

Spatial Factors of Conflict Potential in the Use of Urban Symbolic Geopolitical Capital in Russia

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Abstract—The purpose of the work is to identify spatial factors of conflict potential in the use of urban symbolic geopolitical capital in Russia, which is understood here as a set of accumulated geopolitical meanings (connotations) of the city, territories and individual places. The symbolic resources of the environment, namely, urban signs or symbol carriers have unique properties that give an advantage to the actors of symbolic politics who use them in the competitive struggle. The meanings, values and emotions that these symbols and signs are endowed with can have both positive and negative connotations in the perceptions of different groups. The same symbol (historical person or event) can have opposite connotations in different places. These features are actively used in symbolic politics at different spatial levels. Out of more than a hundred cases of modern conflicts using geopolitical symbols and memorial signs dedicated to them in Russian cities collected from media materials, 20 were analyzed in the work with a special methodology, relating to the symbols of the pre-socialist era and the period of the Civil War and foreign intervention of 1917–1922. The work presents an analysis of the significance of various local geopolitical symbols and signs for the formation of geopolitical symbolic capital and its use in modern Russian urban and regional symbolic policy both in constructive and creative practice, and in conflicted interactions and even destructive practices. It is concluded that location changes the substance of conflict over local geopolitical symbols and signs in accordance with the following factors: confinement of events associated with the symbol to the place; presence and features of settlement pattern of conflicting identities/social groups associated with the symbol; characteristics of public exposure and potential audience reach; competitiveness of the place; hierarchy of locations; spatial structure of ownership, and relations with regards to power and influence.

Keywords: symbolic politics, critical geopolitics, urban conflicts, identity, politics of memory

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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing geopolitical reconfiguration of the world over the past four decades, which has accelerated sharply in the last decade, is pushing not only states and their associations, but also individual regions within states, political parties and other political actors to reconsider their geopolitical identity (Gadzhiev, 2011; Grebnev, 2023; Shevchenko, 2019). Some politicians and experts even call for “overcoming the identity crisis” in this regard. (Zhade, 2013, p. 141). The revision of geopolitical self-identification and the formation of a new identity also occur at the level of social groups and individuals (Zhade, 2011). It is precisely at this level that mass support bases are shaped for the bearers of all higher hierarchical levels of geopolitical identity, therefore the struggle of political institutions for influence at this level inevitably intensifies with the growth of “geopolitical turbulence.”

A significant role in all periods of such growth has been played by the resource provided by urban sym-

bolic geopolitical capital (Forest and Johnson, 2011; Mokhov, 2011).¹ In previous works, the author discussed in detail the structure and properties of urban symbolic geopolitical capital (USGC), defining it as a set of geopolitical meanings (connotations) of the city, its territories and individual places accumulated in society (Aksenov, 2024). The significance of urban symbolic capital in comparison with non-urban (rural, peripheral, territorial, etc.) is also substantiated there: the former, as a rule, acts as the core for the emergence and further spatial diffusion of geopolitical innovations, which is actively facilitated by the USGC resources (Aksenov, 2024; Aksenov and Andreev, 2021).

As Fedotova (2018) points out, the accumulation of symbolic capital of a place is the production of mean-

¹ It is enough to recall the very costly, geopolitically motivated periods of vigorous “monumental propaganda,” or waves of internationalization-deinternationalization of urban toponymy in Russia and the Soviet Union (Aksenov, 2024; Aksenov and Gres, 2023).

ings of territorial connotations, where elements of the local place environment acquire new or additional meaning, both for local and external audiences. Importantly, such new or additional meaning can be given not only by elements of symbolic capital of exclusively local origin (such as local historical facts, elements of the local environment or characters unknown in the outside world, imbedded in the geopolitical context), but also by special local interpretations of well-known phenomena (real or fictional geopolitical events, achievements of various historical figures, etc.).

Thus, the dissemination of the image of Alexander the Great associated with geopolitics in the international material culture, and the fixation of his name in numerous local toponyms are widely known (Denisov, 2019; Postnikov, 2006). In various cities around the world, purely local objects and myths that use his name become specific elements of the symbolic capital of the place (see, e.g., (Alieva, 2022; Akhunov, 2007)). In this connection, by local geopolitical symbol we will understand both interpretations of purely local events and persons, and special local interpretations of well-known phenomena of geopolitical origin.

