that's a good question, because we usually - in a very kind of familiar to all of us way think of property as some form of a legitimate ownership of a piece of land, it's an attached bundle of rights with secure and defined delineated boundaries. There is legitimacy of the state there as well, because we have property inside a legitimate state relations too. But this kind of familiar, maybe Western-centric form of property really cannot account for complex, multi-layered forms of property coming from post-Socialist contexts. And Russia, here, of course, would be one such example. There are multiple multitudes of post-Socialist cases.

There is really not this single definition for the Russian property model, right, or a post-Socialist property model, at large. It would differ from urban contexts to rural contexts, from periphery of Moscow to the indigenous lands in Russian north, for example, to the rural

form of collective kolkhoz relations of collective farms and whatnot. But all these different contexts, across Russia and across other post-Socialist societies, very much find this one common ground - that property, despite being legalised in formal ways, is incredibly insecure. It draws from legacies of collectivist relations; it draws from legacies of informal relations and informalities at large. It draws from fluid spatiality of the property boundaries, constant negotiations between the state, the private and the public. So, this kind of fluidity and informality is engrained in post-Socialist human-land relations.

There are multiple of these scholars who try to unveil those relations and bring them up for debate at a larger, kind of Eurocentric, stage. And they have done so predominantly by dissecting the property relations in post-Socialism and tried to look into different conceptual models, one of them - probably this was the most notable one - would be Katherine Verdery, talking about the fuzzy property relations and the fuzziness of property in post-Socialist states. That's one of the earlier works, probably, bringing the post-Socialist context out into the world, to political geography at large, so there it says that property in post-Socialist studies is fuzzy, because there is really not a single set of rules that define exclusion or inclusion, there is a lack of clearly defined borders, there is a lack of legitimate owners, despite actually property being legitimised on the paper. And then we have all kinds of other works from critical agrarian scholarship as well. The ideas of quiet sovereignty, talking about rural property relations in rural Russia, in rural post-Soviet states too, and talking about the value of small-holding agriculture rights that presents the space for survival, especially in times of crisis and political instabilities, too. That work was done by Natalia Mamonova and others talking about the lack of formal movements, formal organisation of food sovereignty, therefore talking about quiet sovereignty. Other ideas, such as for example the story of dispossession, by Alexander Vorbrugg, talking about the multi-layered law and violence, that presents the post-Socialist case of property relations. These slow, multi-layered forms of dispossession are so different than what we usually perceive as a large-scale, massive land grab, where we know who is grabbing where and what is being enclosed, but here it's so non-transparent, so it's really hard to pin down where dispossession takes place and why and how and on what scale.

Most of those scholars and I worked in particular with some historical examples of property land enclosure - most of us do try to develop this post-Socialist kind of model more generally and really try to contribute not only to different forms of seeing other forms of property but also different ways of organising land ownership and land management, too.

[07:20] **Markus Kip:** Good. Well, we are here to talk about the historical dimension that you unveil in the Russian context around property. So, can you tell us more about the processes of propertisation of land that is the making of property in land in Russia generally, and land privatisation specifically? And maybe guide us from the relevant historical origins maybe until today.

[07:57] **Vera Smirnova:** The question of historical origins... Yes, I did spend a lot of time in the archives digging out the papers from 1906, the first land enclosure acts in the Russian

Empire, but I think Markus, what you mention here is kind of the separation between property-making, right, and privatisation. So how we have become property-owners, kind of, on the paper and in reality. And I think in Russia, in particular, that is kind of my object of analysis, we can really trace three different episodes of the creation of *proprietor* and the creation of property. The first one, of course, would be the 1906 Stolypin land reforms, initiated by the prime minister of the Russian Empire, Pyotr Stolypin, to help the peasants exit this notorious commune, the peasant land commune, that was just kind of - according to the statist interpretations - it was dragging the society behind. The majority of the peasants were cultivating land in so-called communes, that would be called *Obschina* or *Mir*, in Russian. And what Stolypin and his administration tried to do is to consolidate their land strips, to consolidate their land plots and to create this new, "peasant proprietor". From peasant to property-owners - was a whole journey that was kind of short-lived and actually pretty violent in Russia. So here, by the end of 1913, the land enclosure acts that Stolypin has initiated completely failed, only about up to 40% of the peasants have actually enclosed their land holdings and actually became the real property owners in the Russian imperial sense, which did not mean they acquired a piece of land, no, they have acquired a paper that have said that they are the property owners but to allocate that piece of land, to delineate it, to mark it up and to register it will take other years and years of work, and that did not happen. The customary practices of the Russian land commune still prevailed and so we have seen that the reforms, they stopped very much abruptly, after 1911, because Pyotr Stolypin was assassinated by some revolutionaries that were very much against his reforms, by trying to turn the Russian peasant into capitalist proprietor. So, after assassination all the reforms have stopped and very much the peasants have returned back to the communes. But what was interesting, how we could read this episode from the point of view of the British enclosure acts of parliament, right, where the British peasants were turned into capitalist appropriators, which is a much longer kind of - a very different story and seeing that story in parallel will help us to understand the difference between creating property-owners and actually allocating land to the peasant.

