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Housing struggles in Romania and in Central Eastern Europe (CEE)

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Abstract

In this conversation we are encountering a number of comrades with whom we shared direct action and theorizing in Romania and beyond. Erin conducted research there between 2016 and 2018, working extensively in Bucharest and Cluj, the latter the city where **Enikő Vincze** and **George Zamfir** do their organizing work with the group *Căși sociale ACUM!* / Social Housing NOW! **Michele Lancione** lived in Romania from 2014 to 2016, where he conducted extensive research on street-level drug use, homelessness and housing struggle. There, he joined the *Frontul Comun Pentru Drept la Locuire* / Common Front for Housing Rights (FCDL), a grassroot movement started, among others, by **Veda Popovici** and **Ioana Florea** (and that **Erin McElroy** also became a part of). In this conversation we reflect with our Romanian comrades around the struggle for housing in the country and in Central Eastern Europe (CEE), on the Western economic and State power on the East, on grassroot organising and more.

RHJ: Can you briefly introduce yourself, the groups that you are involved with, and your involvement in housing struggles in Romania?

Enikő: As an academic, I aim at using my privileges to perform a public role through the creation of knowledge in order to reveal the structural causes of housing injustice in capitalism. I also take part directly in actions, which challenge state politics underlying the profit-oriented political economy of housing.

The Căși sociale ACUM!/ Social Housing NOW! movement from Cluj is the immediate frame of my actions, where Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma are acting together for a just and anti-rasist housing politics in a multicultural city marked by deep housing inequalities. Challenged by the eviction of 350 Roma persons in December 2010 from a centrally placed area of Cluj who were forcibly relocated to the proximity of the municipal landfill, we embarked on the struggle for housing justice by condemning institutional racism.[1] This racism had transformed Roma people into a dehumanized, stigmatized and inferior group whose life supposedly does not matter.[2] Later, we addressed larger systemic issues that made the dramatic eviction in a burgeoning city possible, such as the politics leading to the massive privatization of housing, the super-commodification of housing stock, and the transformation of housing into a financial asset via real estate development.

Beyond the city of Cluj, in 2017, our group was among the initiators of the decentralized national network Blocul pentru Locuire/ Block for Housing (BPL) link. Together we militate for increased public housing stock as a means for solving the housing crisis and assuring housing as a universal human right. We also organize for a just and antiracist system of social housing distribution that prioritizes the needs of low-income people who very often are subjected to forced evictions and inadequate, insecure housing conditions.

George: I joined the housing rights movement in Cluj in 2015, shortly after I arrived from Bucharest to Cluj as a PhD student in sociology. Prior, I had participated in research projects on social marginalization and discrimination regarding access to public services, such as education and medical services, migration, and rural precarity. Since then, I have participated in most of the collective's activist work as a member of Căși Sociale ACUM/Social Housing NOW. Together, we are striving to publicly unveil the formation of bureaucratic structures set in place in Cluj, as well as in larger social stages, that instigate racialized marginalization. We use activist research to come up with means of countering these processes.

Veda: As an activist and engaged theorist based in Bucharest, I'm devoted to a consistent local engagement and to building radical regional and international solidarities. My

[1] Readers might learn about the moments of this ongoing struggle from films produced by Căși sociale ACUM!, available with English subtitle, for example: Pata rămâne a tuturor/ The stain lingers on (2016), www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=294&v=yBGLh8_wauA&feature=emb_logo; Social justice in Pata Cluj (2016), www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVfRWXW-94g; Racism at home (2018), www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPPhXVF6x6c&feature=emb_logo; Garbage is toxic for people (2019), www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9nJtBa7ptE&feature=emb_logo

[2] Histories of earlier processes of evictions are presented in this documentary film produced by Căși sociale ACUM!: Dislocations - Eviction routes to Cantonului Street (1996-2016), https://vimeo.com/194308421

political work has developed through various anti-authoritarian, anarchist and feminist collectives such as Macaz Autonom, the Alternative Library, Dysnomia and the Gazette of Political Art. While being involved in several sites of resistance over the past ten years - such as resisting evictions, organizing occupations, participating in squattings and building community around collective space - I've come to realize the importance of materially organizing around housing and the city. Thus in 2013, I co-founded *Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul al Locuire/ Common Front for Housing Rights (FCDL)* in Bucharest, and I currently work as the facilitator of the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City (EAC) and campaigner for the Block for Housing.