The construction of geopolitical images of a territory is a field of struggle and competition between social, professional and political groups (Abashev, 2015; Aksenov and Andreev, 2021; Flint, 2012). A significant body of work is devoted to open forms of such struggle, such as urban conflicts (Galustov, 2016; Medvedev, 2017, 2019; Tykanova, 2013), which we will view here in the broadest possible terms as a clash of opposing interests, goals, views, ideologies of individuals, social groups and classes in the urban space (Dementyeva, 2013). It is precisely contemporary conflicts using the USGC that will be the focus of this study, as the most socially significant manifestations of the use of geopolitical symbols in urban politics.

Can it be argued, however, that if there is a significant social conflict, the geopolitical symbols that caused it are clearly negative for the given place and in themselves require a special regime for regulating their public treatment, up to and including the often practiced prohibitions of use? Letnyakov argues that if a confrontation over historical (including geopolitical—*K.A.*) symbols occurs within a common symbolic space, and discussions are conducted about the national past, then memorial conflicts and discussions often have a constructive rather than destructive impact on society. One may agree with his approach, according to which "...the historical memory of society must be presented not as a single, consistent narrative, but as a set of narratives that constantly challenge each other. From this point of view, memorial conflicts, disputes over the interpretation of certain historical events, the concept of teaching history, the demolition/installation of monuments seem to be a natural part of the discussions that take place in the

public sphere of any democratic society" (Letnyakov, 2022, pp. 46–47). According to him, "rewriting history" is a normal process of society revising its ideas about itself, which can occur due to generational shifts, ideological transformations, the growth of cultural diversity, etc. (Letnyakov, 2022). Below we use this approach as part of the conceptual and methodological apparatus of the study.

If meanings are a priori abstract and exist only in the minds of people physically located anywhere, then the city is not only and not so much an ideal but a material substance, which is localized and quite steadily connected to a specific place on the surface of the Earth. How do material and non-material components of the USGC relate?

The intangible component of the USGC includes the symbols and meanings themselves: assessments of the significance and interpretation of geopolitical events, personalities, etc. The main goal of the symbolic policy of various social entities is to consolidate their version of such assessment and interpretation as dominant (Malina, 2019; Malina and Miller, 2021). Numerous studies show that urban signs or urban carriers of symbols (such as monuments, museums, memorial sites, toponymy, urban holidays, and public rituals) are very helpful in achieving such dominance (Aksenov, 2024; Aksenov and Andreev, 2021; Forest and Johnson, 2011; Mokhov, 2011).

Such carriers should be separated from ideal symbols and meanings and perceived as a resource for use by real and potential actors in sociopolitical processes (Eisenstadt and Schluchter, 1998; Fedotova, 2018; Rossiya ..., 2000). Without their use, it is extremely difficult and much less effective to convey one's position to society, mobilize supporters, and, with the help of symbolic politics, turn the symbolic capital of the city into political dividends by establishing and consolidating the dominance of one's interpretation of geopolitical events and phenomena (Gelman, 2003; Malinova, 2019; Potseluev, 1999).

This is due to the fact that material urban signs have a number of unique advantages over other signs as a resource for symbolic politics (for more details, see (Aksenov, 2024)). Therefore, clarifying the definition of Malinova (2019), we note that symbolic politics is the production of ways of interpreting social reality and the struggle for their dominance, including the production of symbolic resources, i.e. signs (especially urban ones) suitable for the "correct" interpretation. And the manifestation and "appropriation" by the actor of certain interpretations through the production of the material carrier of the symbol, its nomination or renomination, becomes an important contribution to achieving such dominance (Krzyżanowska, 2016).

The meanings, values and emotions that these symbols and signs are endowed with can thus have both positive and negative connotations in the perceptions of different groups; the same symbol (historical

person or event) can have opposite connotations in different places and in different periods. Not only individual social groups, but also various cities and even regions are competing for the right to be a symbolic center for the “dissemination” of one or another “positive” geopolitical symbol. There is even a struggle for the right to become the center of lower levels of the hierarchy in order to more effectively “monetize” the symbol: factual or mythological proof of a closer connection of a given symbol with a specific city or place compared to other locations provides additional advantages in such competition.

Thus, in relation to the symbolic figure of Genghis Khan, Mongolia and Ulaanbaatar have become an undoubted center of the highest order: they have the world’s largest museums and memorials in his honor, the largest number of toponyms, public and commercial objects bearing his name and, obviously, receiving additional dividends from this. However, in Russia, a number of regions and cities associated with the history of the Genghis Khan’s geopolitical activities are competing for leadership at a lower (intra-Russian) level. A number of commercial facilities bear the name of Genghis Khan in Ulan-Ude, the first monument to Genghis Khan in Russia was erected in Kalmykia, and beer under the Genghis Khan brand is produced by regional companies with different transcriptions of his name in Ulan-Ude, Chita, and Abakan. We will call this phenomenon the factor of confinement of events to a place, or connectivity with it.