[11:23] **Markus Kip:** I'd like to hear a little bit about the commune, the *Obschina*, that you mentioned and this idea of a collective ownership of land. How does this relate to the feudal social structures of the time, and these practices of serfdom that I associate with the Russia of the late 19th century?

[11:52] **Vera Smirnova:** Oh, I love this question. I'm a big fan of the Russian land commune, we can just have a parallel podcast about that as well. The Russian land commune very much - what we know about it today is just a number of written records that were obviously collected by land surveyors and different, by many, officials that would travel into the commune to analyse it. The peasants themselves would just sign those papers, many times they wouldn't be able to write and to read and whatnot so you would have, in the kind of documents that I was working with, I would see the survey of the commune and the peasant would just sign the survey. The rest would be collected. So here, we already need to question the practice of knowledge production, that we only acquire so much knowledge from the archive that we can. And that obviously can be subjective knowledge. But from what we know, the peasant land commune has predated serfdom. It was in Russia prior the

serfdom was established. It's the most ancient form of land tenure based on the so-called peasant law or what they would call an inseparability of family property, so it was a heritable commune, and the property would be transferred from the parent to the child, to the grandchild and whatnot. The land commune has worked land together, collectively, with a number of other families. They would not officially possess or have a title to the land, right, that was only under Catherine the Great that the commune became the official kind of user of the land, owned by the Crown. But prior to Catherine, they just used land that was not very much theirs, but they have perceived it as theirs.

But the commune would defer from other forms of collective ownership structures is that it was a heritable commune and a distributional commune, they call it repartitional commune as well, because every single year, the commoners went through land redivision practices, they would delineate the land according to some formal - you know, some oral traditions - that were practiced in that society at that time, generation after generation. They would use different ways of land distribution based on some normative units that they have established historically. These would be demographic units such as the amounts of male power that can actually cultivate that piece of land, they called it male souls, *doushy*. Each peasant would have a value attached to that family dependent on how many male peasants you have in a certain age so that you can actually work the land. Sometimes they were redistributed based on the number of eaters, or *edoki*, that would also be put into calculation. Sometimes the number of foreheads, they would call it *dushi*, just the number of people that could work the land. It's really, really complex and the only records that we have today from the actual land management practices in the commune are coming from the Russian Geographical Society and from the Free Economic Society surveys in 1877 or 1860s, where the surveyors went into the commune and tried to study and analyse how the commoners live their lives. But what we believe is that the commune actually was a sovereign entity in and of itself. They had some sort of defined territorial boundaries, if a guest would come to visit the commune, the guest would have to find some commoner that would vouch for the guest to let them enter the commune. The commune had full control over its members, full control over its land. It was a form of sovereign, territorial state, in and of itself. Even though, in reality, they did not actually own that land, the land was owned by the Crown, by the Empire, or whatnot. So, there is a lot of reasoning about it.

Revolutionaries such as Rosa Luxemburg has talked about the land commune as *the* example of actually just going straight into the highest level of socialist organisation of life. And well, negating that type of first transition towards capitalism - now, we can just jump fully into socialism in Russia because the land commune is so powerful since it has already happened in the way that they would be talking about. But it has generated a lot of debate across different anarchist circles, too, and it's just a fascinating case, really, to study.

And then 20 years later, we get collectivisation which abolishes all forms of privatisation, all forms of private ownership, all transactions that involves the land would be forbidden and land was transferred to the large-scale state or collective farms called *kolkhozy* or *sovkhozy*. And of course that was a forced form of collectivisation. It was not at all similar to reviving the old, peasant land commune, even though on the paper it was shown that we are indeed rolling back all the privatisation efforts and reviving the land commune. But in reality, it was

a very colonial forced collectivisation reform that has led to surveying of the land, moving human subjects around, attaching them to the land, attaching them to collective farms, erasing any kind of forms of local land tenure - that would be indigenous forms of tenure, present all across Siberia - and then also Russia. That would be erasing local peasant forms of land tenure, under the fully collectivised system of land management.

And then we fast forward another 50-60 years and we got property coming back through land privatisation reforms in 1992. We have this “tragedy of property” unfolding, that's probably the most well-studied episode of privatisation across post-Socialist societies, because it happened so differently in so many different post-Socialist societies. For example, in Central-Eastern Europe you would see this distribution of land based on actual physical land title, but in Russia, you would see distribution of land based on a paper voucher that did not have an actual land plot attached to it. So, it was not territorialised in the liberal form, it did not imply defined boundaries of property, it did not imply defined location of your land plot, it was just a paper voucher that has tried to turn those collective farms into joint stock companies, and to make their employees, the farmers, become shareholders of those joint stock companies. And it obviously turned into a massive amount of land just getting fallowed and farms getting bankrupted and leading to the most critical waves of land abandonment in Russia which we are still dealing with today. I'm not sure what we need to do about it.

Obviously contributing to the lack of property culture and the inability of us to define our real proprietors, what the real proprietors should do and how to really privatise your piece of land in the legal sense, how to update this bundle of rights that it should guarantee, in terms of the liberal understanding of property.

[20:47] **Hanna Hilbrandt:** You started with that if there is one thing that defines the multiplicity of ideas about property when one thinks of Russia and also different post-Socialist contexts, is that idea of kind of insecurity and the fuzziness of the concept itself. And then you talked us through these different episodes of propertisation and different understandings of property that inhabited them - so how does this history create these ideas of insecurity in contemporary Russia and how is the insecurity felt or lived in contemporary Russia?