FCDL, a grassroots organization started by a group of activists, evictees and cultural workers has dedicated its activity in fostering solidarity and building community for resisting evictions, stregthen representation of eviction experiences and fight for housing justice from an anticapitalist, feminist perspective.

Ioana: Stronger and more visible mobilizations against evictions, against utility cuts, and for the right to housing emerged in Bucharest around 2005-2006. Having already researched issues of squatting and informal occupation, as well as living conditions in impoverished working class neighbourhoods, I became involved in support groups for these struggles. In 2013-2014, I joined the Common Front for Housing Rights (FCDL) and the Political Art Gazette collective, which drew their roots from such previous mobilizations. In 2017, I also joined the national coalition Block for Housing (BPL) and the EAC. Since 2003, I have been studying how inequalities play out in cities and how they are lived by those affected. I have also researched urban policies and urban power structures, trying to understand layers of inequalities and unequal development, from the global to the very local. I have been working as a researcher with the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, the University of Bucharest; the "Europa" Viadrina University (Frankfurt/Oder); the National Agency for Roma (Bucharest); the Center for Research and Studies in Sociology, the University Institute of Lisbon; the Department of Sociology and Work Science, the University of Gothenburg. All my research is dedicated to advancing social justice struggles.

RHJ: What is specific about housing injustice in the post-socialist geographies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and what does this have to do with race and gender?

Veda: Post-socialist geographies of CEE are marked by a heavy historical tension between the material, political legacy of the socialist era and the capitalist neo-liberal occupation of all aspects of society after 1989. This tension manifests on the level of housing injustice through the erosion and dismantlement of public housing as a resource by the private capitalist sector.

However, it is when we look closely at gendered and racialized oppression that we can understand not simply the tension between the two historical conditions, but the continuity as well.

The Roma population has been historically excluded from the access to property and land, and it was only in socialist times that some gained access to property and housing. Regardless, some forms of segregation, marginalization and dislocation continously happened, especially as socialist regimes within the region took up policies of ethnic assimilation, denying the specific historical experience of a population that went through slavery, genocide and rests on a culture that did not consider the formation of a national state a priority. This failure of socialism to address racialization laid the ground for capitalism's blunt exploitation of racialized histories. After 1989, the Roma population experienced a new wave of dislocations, dispossessions, and segregation facilitated by typical capitalist housing and property transformations: restitutions[3], privatization of public housing, building of social housing in the outskirts of cities.

As we look closer at gender dynamics, we see housing injustice affecting disproportionately women. Because of the patriarchal distribution of labor, women carry the labor of the home and the house. However, due partly to processes of women's liberation in the early phases of socialism, this translated in society into women being responsible and even "heads" of the house. Fast forward to the present: we find women affected by the loss of their homes as a loss of dignity and power. Thus, housing movements in the post-socialist world are often led by visionary women, motivated to regain their status in their communities or society at large. For example, one can see the emergence of our colleague Nicoleta Vișan as a community leader in her diary of the Vulturilor evictee community in Bucharest[4]. Her experience was first documented through a blog which then became a collective book dedicated, not incidentally, to another strong woman also part of the housing movement, her mother, Steluța Vișan.

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[3] This text uses the term "restitutions" to refer to the ample process happening in the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe by which property nationalized during socialism is returned to the descendants of pre-socialist owners. Both national governments and transnational institutions such as the EU or ECHR have opted for the term "restitutions" in the context of postsocialism designating in-kind restitutions and financial compensation. From the critical perspective of the authors and editors of this text, such option carries a key ideological, moralizing component: legally, the term "restitution" implies a restoration of a morally rightful order. Thus, although the legislation recognizes the lawfulness of nationalizations, it postulates their illegitimacy while the processes of "restitutions" are implicitly linked to recovery, restoration and reparation. The vocabulary is set in such a manner that it becomes linked with other historical transitions such as post-apartheid and post-Holocaust that involve some form of reparations.
This is why, tactically, some critical organizers and researchers support the usage of "retrocession" over "restitution". In context, the former describes strictly the process of ceding back a title of property (or its equivalent) to its previous owner. Thus, as opposed to the latter, it may not carry over the moral implication of restoring a rightful order.
This text opts for the use of "restitutions" to directly address affirmative literature, bring a radical critical perspective on the phenomenon by revealing it's violent consequences and thus critically resignifying it.