At the same time, the “war of monuments” that has unfolded in the world in recent decades on geopolitical issues (decommunization, decolonization, anti-racism, etc.), emphasizes the importance of this element of symbolic urban capital not only for local but also international politics, on the one hand, and demonstrates the importance of both positive and negative interpretations for political competition, on the other. The latter statement is true for urban symbolic politics at any level of spatial hierarchies (Chikhichin, 2006).

All actors in such a struggle, regardless of the “sign” of the connotation of symbols used, are capable of demonstrating, according to Malinova, the practice of “cunning adaptation” and “doublethink” to achieve their goals. This practice, in particular, fits in well with the strategy of “political use of the past,” often incorrectly interpreted as “memory policy” (Malinova, 2019; Malinova and Miller, 2021).

Thus, memorial iconographic figures of Columbus, Lenin or Zhukov may act as positive symbols for some historical conditions, locations and/or political groups, and as purely negative symbols for others. As we know from practice, the “sign” of such an assessment depends on a specific combination of the mentioned variables: time (historical period), place and political actor-interpreter. These features are actively used in symbolic politics on geopolitical issues at different spatial levels, causing conflict interactions.²

This paper presents an analysis of the significance of various geopolitical symbols for the formation of geopolitical symbolic capital and its use in contemporary Russian urban and regional symbolic policy both in constructive, creative practice and, to a greater extent, in conflict interactions and even destructive practices. The aim of the work is to identify the spatial features of the practice and results of using various local elements of urban geopolitical symbolic capital in the Russian Federation. The main object of our research is urban signs or carriers of symbols.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Of the four types of urban signs (symbol carriers) identified by experts, namely, *material* (everything that is expressed in material structures), *discursive* (manifested in public discourses), *iconographic* (persons symbolic for the city),³ and *behavioral* (various types of socially significant events) (Nas et al., 2006), we will be interested, first of all, in what is fixed in *material urban signs* (MUS). Special properties that material urban signs possess in comparison with other types of symbols (duration of existence, anchoring in the fabric of the city; fixing the idea of the legitimacy of the symbol; anchoring “normal,” “comfortable” and positive perception; the previously mentioned special means of political maneuver) are described in detail in (Aksenov, 2024). Thanks to these properties, it is the material urban signs that form the basis of the city’s symbolic capital.

Out of the entire variety of MUS types (Abashev, 2015; Aksenov, 2024; Britvin et al., 2020) we have selected outdoor monuments for this analysis: monuments, busts, free-standing or associated with other objects memorial signs, and memorial plaques. Other types of MUS (toponymy and onomastics, special objects and structures, monumental artistic creativity, etc.) due to the limited format of the article are left out and deserve separate consideration (see, e.g., (Aksenov, 2020; Aksenov and Yaralyan, 2012)).

For this work, in defining “geopolitical” it is appropriate to use the approach of the school of critical geopolitics that emphasizes the importance of the mental. Flint understands geopolitics as consisting of: (1) practices and manifestations of territorial strategies in relation to statehood, (2) ideological constructions and other concepts of worldview, (3) ideas about territory and control over it by any subject of social relations, (4) practices of defining relations regarding power in space using semantics and rhetoric (Flint, 2012). We will look for these components in modern practices of symbolic politics in relation to the inter-

² For examples of such conflicts over material urban signs, grouped according to various geopolitical areas (see (Aksenov, 2024; Aksenov and Andreev, 2021)).

³ In this work, the term “iconographic” and its derivatives are used strictly in this connotation.

Table 1. Monument to Yermak in Tyumen: composition and goals of the conflict actors

Actor	Actor 1 Regional and local authorities	Actor 2 Cossack organizations, Russian Orthodox Church	Actor 3 Siberian Tatars
What symbol is associated with the sign for the actor?	Pioneer, historical figure, national symbol of Russia	A cult figure, a Russian Orthodox pioneer, “the unifier of the Siberian peoples”	Conqueror, robber, plunderer, humiliation of the Tatars, symbol of discord
The actor’s goal in relation to the sign	To immortalize the nationwide symbol in the form of a memorial sign (if not a monument). Secure the symbol as Tyumen’s <i>genius loci</i> . Prevent social tensions	Representation of the period of conquest of Siberia and consolidation of the necessary “markers” and landmarks in public memory; fix a national symbol in the monument	Prevent the installation of a monument as a symbol of discord
Has the actor’s goal been achieved during the conflict?	No	Partially (monument—no, cross—yes)	Yes