[21:25] **Vera Smirnova:** It's a very complex question, because, again, it would be different from urban to rural contexts. But what really kind of ties those two together is that we can find some contradictory processes taking place in the Russian periphery and in the urban centres and whatnot. That would be still different in nuance but all-in-all we can talk about - on the one hand: much land is still unused and depleted. And here we discuss primarily rural, agricultural land, so the post-1991 collapse obviously has triggered some of the most devastating and catastrophic waves of land abandonment. We have seen many farms turned into bankruptcy and much of the state land is still currently not delineated, which means half of all the land that the state owns does not have actual defined boundaries. And half of that, of most of the land that the state owns, does not have a record, right, in the Registry and Cadastre Chamber. We don't have a record, we don't have delineation of the land, we also see that the recent survey that the Cadaster chamber conducted in 2018,

they have found that that land is being very much used by different agricultural companies, by different firms, but most of the land is leased not following any form of competitive procedures, applying some kind of non-transparent procedures for determining the rates of that lease - we don't know who leased the land, they don't know who the renters are, we don't know who the owners are, because the majority of state land after the 90s privatisation should have been assigned to either a municipal form of ownership or a federal form of ownership. But currently we cannot even track it down. Even the state itself is trying so much to allocate delineated land, but it's just a huge mess in terms of doing that because that would be about almost 90% of all agricultural land that is in state ownership, currently does not have clearly defined boundaries. So that is a complicated question on the one hand.

On the other hand, we have some really valuable land plots that are acquired at all costs and all means possible through all kinds of extra-legal measures, displacing and evicting the local residents. That is obviously the case for urban Russia but also for rural Russia, too. For example, recent amendments to the City Planning Code in 2020 have institutionalised practices of land expropriation, not only by the state but by private companies for housing - for construction of new housing. Simplifying the procedures for ceasing those land plots inside cities. It was very much tied to the most notorious and widely discussed program of housing renovation in Moscow that many people have probably heard about, and we have written about this as well, how it was very much resulted in millions of people being displaced and most of the 1950s and 60s housing stock being demolished. But that amendment to the planning code, allowing private corporations to cease the land plots for the purpose of housing development was passed exactly after the 2017 notorious housing renovation program of Moscow. There are other, different forms of amendments that passed, one was amendment of the Civil Code, it just passed in December of 2022. And that says that property owners can be deprived from their ownership rights if they don't use the land plots for intended purposes or they don't take care of their land plots, or if the neighbours are not happy with them. So, it again injects other kind of form of conflict in terms of delineation of property boundaries, and whatnot. And what is defined as the proper use of the land? That is also quite obscure in the amendments. So, it introduces another form of uncertainty.

The fuzziness of property is still taking place, right, the land abandonment on the one side and also the extreme kind of extra-legal form of land appropriation on the other side. It's taking place in parallel, kind of, as we speak.

[26:41] **Markus Kip:** Let's take our conversation onto the territory of territory. In our last episode we spoke to Nicolas Blomley about his new book territory. And for Blomley - in short, territory is a social relation, shaped by and shaping systemic inequalities and power imbalances. And we would like to invite you, now, to link your ideas of property to conceptions of territory, especially since these are also important and at the forefront of your 2023 – this year's – article with Oleg Golubchikov. So, the question is: the particularity of Russian political geographical and philosophical intellectual traditions with regard to territory and property.



[27:41] **Vera Smirnova:** It's such a good question - because we need to be drawing more connections between property and territory. And I guess Blomley is the one that started to draw those connections by bringing the discussion of territory into property.

But territory, as we all know it, in the kind of liberal-western sense, is enclosed, measured, and calculated... And it takes such an important niche, in political geography in particular, there is a whole evolution of studies about territory. From territory being a kind of a mere enclosure of a piece of land under the ownership of a group of people, to state territory - those two things kind of go together. And then there have been different developments, taking about relational territory; decolonising territory; looking at bottom-up experiences of territorial practices; talking about territory as the process and not as a mere kind of outcome of spatial relations of power... All those developments are so well articulated in political geography.

But property is also a really powerful political technology, that also has its own spatiality. So, the territory of property, like Nicholas Blomley says, is also premised on spatial enclosure, it has defined boundaries to exclude some people and to include others. It also relies on the existence and legitimacy of the state, because that's what territory do - it's impossible without the existence of a legitimised state. And property, too - property formalisation are based on there being a state, if there is no state, there is going to be no one to formalise and recognise property. And many accounts connecting property and territory would draw from the parliamentary enclosure acts in Britain, right, and similar cases can be said about Russia, about the Stolypin land reforms of 1906 that brought land enclosure acts for the first time in history to the Russian land. But it didn't, obviously, worked, it completely failed, peasants have revolted and tried to bring back the commune because it was so different from the western sense of collective relations too.