[4] The Vulturilor protest camp became represented in a number of collective works promoted by FCDL. At first, we started with an on-line community blog, written by Nicoleta Vișan (www.jurnaldinvulturilor50.or). Then we worked on a documentary film, directed by Michele Lancione, on the history of restitutions and the Vulturilor struggle, which we presented in more than 40 community screenings across Europe (www.ainceputploaia.com). Lastly, thanks to a grant from the Antipode Foundation, we produced a book, which includes Nicoleta's diary of resistance. The book is available in Romanian (http://www.idea.ro/editura/ro/jurnalul-din-vulturilor-50-povestea-unei-lupte-pentru-dreptate-locativ-d186.html) and it will soon also be published in English.

Ioana: I would just add a long-term perspective on housing regimes, mentioning that Romania entered the 20th century with a large proportion of the population in housing poverty and a very unequal property regime. The massive socialist industrialization and urbanization process, with huge housing projects, was still unable to totally solve geographical inequalities and discriminatory housing-allocation amongst different hierarchies (working branches, party rank, civil status). Since the early 1990s, the IMF and World Bank have pushed (all CEE countries) for the complete privatization of housing, in order to create the real estate and mortgage market, with the contribution of the state (see Stanilov, 2007).

Enikő: Indeed, Romania has been integrated into global capitalism as a country of cheap labor force, where housing is super-commodified and emerges as a financial asset. In this context, housing injustice is rooted in the production of uneven development that takes diverse forms. Firstly, depopulating localities based on subsistence economy display empty buildings, while the cities with new job opportunities are challenged by housing shortage. Secondly, the small home-owners with low income and pensions are faced with overcrowded homes and are overburdened by the high cost of utilities, while lacking money for refurbishment. Moreover, the new generations who are in need for housing are condemned to pay more than 50% of their income for private rent or for mortgages in the cities with available jobs, entering into different forms of indebtedness. At the same time, people who never owned homes and/ or were left homeless as a result of evictions are struggling with inadequate and insecure housing conditions on the infrastructurally underdeveloped margins of the localities, while also struggling with all the stigmas associated with a racialized subject. Besides, the lack of affordable housing keeps people prisoners and dependent on patriarchal household regimes, since victims of the later usually do not have resources or alternatives for moving out

Meanwhile, developers and financial investors are making quick and huge profits from residential real estate and implicitly from the lack of a significant public and social housing stock that could have counterbalanced their monopoly in the domain of housing.

All these inequalities and injustices are induced by capitalist development in a semi-periphery country marked by a *long-durée* of dependent development. They are being legitimized (by the ruling elites) through a popular anti-communist ideology, of a politically sustained fear of being 'socially assisted' and of a market fundamentalism according to which housing needs are to be solved by making the real estate market more efficient.

Ioana: Moreover, a market fundamentalism according to which housing needs are to be solved by individuals themselves as the sole responsible.

Because of this, we are also experiencing a difficulty in politicizing housing. Since the early 1990s, the dominant approach to housing precarity has seen isolated cases picked for (multinational) charity business, despite the generalized precarious housing conditions. In fact, the Roma emancipatory movement was the first to challenge this dominant

approach, and to politicize the right to housing as a social justice issue and in terms of structural inequalities.

RHJ: What about Romanian cities in particular, with specific reference to housing injustice?

Enikő: In the 2000s, some of Romanian cities - the capital and a few regional centers defined as growth poles - started to recover from the crisis induced by the collapse of the state-owned economy, as far as they could attract capital to be invested into urban development and its contemporary "stars," such as the IT sector, banking and real estate.

Housing became one of the major economic sectors or businesses in these localities that promised quick and huge profit, under conditions in which these cities offered new job opportunities and a higher medium income than the national average, in parallel with an insignificant stock of public and social housing. The retroceded buildings in downtowns "cleansed" of the poor tenants via evictions, alongside the new residential districts (which grew easily with the support of a deregulated urbanism) and office buildings occupying the spaces of some centrally placed bankrupted factories, became financial assets to be speculated on by the real estate market.