S.D. Dorofeev took part in the collection and initial processing of data for this case.
Compiled by the author.

pretations of geopolitical events and persons of only two periods in Russian history: pre-socialist (before 1917) and the Civil War and foreign intervention of 1917–1922.⁴

For this work, in the course of collective research projects under the supervision of the author with the participation of students of the Geo-Urban Studies Master’s program of St. Petersburg State University and the Graduate School of Urban Studies at the HSE, Moscow, in 2023, data were collected on all cases of conflict interactions in the post-Soviet period based on publications in Russian electronic media (the blogosphere was used only as reference material) regarding the installation of new monuments in the post-Soviet period.⁵ From more than a hundred cases recorded and described using a single methodology, 20 of the most representative ones that meet the above-mentioned criteria were selected for this work.

The methodology of description contained a general description of the case, an analysis of the composition and goals of the actors in the conflict/symbolic politics, a detailed description of the course of the conflict/discussion, and a recording of the results. Each of the collected facts was supported by a corresponding link to a media publication; qualitative assessments of the goals and positions of the actors were, where possible, supported by quotes from their public statements.

As an example of the applied methodology used to analyze each of the 20 cases summarized below, we

present the materials collected for the case of the Yermak monument in Tyumen. Omitting the general description (it is basically duplicated in Tables 1 and 2), we present the data grouped according to the standard methodology used.

Actor 1 Position: Regional and Local Authorities

From the letter, outgoing No. 94 of January 30, 2003 to No. 107-zh of January 24, 2003 by the head of the Department of Architecture and Urban Development Policy, S.N. Leskov, “On the monument of ‘Yermak the Conqueror of Siberia,’” to the Archbishop Tobolsky and Tyumensky Dmitry: “The Department of Architecture and Urban Development Policy of the oblast administration supports the idea of installing a monument to *Yermak the Conqueror of Siberia* in the city of Tyumen, placing it in Yermak Square (near the regional museum of local history); this information has been forwarded to the oblast administration, where a decision on this issue will be taken in the near future.”⁶

Deputy governor Natalia Shevchik: “The monument to Yermak will reflect not so much the 400-year history of cooperation between peoples, but rather the moment of conquest and confrontation between different cultures. The most optimal solution may be for the city administration, which is responsible for this issue, to announce a competition for a design of a sculpture group dedicated to the founders of the city.”⁷

⁴ The methodology for determining geopolitical markers is described in detail in (Aksenov, 2024; Aksenov and Gres, 2023).

⁵ The only exception is the monument to Yermolov in Grozny, which is included in the analysis as an antithesis to the results of similar cases in other regions of the Russian Federation.

⁶ https://ruskline.ru/analitika/2013/07/10/istoriya_poruganiya_poklonnogo_kresta_ermaku_vasiliiyu_timofeevichu_s_tovariwi_v_tyumeni/ (date of access March 10, 2023).

⁷ <https://www.pravda.ru/culture/36646-ermak/> (date of access March 11, 2023).

Table 2. Monument to Yermak in Tyumen: the course of the conflict

Phase	Date	Actions of actor 1: regional and local authorities	Actions of actor 2: Cossack organizations, Russian Orthodox Church	Actions of actor 3: Siberian Tatars, national associations
Pre-conflict: setting up a cross	December 6, 1992	Permission to install a memorial cross	Installation of a memo- rial Worship Cross and an obelisk with the inscription at the central location on the History Square: “To Yermak and his comrades. Descendants of the Cossacks”	
Conflict 1: The stone broken, cross damaged	1993–1994		Restored by the Cos- sacks, blessed by the Patriarch	
Conflict 2: Attempt to replace the cross with a monument	Autumn 2002	The line committee approved and proposed to erect a new monu- ment on History Square	Proposal to erect a full- fledged monument to Yermak in Tyumen	Protest against the installation of the mon- ument
	2003	Refusal to allow instal- lation of a monument on History Square		
	2001–2010	Three attempts to remove or move the Cross under the pretext of restoration and improvement of the park	Cossacks and city resi- dents thwarted the administration’s plans	
	2019		Fundraising for the reconstruction of the Worship Cross and its implementation	
Conflict 3: Attempt to change the location of the monument	2015	The line committee is in favor, the city council is against	Initiative to install a monument to Yermak in a remote location	Protests against the installation of the mon- ument
	December 2022	A monument to the “Legendary Cossack pioneers of Siberia” without Yermak’s name was erected at a periph- eral location with gov- ernment money		

S.D. Dorofeev took part in the collection and initial processing of data for this case.