But what we can find in Russia in particular is that property of territory or territory in general at a larger scale does not rely on firm boundaries. It just completely breaks boundaries, kind of, historically, contemporarily, it completely denies sovereignty to different groups of people. Be that an individual that used to own a piece of land in the periphery of Moscow, and now that piece of land has been appropriated by a large construction company that just needs to build houses in the current housing renovation program; or be that the peasant in the productive black earth-region in the South of Russia or Ukraine where there is massive agri-holding companytaking over land illegally, overnight.

The boundaries are broken very easily, the formal owners are not defined on paper, the state legitimacy is shaky. Particularly in the current political-economic crisis. But especially if we discuss the larger scale territory, territory as state sovereignty, there we also see some contradictions. We see Russia very famously as a negotiator of contradictory form of narratives, cynically disregarding territorial autonomy of its neighbours, as we see it with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we saw the war in Georgia, we see this in the recognition of other so-called autonomous republics that Russia stands behind, and we see it in the Nagorno Karabach conflict, too. At the same time, disregarding territorial autonomy of post-Soviet states also goes in parallel with Russia forcing this Westphalian, western idea of territory onto its own national realm, by denying territorial sovereignty of its own nations,

different nations that used to be independent states. That draw from the old history of the old statehood are currently being denied its sovereignty - and not only currently, this is kind of an ongoing trend starting in the early 2000s, where we are seeing infringement on their territorial sovereignty as well. So Ruth Deyermond, a political scientist, talked about this as a “dual sovereignty”, where Russia oscillates between Westphalian principles of territorial sovereignty and post-Soviet model of territorial sovereignty, where all the brotherly nations are kind of together, there are no really defined boundaries between us - why do we need boundaries if everyone lives happily ever after the socialism has collapsed and whatnot. Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, has joked at the presentation of awards of the Russian geographical society in 2016 that Russian borders do not end anywhere.

Russia is this endless, expansive space, geographically grounded in its state, in this kind of geography of an expansive region. We wrote the paper with Oleg Golubchikov trying to unpack these territorial imaginaries and we are trying to see how territory is created out of local experiences of indigenous peoples, nomadic communities, and the peasant communities as well, to describe a state territory of the state as massive, expansive, unlimited. Russian political geographers indeed, famously so, interpreted space of the state as infinite and the spatial bordering of that space is a foreign thing - that it's very borrowed from abroad, it's not the way that Russian society has evolved. There were various movements that we have explored. Slavophilism, Pochvennichestvo, “return to the native soil” movement. Eurasianism is probably the most known to us today because we talk about it a lot due to the invasion of Ukraine. But they all build on very different spatial imaginaries, and that would be soil or terrain or landscape or place – everything, but territory. There are multitude of spatial expressions of power by the Russian state, and for these, they are using different kind of local, indigenous practices, to legitimise those forms of expansionism. So, we look into the convergence of three different ontologies of territory: the first ontology - we call it an “ontology of commoning”, that is grounded in the experience of the Russian land commune and how the statist scholars went into the commune. That was a famous thing, going “*V Narod*”, into the people, analysing the commune and using those examples, those cases to talk about the expansionist nature of the old Slavic realm, where they own and share collectively rights to all Slavic land. The second ontology we describe as “ontology of assembling”, that comes from the ideas of Eurasianists, and that is very much grounded in the physical geographical traditions of terrain, talking about terrain and landscape as something that the state has sourced its territory out from. And Eurasianists, obviously, have used ideas of local nomadic communities, this whole “cult of nomadism” that Marlene Laruelle, a famous scholar on Eurasianism, talks about, got possessed by the cult of nomadism. They used it to describe the other form of expansionism, not so much Slavic and collective but more of the Eurasianist, you know, Asian-forward-looking form of expansionism. And then we talk about the third ontology, “ontology of peopling”, that is probably something that we are most familiar with. The ontology of the Soviet state projects of modernisation, where we moved people around to enforce boundaries, using border-making practices, they used people to enforce the boundary, to move people around, to rechart the frontiers of imperial expansive state in the Soviet modernisation practices and whatnot.



One thing that is really interesting to note is that those different territorial imaginaries are now coming back into the formal Russian foreign policy. And we see it's not only in this popular discourse and the bringing back of those geographical ideas of the “near-abroad”, the “third Rome”, the notorious “Russian world” - but we also see it in actual public decision-making as well. For example, the new Foreign Policy Concept that was just signed by Vladimir Putin in the end of March of this year. For the first time since its previous iteration, it talks about Russia's special position as a distinctive state civilisation and the vast Eurasian and Europacific power. And it also talks about wandering (joining) of the people of Russia in Eurasia together, to constitute this kind of civilisational unity of the Russian world. So, we are seeing those geographical imaginaries, not just being discussed by different scholars but also quite powerfully used in foreign policy agenda. It's pretty important to note as well.

[38:50] **Hanna Hilbrandt:** Thank you, that is really providing a very good first overview into this indeed very fascinating article, and just so people also find it - it appeared in the *Annals* and it's called ‘More-Than-State Ontologies of Territory’, and with this explained, I think the title is also becoming clearer. Before we move more deeply into these ontologies, I'd like to talk a bit about the epistemological project that is related to this. You also refer to this article in the context of the decolonial project to the centre debates, and in this case, also the context about territory. Could you spell out a bit more clearly what those colonial relations are, present colonial relations, what is at stake there when thinking about Russia?