In parallel, many low-income people are subjected to forced evictions. But their labor force is needed in different economic sectors, including construction, sanitation, and cleaning services - industries fabricating components for global chains of production. Low-income workers are responding to the lack of affordable housing and work-and-housing exploitation via different survival strategies: making a living in overcrowded homes; constructing unconventional or improvised homes; disconnecting their apartments from utilities; moving into the nearby villages and commuting for work in the city; and last but not least, migrating to Western Europe for seasonal jobs.

The formation of disadvantaged residential territories on the one hand, and on the other, the creation of super-expensive residential units on land with growing real estate value, as older buildings (dis)considered 'communist legacies' are being demolished, are the two facets of uneven urban development as an endemic feature of capitalism. Besides these extreme housing arrangements, the economically burgeoning cities of Romania do have many territories where one may still encounter a mixture of socialist blocks of flats and new housing units, or abandoned and degraded buildings and new real estate developments. Altogether, these localities became construction sites where profit is created alongside with social cleansing, such sites and cities being shaped by the cyclical evolutions of capitalism and the politics of entrepreneurial development.

George: As Eniko described, Romanian cities drastically transformed during the last 30 years because of an unfettered policy of uneven development. Migration has been a key consequence of the machine-gunned austerity and privatization measures. The private housing industry has definitely been favored, in tandem with financial services. One key example is the First Home program, a still-standing governmental financial subsidy

introduced in 2009 to support the unfreezing of both the housing and the banking sectors in the midst of the crisis.

In addition, I would point out some regional urban differences. Numerous Transylvanian cities inherited historical centers which are now highly praised and constitute key features of urban redevelopment programs - a significant element in both attracting external monies, as well as in contouring cultural and political identities. A recently rediscovered sense of localist and historicist pride fuels urban discourses and political programs, to which the 2021 European Capital of Culture contest in 2016 certainly contributed. Most mid-sized cities (50k-150k) in the rest of the country lack this technical advantage. Many of them went through urban restructuring and modernization during the socialist regime. Thus, they are now disarmed and inferiorized in the tourist attraction competition and relegated as historically tainted. While they appear to suffer less in terms of housing issues (skyrocketing prices for rents and acquisitions), many exhibit similar occurrences: whether burgeoning or decaying, each city contains one or several informal, or even ghettoized, housing areas. Overall, however, the grosser and striking the display of intraurban housing inequalities, the higher up in the interurban competition a city ranks.

RHJ: How are Western economic and state (or supra-national) powers and financialization intervening in the East?

Ioana: As we mentioned before, the full privatization of the housing stock since the early 1990s was implemented in Romania, as was the case in other CEE territories, under the pressure of the World Bank and IMF. Moreover, the massive re-privatization through restitution of properties nationalized in the late 1940s and early 1950s was implemented with a push from the EU as a condition for Romania's mid-2000s EU accession. The housing movements we are part of consider this process unjust. Firstly, because the property regime before the 1940s-50s nationalization was utterly unequal and unjust, its rehabilitation was also utterly unequal and unjust. Secondly, hundreds of thousands of former tenants from these buildings were evicted and left without an adequate housing solution by the new landlords. Moreover, the beneficiaries of this process (the final landlords) were in fact the real estate speculators, while the entire process represented a huge cost for the state. Also, restitutions indiscriminately included properties nationalized in the late 1940s from former fascist collaborators to indebted entrepreneurs or property owners who decided to flee/not to return to Romania after the war.

Moreover, since the late 90s, the Romanian state paved the way for financialization by privatizing state banks, deregulating the credit market and financial activities, deregulating urban developments based on crediting (and gentrification), opening the land property market to foreign investors, building housing from public budgets to be sold through private mortgages (The National Authority for Housing's main program to date). This led directly to the housing and mortgage bubble that burst in 2008-2009. In 2009, the government took a 20 billion loan from the IMF, the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) conditioned by harsh austerity measures.

Under the same conditions, the government opened a state-backed mortgage program in partnership with foreign banks to stimulate credit and real estate markets and limit the drop in housing prices. This is the First Home program that George was talking about before, and this is the main national housing program to date.

But in recent years, under strong World Bank lobby, and in line with wider EU trends, the direction is changing: the state-backed mortgage program will be closed soon, as developers, expecting increasing yields from rents and from high-consumer credits will probably build-to-rent instead of build-to-sell in the near future. In addition, poorer groups are increasingly targeted by credit institutions, sometimes even under their "corporate social responsibility" programs (as "support" credit for the poor), and with the help of subservient (often multinational) NGOs as "trojan horses" (see Florea and Dumitriu, 2018).