Compiled by the author based on materials from the following websites: <https://tumentoday.ru/2019/09/08/v-tyumeni-vosstanovlen-pamyatnik-atamanu-ermaku/> (accessed on March 12, 2023); <https://park72.ru/culture/99776/?ysclid=lgouo1u676444492885> (accessed on March 12, 2023); https://ruskazaki.ru/news/culture/kazaki_organizovali_sbor_sredstv_na_vosstanovlenie_pamyatnika_atamanu_ermaku_v_tyumeni/ (accessed on March 12, 2023); <https://www.tumen.kp.ru/online/news/5069848/> (accessed on March 12, 2023).

Actor 2 position: Yermak Timofeyevich Foundation, the Cossacks

The inscription on the memorial sign laid for the 410th anniversary of the Siberian Cossack Army on December 6, 1992, by the Cossacks from the Tyumensky Union of Cossacks first read: “To Yermak and his comrades. Descendants of the Cossacks. December 6, 1992”; after the reconstruction of the monument: “Eternal memory to Yermak and his comrades. Descendants of the Cossacks. December 6, 1992.”⁸

The Tyumensky Cossack Union of the Union of Cossacks of Russia has established a tradition of Cossack initiation at this Worship Cross as a “symbol of the revival of the former glory of the Russian state, the birth and revival of the traditions of the Russian Cossacks, the revival of Orthodox traditions, the restoration of historical truth.”⁸

Actor position 3: Siberian Tatars

Appeal from the Tatar community of the city and Tyumen district:

“We believe that the monument will become a wedge driven between Russians and Tatars in Tyumen oblast. It will remind every Tatar that he has been humiliated, conquered and that the constitutional principle of equality of peoples is nothing more than a bluff...”⁹

Cited in Table 2, this case shows, in particular, that the same symbol and the sign associated with it could generate several phases and even separate conflicts. The parties to conflict interactions could consist of several interest groups; in the process of conflict interaction their positions could change. All this was also characteristic of other studied cases.

All geopolitical events and persons selected for further analysis are regionally specific, that is, they are somehow connected with the city/territory where their commemoration was carried out or planned in the form of the installation of a memorial sign in their honor. And the fact that there was a significant public conflict in the selected cases covered in the media regarding a specific material urban symbolic object allows us to assert that people endow this place, associated with the geopolitical symbol in question and the corresponding MUS, with meaning, value, and emotion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3 presents significant examples of conflicting symbolic politics regarding memorial signs dedicated

⁸ https://ruskline.ru/analitika/2013/07/10/istoriya_poruganiya_poklonnogo_kresta_ermaku_vasiliyu_timofeevichu_s_tovariw_v_tyumeni/ (date of access March 11, 2023).

⁹ <https://www.pravda.ru/culture/36646-ermak/> (date of access March 11, 2023).

to geopolitical symbols in the Russian Federation cities, selected in accordance with the described methodology. There are many more monuments and memorial signs to these (and other) personalities and geopolitical events in post-Soviet times in Russia.¹⁰ The table lists cases of only those for which conflict interactions have been recorded in the media.

From the materials in Table 3 it is clear that the main rift in the conflicts over the aforementioned geopolitical symbols of the pre-Soviet period lies in the area of divergence between the dominant state-centric ideas in the Russian Federation¹¹ and regional ethnocentric¹² interpretations of historical geopolitical events and their consequences. For the conflicts relating to MUS of the Civil War period, such a split lies rather in the area of ideological confrontation between supporters of the imperial Orthodox¹³ and the Soviet imperial traditions, into which the confrontation between the “Whites” and the “Reds” reincarnated itself a century later (Goncharenko and Avakova, 2022; Tarasov, 2018).

For both of them, the confrontation over city symbols and signs is all the more intense:

- the more significant the social groups associated with the parties to the conflict are (in terms of numbers, influence, etc.) in the region;
- the stronger for its identity are the ideas about the connection of this social group with the relevant geopolitical symbol (its interpretation of this *genius loci*);
- the more significant the symbol itself is in history;
- the more significant a specific location (region, city, specific place) is for its connection with the symbol under question;
- the more involved the different levels of power on the side of one of the opponents are in the confrontation.