[39:43] **Vera Smirnova:** I think, talking about decolonial scholarship in Russia, those two things just come with such a contradiction, because as a massive expansive empire, Russian scholars have never really questioned - I mean, they have questioned its colonial practices, but they haven't really unpacked the “decolonial” - is something that so many of us have trouble with today. Because many nations are trying to redefine their statehood, trying to bring back some form of sovereignty, especially with the war in Ukraine and whatnot. But there is just a lack of this decolonial discussion coming from Russia, coming from Russian in the central-statist kind of scholarship too. Many historians have argued about different forms of colonisation, that would be internal colonisation, right, where you look into the Russian peasants as the ones that have been colonised, but that has also been quite conflicting - we cannot equate the experiences of the Russian peasant and the indigenous people of Siberia, that would be a very different form of violence, performed against one another and we cannot collide them together. So Russian scholars have obviously had troubles trying to really redefine and talk about decolonisation and many just pretty much didn't do it. But what's interesting here and what we talk about in our paper is that the Russian state itself has successfully utilised a decolonial narrative, they essentially mobilised the language of decolonisation to talk about different forms of liberation from different kinds of abusive practices. For example in the early Soviet period, decolonisation was broadcast by the state as the undoing of the historical wrongdoings of the Russian imperial state. We are talking here about the Soviet Union portraying itself as an “empire of nations”, or “affirmative action empire” as to historians Terry Martin and Francine Hirsch talked about in their books. But in reality, those decolonial ideas were very much used to subject other peoples to its own forms of colonisation. The concept of Eurasia as well, was initially described as this liberty from the decolonial project that would bring together oppressed

nations of Asia and Europe and show them a better post-colonial future and whatnot. But in the 90s, Eurasia comes back as full-scale revisionist project of Russian imperialism. The restoration of the structure of Great Power, and the whole conceptual contribution of Neo-Eurasianism, with Aleksandr Dugin, one of the main proponents of Neo-Eurasianism, bringing back the hodge-podge of different geopolitical theories to justify other oppressive modes of colonisation and whatnot. So decolonial narrative has been hijacked by the state, successfully so, in order to promote its own form of decolonisation. But at the same time, now we are seeing not only the kind of come-back of decolonial narratives, in not so much scholarship but actual activism, ground-up activism, coming from different national republics in Russia, that are challenging the recent history. They are challenging Leninist nationality principles, that didn't define their nationhood in the right way, even though nationality was so crucial to the Soviet state, Stalinist deportations that disrupted their livelihoods, they are contesting Putin's different reforms that led to the recent federalization of Russia and denied their form of sovereignty as well. Different nations are searching for those lost territorial identities, sometimes they would be based on different physical geographical attributes, such as the people of the North or the people with the Volga region. Some of them are drawing back from experiences of their former territorial statehoods, for example, Tatarstan has asserted its independence from Russia in 1992, when statehood was denied. Or Republic of Tuva, formerly a part of China and formerly having its own form of statehood, obviously was consumed by Russia. Or other kinds of short-lived states that were there before the Russian colonization, like Idel Ural - the multi-nation state as well is trying to find its own kind of territorial statehood currently. Many of them have joined this forum of activists and scholars called the the Forum of people of post-Russia (The Free Nations of Russia forum). Really controversial one, with so many of those ideas (members) who are pretty radical, proposing to leave Russia entirely. Obviously, many of those organisations are banned in Russia and claimed as undesirable organisations and whatnot. We are seeing some interesting developments there right now. Therefore, there is some point to try to talk about Russia and post-colonisation and yet it's such a contested topic as well.

[45:59] **Markus Kip:** Could you also situate these in the context of the decolonial debates going on elsewhere in the world? In that article that we were already discussing you write that "thinking between the posts" - meaning the post-colonial and the post-Soviet analysis - has gained more attention. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you see the role or the place of Russia in contemporary decolonial debates?

[46:38] **Vera Smirnova:** It's important to think between the posts even more than what we are doing now. And we have some notable scholars like Madina Tlostanova, that is working with the leading post-colonial scholars too, together, to look into drawing different connections between post-colonial and post-socialist. Many of us question whether those connections need to be drawn or not.

But what's interesting to me especially bringing the discussion back to the idea of territory: we see a very developed project of decolonisation when it comes to territory coming from Latin American perspectives. And we see Latin American scholars decolonising the liberal-western Eurocentric idea of territory by looking into the various scholarly works talking about territory from a Latin American perspective, but mostly looking into territory as a form

of dwelling, as the form of shelter, as the form of just really pursuing basic life purposes, that the liberal idea of territory doesn't talk about at all.