Enikő: In the 1980s, in Romania, the percentage of state-owned housing stock was around 30% at national level, which meant that a significant part of homes was in peoples' private property. Letting the latter survive in a state-owned economy, understood and controlled by the state as 'personal property,' was how the socialist state thought to manage the lack of capital that could have produced enough public homes. This could have served the housing needs of people moving to the cities for the new jobs created in the rapidly growing industries. This socialist developmentalism was sustained by loans taken by Romania mostly from Western commercial banks and international financial organizations. This model entered into crises with the austerity measures implemented in the 1980s in order to repay the country's debts.

The post-socialist privatization of economic production was accompanied in the 1990s by the total privatization of the public housing stock, which was imposed as a must in the countries supposed to transit 'from totalitarianism to democracy.' The ideologies of economic liberalism and anti-communism were constitutive forces of this politics. Furthermore, the development of the market economy was a condition that Romania had to fulfill to be integrated into the neoliberal European Union. The latter was sustained since the 2000s via governmental policies supporting the private production of private homes and the creation of the real estate market. It was also supported through encouraging the development of related banking instruments, facilitating easy profits for investment funds from the built environment, including that of residential real estate. By the end of the 2000s, more than 80% of the banking sector was owned by foreign banks.

Since the 1990s, Romania has become one of the most 'foreign direct investment'-friendly countries. And not only due to its cheap labor force. But also due to the fact that it has one of the lowest flat tax rates on the net profits, VAT, and income tax in the EU. Here, one may enjoy tax exemption on reinvested profit and income tax exemption. In the Romanian real estate business, the gross annual rental income is 7.76% (third position in the European ranking of Gross Rental Yields). In this country, there is no interdiction on ownership rights over real estate (apartments, commercial, or industrial buildings) for foreign citizens and companies. Romania's mortgage market remains small by

international standards, at just 7.82% of GDP in 2019. However, from 2008 to 2018 housing loans outstanding have grown by almost 17% annually.

RHJ: Can you tell us more about grassroots organising in Romanian cities? We are thinking in particular at 'the Block', the largest housing struggle network in the country, of which you were instrumental in founding. Why is cross-urban networking important in linking experiences and struggles?

George: As we said before, grassroots organizing is painstakingly difficult, especially in an area without a relevant tradition in the North-American sense. Most prior non-electoral grassroots organizing has been, and still is, plagued by liberal positions. Many of us learned how to do it step by step, while some specifically politicized pure charity work. For some of us coming from academic standpoints, it has all ended up being a slippery slope: first researching, next supporting people to fill forms, and then organizing protests. The standpoint of our evicted comrades is surely different. Most of the work is emotional and consists of various means of conveying 'You are not alone.' Then the uphill battle starts, although the horizon is never clear. This is why fraternizing with as many people and groups as possible is essential to maintaining a resilient and combative attitude. We know that, for example, you/I are not the only one in Cluj who suffers from housing problems. Finding out that housing problems also transpire in Bucharest and Timișoara as well is essential to comprehending systemic injustice. Similarly, when we learn that housing injustice transpires all over Europe from our comrades in the European Action Coalition, we feel less alone. This understanding brings energy and strength in continued organizing, helping us to reassess political goals and discover new strategies. I believe that we are now in a critical moment: the bureaucratic avenues to housing justice have more or less been exhausted. The stormy political atmosphere of the last several years has somewhat settled, and we are now expecting an anxious right wing government for the next cycle. It seems that grassroots organizing is just about to require next level resources and dedication, but we imagine the results to be worthwhile.

Enikő: Căși sociale ACUM!/ Social Housing NOW! is a grassroots informal initiative that aims to act as an engine for a political activist movement in the city of Cluj by proposing an urban development model based on: the extension of the public housing stock including social housing; the allocation of adequate budgets for related public interventions; ensuring the access to social housing for low income people who live under deprived housing conditions; and support from the public budget for alternative housing models, such as different forms of collective living or cooperative housing. Our movement's actions are based on documentation and analysis, and they include direct actions against housing injustice, support for people applying for social housing, consciousness raising, legal actions, and last but not least, publishing the newspaper entitled, *Cărămida. Ziarul dreptății locative* (*The Brick. Magazine for Housing Justice*, of which you can read here and here).