The strength of the confrontation is reflected in the degree of media attention to it (both by quantitative and qualitative media indicators), duration, mass

¹⁰ Thus, according to the reference book published by the Tyumen’ State University, dozens of toponyms and urban names, and about two dozen memorial signs have been named in Russia after Yermak (Agarkov et al., 2016); A. Kolchak has memorial signs and monuments—not mentioned in the table—at least in Moscow, Irkutsk and on a private territory in St. Petersburg; Yermolov, in Oryol, Pyatigorsk, and Krasnodar (where a single picket was recorded), etc.

¹¹ Their bearers were most often Russian patriotic organizations, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Cossacks, veteran organizations, and the Military Historical Society.

¹² Most often represented by regional ethnic and non-Orthodox religious organizations.

¹³ Represented by Russian patriotic and monarchist organizations, the Russian Orthodox Church, local authorities, and representatives of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.

Table 3. Geopolitical symbols and examples of conflict politics using memorial signs in Russian Federation cities

Symbol, fixed period*	In favor of a memorial sign (initiators, supporters)	Against the memorial sign (protesters)	In favor of reconciliation/ compromise	Result
Pre-Soviet period				
Yermak, Tyumen, 1992–2019	Russian Orthodox Church, regional and local authorities, Cossack organizations	Regional Tatar organizations	Regional and local authorities	The monument planned for the central city location was not erected, but a cross with a memorial stone and Yermak's name is there**; a monument to the "Legendary Cossack pioneers of Siberia" without Yermak's name was erected with government money at a peripheral location, contrary to the original plans
Yermak, Tobolsk, 2020–2021	Tobolsk Revival Foundation, Cossack organizations	Regional Tatar and Islamic organizations	Local authorities	Following protests, local authorities blocked the installation of a memorial cross on municipal land. The cross was erected with private funds on private land
Yermak, Omsk, 2016	Military Historical Society, local public organizations	Regional Tatar organizations	Local authorities	A bust is installed in the park. Despite the promise of local authorities at a meeting with protesters to move it to the museum grounds, the monument was left at its original site
Ivan the Terrible, Astrakhan, 1990s – summer 2023	Russian patriotic organizations, Russian Orthodox Church	Tatar, Nogai, Islamic organizations	Regional and local authorities	Instead of a monument in the center, a bust was installed using private donations and on private property (2023), and a bas-relief on the Triumphal Arch (2017)
Ivan the Terrible, Cheboksary, 2018–2020s	Local and federal authorities, Russian Orthodox Church	Chuvash national organizations, Academic Board of the Chuvash State University		The monument was erected using government funds, including federal ones**
Von Sass, Armavir, 2003–2023	Local and regional authorities, local Armenian organizations	Adyghe ethnic organizations		Despite demands for dismantling, the monument, erected in 2003, stands
Yermolov, Mineralnye Vody, 2008–2023	Cossack organizations, local authorities	Authorities of the Chechen Republic		The authorities of the Chechen Republic demand the dismantling of the monument to Yermolov in Mineralnye Vody. Local authorities refuse and propose erecting a monument to Shamil**
Yermolov, Grozny, 1949–1989	Soviet authorities	Local Chechen population, regional authorities		The monument, restored by order of Beria in 1949, was dismantled by regional authorities in 1989**
Lazarev, Sochi, 2003 (1990–2023)	Local authorities	Adyghe ethnic organizations		Following restoration in 2003 of the monument once demolished in 1990 and demands for dismantling or relocation, authorities refused, and the monument stays in its original place
Suvorov, Maykop, 2014	Regional veteran and patriotic organizations, Military Historical Society, Russian Ministry of Defense	Adyghe ethnic organizations		Demands for dismantling (relocating) the bust from the territory of the military unit. The bust stays in its original place
Fort of the Holy Spirit, Sochi, 2020	Local authorities, Russian Orthodox Church, Military Historical Society	Adyghe ethnic organizations		The monument was erected at the site of the first Russian fort on the Caucasus coast. Demands for dismantling. The monument was dismantled 8 days after its installation

Table 3. Contd.

