

From Post-Socialist Cities to Smart Urban Futures: Implementing the ‘Right to the City’ in Ukraine

Oleg Khalabudenko, PhD, Assoc. Professor¹ (ORCID: 0000-0001-9478-0164),
Kateryna Nechyporenko, bacher student¹ (ORCID: 0009-0002-0035-4987)

¹ Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture, Ukraine

SUMMARY

The city is a space of social interaction that is in a constant state of change. In the current phase, urban development is described by the concept of the ‘right to the city’. The article examines some of the issues that arise in the implementation of this concept in the practice of urban life, using the example of Ukrainian cities. First and foremost, the article addresses the issue of active participation of city dwellers in the transformation processes of urban space. In this context, certain forms (‘ways’) of realization of the ‘right to the city’ are considered, namely: participation, creation of a ‘smart city’ with the help of digital technologies, creation of ‘cluster’ cities. The analysis of the materials allows us to conclude that the practical implementation of the concept of the ‘right to the city’ is at the same time a form of urban social activism aimed at creating a decent life for every citizen.

Keywords: Right to the City, Citizen Participation, Smart Cities, Sustainable Urban Development, Post-Socialist Cities

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern cities foster social interaction, economic growth, and cultural exchange but also face issues like unequal resource access, limited community influence, and urban commercialization. The 1960s concept of the “right to the city” addresses these challenges by promoting a holistic view of urban life that includes social, economic, and cultural aspects, emphasizing dynamic, resident-driven processes beyond traditional planning [1].

2. THE PURPOSE OF THE THESIS

The aim of the article is to examine how the concept of the “right to the city” can be implemented in the practise of urban life - especially in Ukrainian and post-socialist cities- by analysing mechanisms such as citizen participation, smart city technologies, sustainable urban development and legal frameworks. It will show how these tools can strengthen urban democracy, ensure equitable access to urban resources and support the creation of inclusive, environmentally conscious and socially just cities.

3. KEY CASE STUDIES OF RIGHT TO THE CITY IN POST-SOCIALIST CITIES

Key case studies of the "Right to the City" in post-socialist cities reveal complex transitions as these cities navigate legacies of socialist urban planning and neoliberal market forces, which shape residents' ability to exercise urban rights and reshape their environments.

Post-socialist cities show a hybrid status where socialist urban fabric continues to shape social life and spatial divisions. Citizens struggle to reclaim public space and exercise urban rights amidst privatization and neoliberal pressures that fragment the city and limit civic participation. The socialist imprint inhibits development of civic attitudes and entitlement to urban space, while new capitalist forces bring challenges such as privatization and exclusion of marginalized groups. The right to the city here involves contesting neoliberal urbanization and reclaiming access and control over public spaces [2].

Cities undergo reforms marked by housing and land privatization, leading to increased socio-spatial inequalities.

The introduction of market mechanisms creates rent gaps and drives spatial restructuring, sometimes displacing less affluent groups. Urban governance becomes reactive to capital interests, often undermining social citizenship rights related to housing and public services. Post-socialist cities differentiate between "clone cities" (those mimicking neoliberal Western models) and more informal "wild cities" with organic, often unregulated development. The right to the city includes the capacity of local populations to resist market-driven displacements and assert social inclusion within urban transformations [3].

In some post-socialist cities, culture-led urban regeneration initiatives have been used to reclaim and redefine urban spaces, promoting community-based participation and creativity as expressions of the right to the city. These efforts highlight how the right encompasses cultural and symbolic dimensions along with material and political claims [4].

Post-socialist cities face tensions between economic stabilization and political legitimacy, affecting how urban citizenship and participation rights develop. The authoritarian socialist legacy often restricts residents' political agency and complicates inclusive urban governance [5].

These cities exemplify the "Right to the City" as a struggle to reclaim public spaces, resist exclusionary neoliberal policies, and promote democratic participation amid socialist planning legacies and new market forces, making them unique sites for social justice and spatial rights debates.

Post-socialist cities are not just sites of transition but laboratories where socialist legacies and neoliberal transformations intersect. The “Right to the City” here goes beyond access to space, encompassing collective efforts to reclaim public goods, resist exclusion, and foster democratic participation. These cases highlight the need for stronger legal frameworks, inclusive governance, and culture-led regeneration, offering valuable lessons for advancing urban justice and guiding cities toward more equitable, participatory, and socially sustainable futures.

4. FROM SMART CITIES TO THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: UKRAINE'S FIRST STEPS

The 'right to the city' means people have the right to live in and actively shape the city. A city for people promotes comfortable living by increasing pedestrian zones, bicycle infrastructure, and reducing car use. Environmental inclusion lowers pollution and boosts social interaction, enhancing residents' well-being. Today, this concept serves as a tool to fight for fair urban space distribution.