The activist experience of some local groups acting for housing justice in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Mizil, Timișoara, and Valea Seacă led to the establishment of the Block for Housing (*Blocul pentru Locuire,* BPL). Its formation was declared in June 2017, during the conclusion of a project run by Foundation Desire in Cluj supported by Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, entitled 'Strengthening the housing justice coalition through reframing the political claims for public housing.' In the recent years, the Block for Housing implemented the following projects: February – November 2018, 'Action platform for housing justice in Romania'; February – November 2019, the project 'BLOCUL PENTRU LOCUIRE (Block for Housing) – action against labour exploitation and housing deprivation'; and starting in January 2020, the project, 'From knowledge production to political mobilization for public housing as a solution to the housing crisis created by capitalism.'

Regardless of their concrete topics, through each of these initiatives, the Block for Housing aims to empower its member groups as self-organized left actors in building up analytically sound and politically relevant knowledge about the structural causes of the housing crisis in Romania. It also helps identify potential allies who align with BPL ideas regarding just and antiracist housing politics, aiming to transform ideals into policy measures. Conducting research on forced evictions in Romania, we have focused on establishing contacts with the National Agency for Roma and to provide them with policy instruments for improving Roma housing conditions. Further, by organizing militant research on the relationship between labor and housing, the BPL has looked for cooperation with Romanian trade unions who are potentially ready to include housing-related demands on their agenda. In addition, we have addressed Romanian Euro-parliamentary candidates with a call entitled "Public social housing! Priority of the European Parliament Agenda for 2019-2023". In 2020, we are implementing actions to raise public awareness about the core role that housing plays in the political economy of capitalism. Moreover, we aim to raise awareness about the need to change local and national housing politics in order to sustain housing as a universal human right, and to fulfill people's housing needs instead of supporting housing as a source of profit for developers and financial investors.

RHJ: Do you have links with struggles in other parts of Europe, and what are the challenges of establishing links and solidarities with comrades coming from different geographies and histories? What might new forms of international solidarity look like?

Veda: International solidarity is key in any radical social justice movement. Equally, within the housing movement, reaching out and building knowledge and action together must be a priority. That said, I perceive a challenge in building such togetherness while being respectful and honoring difference. Developments in both housing injustice and resistance within the Western world are still the go-to reference for understanding where we stand. Thus we need to actively check the way we both diagnose the injustice happening and forge the struggle based on our local and regional experiences with an

internationalist outlook. This means trying to understand what is local and not universal in what we do, and what is locally manifested but rooted in global processes.

Ioana: In this empowering tone set by Veda, I would say that there are some really inspiring housing struggles in the region, for example the homeless organizing in Budapest against a really repressive system and police, the politicized coop housing networks building up in Hungary and Croatia, the Roof over Our Head anti-eviction alliance in Serbia, which is very strong and building up huge solidarity against evictions, loan sharks, and bailiffs. There are some really inspiring and very successful campaigns such as the "re-socialization of housing" campaign in Germany, which advances the idea of taking back private-speculative property and making it not-for-profit. There are struggles to protect autonomous, collective, antifascist living spaces in Greece, Czech Republic, Italy, Ireland and Poland, where squats are under attack. We are connected to all these movements.

We are very inspired by all our comrades from the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City, from which we learn many things about global processes, real estate and financial actors and speculations, the responsibility of the EU in housing precarity regimes, forms of resisting, possible political demands, etc.

But we should also say that our resources are very scarce here in Eastern Europe. We work so much locally (for our bread and for our struggles) that sometimes we hardly have the free time, money, and energy to travel, to participate in international meetings, to get in depth within other contexts. Usually, whatever time, money, and energy we have, we prioritize local actions. So real forms of international solidarity should include a constant transfer of resources from regions with historically more resources. And a stronger recognition from the struggles in the West about their privileges. Moreover, real forms of international solidarity should include a constant interest for non-core (non-Western) contexts, struggles, changes, and making space for non-core movements to speak, to represent themselves, to be heard.