Symbol, fixed period*	In favor of a memorial sign (initiators, supporters)	Against the memorial sign (protesters)	In favor of reconciliation/ compromise	Result
Civil War and Foreign Intervention, 1917–1922				
Wrangel, Rostov-on-Don, August–December 2023	Russian patriotic organizations, Cossacks, supporters of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party	Communist organizations	Regional and local authorities	The bust was moved from an open display to the interior of a military school
Kolchak, Omsk, 2006–2023	Regional authorities, local entrepreneurs	Communist organizations	Regional Society of Local History Experts	The pedestal of the “official” monument was erected using government funds at a less central location than planned, the project was frozen; a “smaller” monument was erected with private funds on the wall of the Kolchak restaurant**
Kolchak, Irkutsk, 2004–2023	Local patriotic organizations, regional and local authorities	Local activists, communist organizations	Author of the artistic idea	The monument was erected with private donations and at a less central location than planned, the idea of reconciliation was introduced into the image
Kolchak, Sterlitamak, 2020–2021	Local entrepreneur, Russian patriotic organizations	Local authorities		The monument, erected with private funds near a private enterprise, was demolished by decision of the authorities
Kolchak, St. Petersburg, 2016–2017	Historical and cultural center White Cause, local authorities	Federal judiciary, leftist organizations		The memorial plaque, installed with private funds and approved by local authorities, was dismantled by court order**
Kolchak, Vladivostok, 2016	Regional public organizations, local entrepreneurs, federal authorities	Communist organizations		A memorial plaque was installed on the building of the Main Railway Station using private funds. The prosecutor’s office refused to allow the protesters to remove it**
White Czechs, Samara, 2008–2018	Federal authorities, as part of the agreement between the Czech Republic and Russia, funding by the Czech Ministry of Defense	Communist organizations local activists	Local authorities	A decision was made to erect a monument (2008); under public pressure, multiple attempts at relocation and start of construction at the expense of the Czech Ministry of Defense at another location; suspended under pressure (2018)**
Kappel, Ulyanovsk, 2018–2019	Cossack, Russian patriotic organizations, Russian Orthodox Church, local authorities	Communist organizations, veterans’ councils		The sign installed at the entrance to the military school was dismantled and moved to the premises of the Cossack sports and cultural center
Kornilov, Krasnodar, 2011–2014	Cossack organizations, local authorities, Russian Orthodox Church	Communist organizations		The monument was erected

The cells corresponding to the recorded outcome are highlighted in color: the victory of supporters or opponents of the installation/preservation of the memorial sign or a compromise solution. This does not necessarily mean that the specific actor mentioned in the cell won. * The period from the onset of the conflict as recorded in media, or until its completion, or at the time of the study. ** During the conflict, acts of vandalism and/or street protests were recorded.

Compiled by the author. Students of the Geo-Urban Studies Master’s program of the St. Petersburg State University (St. Petersburg) and the Higher School of Urban Studies of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow) participated in the collection and primary processing of data under the supervision of the author.

character, and social significance of the actors and the forms of the conflict.

The results of conflicts over geopolitical symbols in connection with the factors listed above in different places ended with the victory of fundamentally different positions and in favor of different types of actors. Victories of different actors were observed even in relation to the same bearer of the symbol across different places (Yermak, Ivan the Terrible, Yermolov, or Kolchak). Overall, the position “in favor” the memorial sign won in our sample 8 times, the position “against,” 5 times, and the compromise position was recorded 7 times. It is easy to notice that conflicting interactions regarding the symbols of the Civil War and foreign intervention period were recorded only in relation to the “White” movement side. This does not mean that there were no conflicts over the symbols of the “Reds,” it’s just there were practically no post-Soviet monuments of interest to us, and the conflicts occurred not over the installation of new ones, but rather over the “revision” of old Soviet monuments within the framework of the general trend of “decommunization.”

It may come as a surprise to some that the winning parties included government actors in only slightly more than half (12) of the cases. Often, quite a variety of public organizations won, which may indicate different types of urban political regimes emerging in different Russian cities during the corresponding periods (Aksenov and Galustov, 2023; Ledyayev, 2008; Stone, 2005).

The presented data also show that it is impossible to consider the “authorities” as a single party in the conflicts concerned. In different regions and cities, authorities could take different stance in relation to the same iconographic figure, giving it different symbolic interpretations (for example, Kolchak in different cities). Different attitudes were also observed regarding the admissibility and degree of conflict surrounding memorial signs. Thus, only in 30% of presented in Table 3 cases the authorities clearly sought to reduce conflict. Importantly, in different places and cases, the authorities *de facto*, regardless of rhetoric, could act either as an arbitrator (Wrangel, Rostov) or as one of the parties to the conflict (Kolchak, Sterlitamak). Differences in the positions of authorities on the same specific conflict were also observed along the following dimensions:

(1) Splits/disunity among local/regional elites. Thus, when the heads changed, the positions of the administrations would change (Ivan the Terrible, Astrakhan); the leaders of different levels and/or divisions expressed different positions in relation to the conflict topic (Yermak, Tyumen), etc.

(2) Changing or adjusting a position during a conflict. Thus, in a significant number of cases, a decision was made to move the originally planned location of

the memorial sign in order to reduce its potential for conflict.