So I think there is some parallel there with taking the Russian territorial imaginaries and divorcing them from all the statist interpretations and diving deeper into nomadic territorial interpretations, into peasant territorial interpretations, and reversing those, and comparing them, and drawing parallels with postcolonial scholarship especially coming from Latin America. And that's where I think such fruitful kind of space for debate is, because there is a lot there. We can talk about informality - it's definitely there. We can talk about fluidity of borders, for sure, it's there as well. And recent work on India and privatisation reforms in India by Thomas Cowan, he talks about how this bureaucracy is debated, negotiated, every single day as the land surveyors are driving around the land plots and just looking at where the boundaries are and how to draw them and who is right and who is wrong. This negotiation is taking place in Russia, too, not only in the national republics, right, but also in rural Russia as well. This constant redrawing the boundaries and preserving some kind of collectivist relations too, is one other feature that we can draw from Latin American societies for example in ejido communities in Mexico. Famously so, have been analysed as an antipole to the neoliberal idea of territory, where the land is still worked collectively, the same thing in Russia, in rural Russia. Alexander Vorbrugg does good work in talking about the collective relations in rural Russia that are not anymore legally binding, right, but they are still there. And some villagers would, for example, privatise land altogether, privately, but then they were still worked together. Or they would make an informal agreement with some other villagers, where one person owns the land, but the people work it together, even though there is no actual legal document that binds their agreement. So, collectivism, informality, the fluidity of boundaries, borders of property and territory can be one way to connect what's going on in post-Socialist debates, especially with Latin American pretty much well-developed scholarship. We are still kind of trying to make these connections.

[50:41] **Hanna Hilbrandt:** Thank you. And one of the things that I found very interesting is also that other parts of the world, the Anglo-American parts of the world, I spoke a lot of the time from Germany, I also try to make these connections and learn from those debates and go beyond Eurocentric understandings even within Europe. So thanks for that, that's also very interesting to me. But I'd like to return back to the ontologies of territory that you spelled out in your article, and we are particularly interested in the ontology of commoning and also its relation to modern projects of property. One of the things that I'm really curious about is how your understanding of commoning relates to or can be positioned within that context of serfdom and feudalism. So there seems to be a contradiction here that I'd like to learn more about. And then also what can be learned also from these debates about the *obshchina* and - I hope I pronounce that right - for debates about commoning in other parts of the world?

[51:46] **Vera Smirnova:** Yeah. I think there is a lot there in terms of looking at commoning maybe also kind of beyond *obshchina*, too, because it might also have negative connotations if we look into land collectivisation reforms, where commoning was portrayed as something similar to *obshchina* but in reality it was a very state-kind of appropriated idea where the state was calculating the amount of resources, the amount of land used, the amount of

produce the farms would produce as well. This ontology of commoning also has a fluid nature, it was indeed used by the state to attach people to the land. The same can be said about serfdom, as you mentioned Hanna, because some scholars of, notorious critics of the Russian land communes, have argued that indeed the peasants were forcefully attached to the land commune by the state, so that they would stop fleeing serfdom and their obligations. The commune was kind of engineered to attach peasants. It was done not only across Russia but for example the Cossack communities in the South of Russia and in Ukraine in Zaporizhzhia, they would also be attached to the land and given some form of common property along the boundaries of the Russian empire to “people” (populate) the boundary and defend the boundary and whatnot. So, there is a contradiction too. It can really be used - and I'm trying to be careful with over-romanticising the idea of commoning, because indeed throughout the Russian history, the state has successfully used the idea of commoning to impose its own practices of calculation and rational distribution of resources and whatnot. The state would also use different cases of Gulag imprisonment camps under Stalin's regime, that could also be described as commoning, right, where the prisoners collectively are cultivating the land and exploiting all those resources in Russia's resource frontiers in Siberia, in the North, and whatnot. So we should be very careful of not falling into the romantic kind of definition of commoning. But what we see as of today, in rural settings in particular, that commoning indeed creates such a space for escape - kind of stateless pockets - where different forms of collectives, different villages can actually escape kind of forced forms of privatisation that are forced upon them by the state. Many of them do not hold the title to the land, for example in some Russian summerhouses, some *dachas* are just ad-hoc constructed and don't have attached title to the land. Many of them occupy other peoples' land also illegally, and much of this is a verbal agreement and kind of negotiation on the ground, that takes place on the ground too. So, the preservation of collectivism as a means of survival is really strong, especially if you look into small-holder agriculture and small allotment plots, scattered all around rural Russia, we will see that they produce the majority of food in very sustainable ways that people still rely on in times of prolonged economic crisis. That could be said, there is some comparison probably with allotment gardens in Berlin, and related to your work, too, where commoning becomes this kind of tool for survival and basic kind of life purposes. So yes... It's important to stay critical still of this idea of commoning and how it's been used and to pursue different ideas.

[56:36] **Markus Kip:** Thank you. However, I would add, in your article you also come to talk about the progressive ends of re-conceptualising these ontologies of commoning, assembling and peopling. And you write "liberating them from statist appropriations". So maybe you want to unpack this a little bit for us, how these progressive ends are inherent in these notions. And then I also wonder - is this idea of redeeming the progressive ends also something that the early communists, following the Russian revolution have already attempted? And what do you plan to do?

[57:39] **Vera Smirnova:** For sure. I mean, maybe Kropotkin and Bakunin, many Russian anarchists, have been studying the peasant society and developing theories of anarchism. We have a very strong tradition of critical agrarian studies as well, we have Teodor Shanin and of course others that are talking about connecting different experiences of peasant

struggles, all across the world, in post-colonial and in post-Socialist countries as well. So, there is such a potential there, I think. And the critical agrarian studies have started really strong, talking about the land commune in particular, and talking about the state encroachment of the commune, and then of course extending that to understand struggles in rural Russia.