Enikő: Housing justice groups from Romania had until now three crucial contributions to the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City. First there was the participation of members of Căși sociale ACUM!/ Social housing NOW! and Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul la Locuire/ Common Front for Housing Rights in writing the EAC brochure on "Housing financialization. Trends, actors and processes." This was meant to be used as a tool by housing activists from different countries to learn about some global processes acting in their particular contexts through different local manifestations. These different manifestations appear according to the past legacies of country-based housing politics, and the role that different countries today play in financialized capitalism. Second, in March 2019, as a result of a meeting hosted by Căși sociale ACUM!/ Social housing NOW! in Cluj-Napoca, along with several grassroots organizations from Romania, France, Portugal, Ireland and Greece, we collectively elaborated the "European Manifesto for Public Housing." This we launched on the occasion of a street manifestation, organized in solidarity with contemporary Berlin housing activist actions for expropriation of big landlords and freezing private rents (see

here). Third, in May 2019, we contributed to the preparation of an EAC appeal to candidates for the European Parliamentary elections, entitled "For another Europe".

The initiatives from above show that international solidarity between housing justice movements across Europe and even beyond should be based on a shared critical understanding of how contemporary capitalism produces housing crises across the globe, and how housing movements should play a role in the anti-capitalist struggle. Housing movements together make diverse publics aware that another world is possible and should be created trans-locally. This international solidarity might be directed against international landlords, investment funds or real estate developers that are making use of one of the main freedoms of the EU - the free movement of capital - which allows developers to move anywhere and anytime their profit-making interests leads them. But this solidarity should also critically address all the transnational (including EU) policies that affect housing financialization. The latter results in housing being less and less considered a right and a need, and more a commodity and a source for profit. Moreover, solidarity among the local movements should mean expressing political support across countries whenever housing activists from different countries are needing it in their struggles, as well as organizing actions at the same moment in different locations with similar political messages.

RHJ: Is there anything else that you want an international housing justice audience to know about the work of housing justice in Romania?

Ioana: For us, it is always important to remind other movements that Romania or Eastern Europe are not "case studies" or "late developments" of processes that already happened in the West. Instead, we are all part of simultaneous global processes (of capitalist advancement), but different territories have different roles in them. EE territories have the role to absorb crisis in the West when needed, through specific glocal processes: usually by living an almost permanent austerity and offering high profits for Western interests. But political developments in these semi-peripheral territories also slowed the capitalist advancement from 1945 to 1989, offering workers organizing models, housing policies, and international economic networks - that can be reclaimed to play an emancipatory role today.

Enikő: Imagining a just housing regime should be based on the critical analysis of the role housing played both in different stages of capitalism, and during state socialism or real existing socialism. When in Romania today we advocate for the increase of public and social housing (whose percentage is now below 2%) - while acknowledging that in this country social housing is in public ownership - we are not idealizing the state-owned and state-controlled housing regime. Because, as we could see, at a point - as part of how it generally serves capital - the state decided to destroy the public housing stock by facilitating its transformation into a commodity transactioned on the market. Instead, we demand a significant housing stock created from a public budget and put under social

control or transferred into the self-administration of tenants (with the condition of not being transformed into a commodity).

Furthermore, we are making a distinction between the terms *public* and *social* housing: public housing is an instrument that assures the access of all to housing as a universal human right. However, as long as our society is marked by deep economic inequalities, it is crucial that the fulfillment of low-income people's housing needs is a priority. So in this sense, public housing should be distributed as a tool of social justice and for reducing socio-economic disparities. Thus, we claim that social housing be produced from the public budget and be put under public control (forbidden to be sold on the market). This should not involve state-surveillance, but rather greater autonomy and self-determination for the tenants.

Veda: As a conclusion, I would add that, within the Romanian context and as my comrades have already pointed out, there is a strong belief that housing justice as a social movement issue has a transversal profile, crossing boundaries of material approaches, discursive analytics and subjectivity/ identity causes. It also has the potential for a solidarity transgressive of class and social backgrounds - at a local level - while offering the potential to build transnational action targeting the heart of capitalism, the real estate and the financial actors. However, for all these potentialities to become real and go beyond some seductive speech, there needs to be acknowledgement of historical geographical asymetries in terms of wealth accumulation and epistemic privilege. Difference must stop to be accounted for as diversity and be recognized as unequal development and accumulation, non-Western historical experience and resistance strategies that don't easily fit Western standards of protest. As activists in the housing movement, both our everyday fights and our critical analysis seek to take these into account and thus we look for likeminded comrades across global regions.

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