(3) By levels and branches of government: different positions of local and regional authorities (Yermak, Tyumen); decisions of local and regional authorities were overturned by federal authorities (Kolchak, St. Petersburg) and *vice versa* (Yermolov, Grozny).

(4) By federal regions: different interpretations by authorities of different subjects of federation of the activity of the iconographic figure (Yermolov, Mineralnye Vody).

Such differences may once again testify to both the significance of the use of the USGC in the political process and the importance of this type of symbol in it.

In most cases, as an alternative to dismantling or banning the installation of the MUS, protesters demanded its relocation either within the city or to another city/region. This requirement was motivated either by the desire to attach the sign to another object that would change the conflicting connotation of the MUS (to the courtyard of a museum, to a theme park, etc.), or to a private or restricted area with less access, or to a place with a different social composition of the population (to another region). In 8 cases out of 20 there was such a change in location: either to a less central (less iconic) one, or with a lower public exposure, or to one dedicated to another object (memorial, thematic, etc.). And in most cases, this really did reduce the level of conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the example of the presented analysis of symbolic politics using the USGC, it can be concluded that location does change the substance of the conflict over a geopolitical symbol/sign in accordance with the following factors:

— Dependence on the events associated with it: the more memorial, that is, the more realistically or mythologically associated with the corresponding events, the location is, the higher the conflict. Conflict manifestations increase with the approach to the regional historical “trace” of the symbol; of the dozens of objects dedicated to Yermak, the conflict potential of this symbolic person was significantly higher not just in the regions where Tatars lived, but in memorial sites directly connected with his activities. This pattern was observed both at the macro level, regional, and at the local level, intra-city (in many cases, the conflict was reduced by moving the sign to a non-memorial location).

— The presence of conflicting identities/social groups associated with the symbol and the characteristics of their settlement pattern. As we have shown, for some types of geopolitical symbols, conflicts between supporters of the state-centric and regional ethnocentric interpretations of historical geopolitical events and their consequences dominating in the Rus-

sian Federation prevailed. For others, the split was between the heirs of the ideological confrontations of the past geopolitical events. Obviously, the places where such groups were concentrated increased the conflict and influenced its outcome.

— Characteristics of public exposure and potential audience reach: the quantity and quality of potential visual contacts with the sign. We have demonstrated significance and effectiveness of the struggle to move a sign to places with a smaller audience or to reduce its visibility (for example, replacing the monument to Ivan the Terrible with a bas-relief on the Triumphal Arch in Astrakhan; moving signs to restricted locations).

— Competitiveness of the place. The conflict potential was influenced by the environment: the saturation of the environment with other competing symbols. For example, placement within other city memorial ensembles (alleys of fame, etc.) in garden and park areas among other similar signs, pantheons in cemeteries, regional museums and complexes, etc., potentially reduced conflict. Another option could have been to place signs in close proximity to each other (or in another location) in honor of the competing sides in the geopolitical confrontation. Most often, this was explained by motives of facilitating reconciliation of the parties (Yermolov, Mineralnye Vody). However, as practice has shown, the proximity of the placement of individual conflicting signs caused the opposite effect (as, for example, in the case of proposals to move the sign to the White Czechs in Samara to the immediate vicinity of the monuments to the “Red” heroes). The same cannot be said about the integration of conflicting symbols into one sign (Kolchak, Irkutsk): as a rule (if there were no additional factors), this reduced or failed to cause conflict.

— Hierarchy of locations: the centrality of the sign’s location increased conflict, while its peripherality decreased it. In this case, centrality could be measured by the center and periphery structure of the urban territory, the hierarchy of the sign in relation to memorialization (main or secondary memorial), etc.

— Spatial structure of ownership. Often (if this factor was not outweighed by others) the conflict was reduced by moving/installing the sign on private or restricted, rather than municipal territory and/or facility.

— Spatial structure of relations regarding power and influence. Conventionally, this factor can be described in terms of the features of urban and local political regimes, characterized by differences in the degree of formal and informal influence by various types of urban actors (in government, business, and society) in urban decision-making (Aksenov and Galustov, 2023; Ledyayev, 2008; Stone, 2005). In different cities and locations, the decision was made in favor of the “strong” actor.

Overall, it can be concluded that the USGC has an increased potential for conflict in modern Russia. Spatial factors often play a key role not only in increasing or decreasing the strength of conflict interactions regarding a particular geopolitical symbol, but also in influencing their substance—the outcome of the conflict, the composition of the actors, and their motivations and arguments.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author of this work declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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