In this regard, we believe it is important to consider ways of implementing the 'right to the city'. One approach is participation: the active involvement of citizens in decision-making processes that affect their lives. In Ukraine, this practice remains underdeveloped, although digital technologies are opening up new opportunities for public participation [6].

The 'smart city' concept applies digital technologies to improve urban infrastructure efficiency, including automated transport, smart lighting, citizen-authority platforms, and eco-friendly solutions, affecting cities' social structures. Kyiv Smart City (2015–2020) showcased this with projects like the Kyiv Card, online appointments, open data portals, electronic queues, video surveillance, and petition systems, later replaced by the Kyiv Digital app.[7].

Another important aspect of modern urban planning is sustainable urban development. Environmental pollution, overpopulation and transport issues require environmentally friendly solutions, such as the '15-minute city' concept, which involves creating conditions where all necessary services are within walking distance [8].

Modern Ukrainian cities struggle with limited green spaces, chaotic development, unequal transport access, and low public involvement in planning. A major challenge to realizing the "right to the city" is the lack of effective citizen participation, causing conflicts and social inequality. Urban policies often favor commercial interests, worsening the housing crisis and rent increases.

Kyiv's example shows how a lack of effective public control mechanisms can lead to chaotic development, the commercialisation of public spaces and transportation problems. At the same time, however, city residents are increasingly organising to defend their rights, particularly through targeted protests and initiatives to protect green spaces [9]. Activism in cities is becoming an increasingly important part of civil society as residents realise that their quality of life depends on their participation in urban development. The struggle for the right to the city encompasses not only protests, but also the creation of new models of coexistence, such as public spaces, social cooperatives, and mutual aid initiatives.

The right to the city implies fair use of the city in accordance with the principles of sustainable development, democracy, equality and social justice. It is a collective right that encompasses all civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. Therefore, the 'right to the city' is not just a declaration, but a real mechanism for shaping a dignified urban life. It is an idea that requires action from both local authorities, who must ensure fair access to resources, and citizens, who must participate actively and take responsibility.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The transition from post-socialist urban realities to a smart urban future in Ukraine shows that the "right to the city" is a practical tool for creating more equitable, inclusive, and

sustainable cities. Post-socialist cities face tensions between inherited spatial structures, neoliberal forces, and democratic aspirations, which create opportunities for innovation. Citizen participation, smart technologies, and sustainability models can reshape governance, improve public access, and strengthen civic engagement. Initiatives like Kyiv Smart City and the "15-minute city" model are early steps toward balancing digital transformation with social justice and environmental goals. However, challenges like unequal access, weak participation, and commercial dominance require stronger legal and institutional frameworks. Ultimately, implementing the "right to the city" demands coordinated efforts by local authorities, civic groups, and residents to create democratic urban spaces where social justice, sustainability, and cultural vitality reinforce each other.

Sources and literature

- [1] Ray Hutchison, Right to the City. In: Encyclopedia of Urban Studies <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412971973.n238>
- [2] Kamil Rusiłowicz. Who Has the Right to the Post-Socialist City? Writing Poland as the Other of Marxist Geographical Materialism// European journal of American studies, 10-3 | 2015 <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.11260>
- [3] Alexandra Sandu. The post-socialist cities from Central and Eastern Europe: Between spatial growth and demographic decline Urban Studies Volume 61, Issue 5, April 2024, Pp. 821-837. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231189261>
- [4] Nicolae Popa, Ana-Maria Pop, Alexandra-Camelia Marian-Potra. Culture-led urban regeneration in post-socialist cities: From decadent spaces towards creative initiatives// Cities, Volume 158, 2025, 105707, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2025.105707>.
- [5] Kinossian, N. (2022). Rethinking the post-socialist city. Urban Geography, 43(8), 1240–1251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2102332>
- [6] Право на місто: що таке партисипація. Cedos. Блоги. 10.06.2019. URL: <https://sal0.li/0F020d2> (дата звернення: 24.09.2025).
- [7] Kyiv Digital app: the smart way to access urban services
- [8] Project: creating the Kyiv Digital app to improve access to city services URL: <https://worldcitiescultureforum.com/city-project/kyiv-digital/>
- [9] Szulc Anna. City Development Concepts as a Response to the Current Challenges Cities Face// BIBLIOTEKA REGIONALISTY (REGIONAL JOURNAL), 22 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.15611/br.2022.1.11> (дата звернення: 24.09.2025).
- [10] Право на місто. Киянам катастрофічно не вистачає місць для прогулянок. TEXTY.ORG.UA. URL: <https://lnk.ua/ANDZxGaex> (дата звернення: 24.09.2025).