But often we see that the frames that are used for analysing that form of agrarian kind of peasant struggle today still draw from western kind of liberal understanding of a 'land grab'. A land grab, that is something big scale, has defined actors, has defined boundaries, it's usually a spectacular event that takes place at once - we know the land grab has happened and the land is being grabbed - it's done, the owners' hands have changed. But what we see if we look into that kind of - you know, the farmer, the rural life struggles today, they cannot be unpacked if you look at them through the lens of a "land grab". And many critical agrarian scholars have argued that yes indeed we need to find different ways of talking about that struggle, without falling into just another paper on land grabbing in Russia. Because that just kind of shifts the conceptual frameworks and distorts the reality. There is not a single massive land grab, it's a multi-layered, long-term, slow kind of process that just takes place via some extra-legal means, people are losing their land, sometimes they wake up in the morning and the land has been fenced with fences, and that would constitute some sort of land grab, but they don't know who did it, they don't know how it's been done, it's been done through some illegal means and we have seen some outcomes of this. For example, the so-called tractor march to Kremlin, they had maybe 60-90 tractors driving from Kuban' region in South of Russia to the Kremlin (and there is just one road that goes to Moscow), they headed to Moscow with posters and everything telling the current administration that the land has been stolen. And that's kind of how those agrarian struggles get into the newspaper, right, through these anecdotal examples of the tractor march.

But most often we don't see any tractor march, because often we see one encapsulated smallholder farm that has been occupied by the massive agro-industrial corporations without any prior notification, without any formal way of doing it, and we should be mindful trying to bring back and talk about critical agrarian studies, by still developing our own conceptual frameworks. Maybe this collaboration with different postcolonial peasant/farmer struggle examples too, which would probably present a more nuanced framework than looking simply at a land grab, kind of a lens or not. That's where we can build some collaboration with these other cases of peasant struggles. But indeed, the critical agrarian struggles have famously so used the examples of commoning to draw such connections and that has been fascinating to read and it's obviously most of it is written in Russian too, which is not translated. Which is another problem that we have, that much scholarship is not translated into English, it's not published in the leading English-speaking anglophone journals and that's where the lack of translation lies as well. That's why they cannot directly just collaborate with one another because scholarship from Latin America sometimes is also not translated and it takes a couple of scholars from the West, bringing them back and translating into English and that's probably not the right way of doing things but we have to find ways to collaborate across national boundaries and language barriers too.

[1:03:11] **Hanna Hilbrandt:** Yes, of course, language is certainly one crucial aspect of how the decolonial project and how to translate it into practice. And the point that I also wanted to pick up is this notion of taking things to Moscow... Because we want to speak a bit more about urban questions as well. So, reading through your work, we were wondering what place urbanisation dynamics have within these three ontologies. How do urbanisation questions change these ontologies, thinking through these ontologies, do they have at all any critical importance in them? What is the connection between urbanisation dynamics and these collectivist or autonomies that you are describing for the commune, for example, how can we think of them from the city?

[1:04:02] **Vera Smirnova:** I think elsewhere we would see that there is actually a lot of connection. But in Russian case, there is just a fascinating little bridge between deep rural Russia and the centre of Moscow that we can draw. And that would be the form of common property, collective property. And there is one case that is a little understudied, there are some scholars working on it, Guenola Inizan and Daria Volkova, currently writing about it as well. It's the case of the courtyards of the most known Soviet-era Khrushchevka houses, or not necessarily Khrushchevka houses but the block, multiple-story housing in particular. So, there we would have the courtyards of those houses, currently legally legitimately occupied by the owners of the apartments in those houses. So that is an example of those pockets of collective ownership that we need to really learn more about and it's not only us, as scholars, but also people who are the owners of that plot of land as well, most often they don't even realise that they have the shared collective ownership rights to their little courtyard, where they have, I don't know, some parking spots, some gardens, a couple of small children's playgrounds. Most often those people were assigned to own those collective plots initially when the houses were built and in particular in the Housing Code of Russia past 2005 most of the owners of those housing blocks became collective owners of the land in the courtyards. That means they had to acquire some sort of a passport to their land plot and not many of them did, not many of them even knew about it, and when they happened to know about it and they went into the archives and tried to retrieve those passports, many of them have found out that the land, their borders of the courtyard have changed quite significantly. There were a couple of waves of surveying of the collective land in Moscow and in other cities as well, and that's when the authorities have happened to reduce some of the collective land plots and sometimes, by 35 or 40%, the land plots were cut and the landowners themselves did not even know about it because they did not possess the passport that would tell them how much land and where they actually collectively share. So when the people would go back to the different registries and update the passport they would find out that there are some projects, some huge projects on, I don't know, building a small shopping centre, already approved in the land plots that they actually own collectively. So here, we don't only have small pockets of collectivism, still there, on the paper, but sometimes people are not aware of it but they are legally there, those small kinds of urban commons, and yet the fuzzy boundaries are still there as well because they don't really know where the boundaries start and where they end. If we go back to the Housing code of 2005, we will find out that the boundaries have changed quite significantly, it's extremely challenging to fight against those recent changes, right, most often you would see that some construction companies are already building something on the land that they (people)



collectively own, and so most of them are losing the battle of trying to roll back those changes and to claim them as illegal. So that kind of struggle between collective and the private is actually taking place in the centres of cities right now. So that's kind of a little bridge that we can draw from the experiences of collective land ownership in rural Russia to the struggles in the cities, too.

[1:08:46] **Hanna Hilbrandt:** Thank you. That's really enlightening as well.

[1:08:52] **Markus Kip:** So last but not least, you've also spoken - or you have written - in your article from the commune to the borderless world, that was last year, about the links between your re-reading of territorial conceptions to today's context, particularly the invasion of Ukraine. So, could you maybe elaborate on this a little bit for us? The ongoing influence of these three traditions, these three ontologies, in today's Russian society and politics and how that illuminates the current geopolitical strategy of Russia?

[1:09:45] **Vera Smirnova:** I think that's - sadly so, but it is in this case, where all the ontologies clearly come together. We started writing the paper way before the invasion. And it happened to be published after it had started. So, we had to address this question as well, it's all in the paper in the analysis. But in Ukraine, particularly, we see the acquisition of land kind of as a resource, as "property", but also land as "territory", play in parallel to one another. So, we see that taking the land as "property", agricultural land as kind of a resource, is detrimental to Russia's agenda for expanding its agricultural frontiers. Russian administration has claimed famously, recently so, that they are going to utilise all that unused, depleted land, to really make Russia the global grain basket, right, and they talked about millions of hectares now being utilised again in the next couple of decades. And of course, the land grab in Ukraine shows that kind of pursuit too. And also, the acquisition of land as "territory" plays a crucial role, especially if you look into popular discourse, right, talking about perception - this porosity of boundaries - between Russia and Ukraine. We have seen this obscure map being shown on all of the Russian state televisions that Ukraine doesn't actually have its own territorial sovereignty, right, it's a very interesting map, it shows those territories of Ukraine as cut into pieces, with each piece being a gift to Ukraine by Lenin or Khrushchev, or who else... And the Russians have ours. Therefore, completely denying the sovereignty of a sovereign state, which Ukraine is. So, we see these two things come in parallel. At the same time, we also see just the massive landgrab, right, across territories that Russia has currently annexed and that comprise about 20% of Ukraine's total farmland, that is really substantial, because Ukraine's farm industry contributes to about 22% of its GDP as well. Grabbing onto that land really undermines their common in long-term. So we see that most of the annexed republics, Donetsk and Luhansk, have seen different nationalisation laws implemented, where the land was already nationalised by the Russian state, to kind of preserve the national property, by expropriating that land from its former owners, that are Ukrainian citizens. We saw the same happen in 2014, in Crimea, where there were about 15 different resolutions of land nationalisation was taking place across Crimean peninsula, where most of the Ukrainian citizens were not allowed to own the land there anymore. Particularly, there was a degree passed and signed by the president of the Russian Federation that would put the entire territory of Crimea in the list of border areas, where foreign citizens are not allowed to own the land at all, that would be only

Russian citizens or people with a Russian passport would be allowed to own that land. So, we see about 4000 land plots all across Crimea have been already appropriated, right, obviously by different elites and whatnot, and that would be some national protection sites and some ancient wineries. We see this kind of extra-legal landgrab. And we also see land abandonment, the same as what we see in Russia, in particular, but obviously at a much larger and more violent scale. We see that most regions that Russians have retreated from has brought about destruction of all of the farming sector completely. Around Kyiv for example, the Ukrainian government has estimated that about 30% of farms fields around Kyiv still have mines scattered around them, which obviously means that they are going to stay empty and not used for years and years to come. And other farmland that was once the most productive agricultural land in Ukraine also have scattered mines and destroyed equipment therefore leaving that land fallow for many years to come. So land abandonment and also just extra-legal land acquisition kind of goes hand in hand here as well. And in particular I think the three ontologies - ontologies of commoning, assembling, and peopling, can help us to understand how this invasion has been kind of explained to the Russian public, juggling different geographic imaginaries and talking about the commonship and the brotherhood of the Ukrainian and the Russian people, and the porosity of the borders, and the massive Eurasianist project too, that was a huge contribution to legitimising the invasion to most of the Russian public. We have seen as Aleksandr Dugin talking about, trying to legitimise the full-scale invasion of Ukraine using Eurasianist ideas. So, all this kind of comes to life, really, not only in public and popular discourse but also in formal foreign policy as well and also on the ground as we see some land being nationalised and some land being intentionally left destroyed and unused and in the future years to come. So that's kind of a sad application of those ontologies that we have extracted from Russian political geography.

[1:16:36] **Hanna Hilbrandt:** Yes, sad and on a more positive note, it's also a very positive or good example of how conceptual thinking helps us understand contemporary development better. And I think it's also been a very good example of how widening conceptual thinking geographically to other parts of the world and kind of excavating their different conceptual understandings of property and territory is also so enriching to think these together. Not only across the posts but also different parts of the world. Thank you so much for that - I've learned an incredible amount of new worlds. Thanks Vera.

[1:17:14] **Vera Smirnova:** Thank you so much for asking such engaging questions.

[1:19:30] **Outro:** Thank you for listening. For more information, visit our website [urbanpolitical.podigy.io](http://urbanpolitical.podigy.io). Please subscribe and follow us on twitter.