

Activist panel “Housing activism: beyond the West”

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This final piece provides the transcription of the Activist Panel¹ held at the conference “Housing Activism: Beyond the West” on the 27th of May, 2016 at Södertörn University, Sweden. It includes the presentations of the four guest organisations attending the panel:

- * Komitet Obrony Praw Lokatorów / The Committee of Defence of Tenants’ Rights (Poland)
- * A Város Mindenkié / The City is for All (Hungary)
- * Dikmen Vadisi Barınma Hakkı Bürosu/ Office of Housing Rights in Dikmen Vadisi (Turkey)
- * Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente/ Popular Organization of Independent Left “Francisco Villa” (Mexico)

Komitet Obrony Praw Lokatorów /The Committee of Defence of Tenants’ Rights (Poland)

I am in this *Committee of the Defence of Tenants’ Rights*. And I am going to speak a little bit about the housing situation in Poland and our background. And then my comrade is going to talk about tenants’ activism and what people do, about our history of our tragic situation. I am mainly concerned with the city of Warsaw.

During World War II the city, especially the inner city was completely destroyed and there was no place for people to live. Thousands and thousands of people were killed, including owners of buildings. Thousands and hundreds of thousands people were homeless, and what does this mean? After the war, people had to rebuild houses; usually they had to do it themselves, with their bare hands. Two things happened simultaneously public housing programs started only later, but in the meantime people were rebuilding the city with their own hands. After World War II there was a regime change, let’s say, and the formally called People’s Republic of Poland was installed. Different solutions to

¹ The panel discussion has been transcribed and edited before publishing. We would like to thank the participants for providing us with visual material to accompany the text.

solve the housing problem caused mainly by the war including many homeless were implemented.

The first solution was that people moved into the many buildings that were abandoned and empty. Some of them were told that if they helped to rebuild the building that was damaged, they could live there legally and permanently, and it would ultimately be able to call it their flat. Other people were assigned to live in these abandoned buildings. In addition, some people were sent to live in specific apartments by the city and by the state. They had to pay rent to a private landlord. So firstly, there was public housing that remained public housing and secondly, there was private housing, but tenants were forced onto the owners, who had no choice. Thirdly, the city and the state started a public housing programme to build new dwellings.

During the so called Polish People's Republic we had very specific housing patterns. We had public housing in buildings that did not exist before the war, and we had public housing in buildings that were privately owned before the war. This is important and you will know in a little bit why.

In 1989, there was a change of the economic and social regime in Poland as the country transformed into so-called market capitalism. One of the main ideas was that everything that was publicly owned or owned by the state or remains of communism, should be privatized. In case of buildings that were built after the war a lot of tenants were able to buy them for a fraction of the market value in order to privatize the housing. But not everybody was able to buy their apartment or they were not put out on the market available for tenants to buy.



Picture 1. Demonstration organized by the Committee in January 2017. Photo: Komitet Obrony Praw Lokatorów

After 1989 some of the people that were tenants in public housing units became owners and the ones that were less well-off remained in the public housing, a lot of these buildings were of very poor quality. In my neighbourhood 70% of the public housing units do not have heating; a lot of them don't have bathrooms in the flats. So it is a very bad standard. To make things worse, they decided to re-privatize some buildings. Which means theoretically to give it back to old owners and there are very few still alive. So mostly it was a matter of finding the needle in the haystack. When they were returning back buildings to previous owners, and this is something that is still in the process, occasionally somebody who was a child of a former owner received it, but usually the family sold it to real estate developers and investors.

The other thing is that a very large portion the houses to be returned in Warsaw (so called return) ended up in wrong hands due to fraud schemes in which people falsified documents to make legal claims. Still today people are being displaced by the privatization process and there is a very large gentrification going on in the city, which means that people are being subject to high rent increases, they are losing their homes, they are being evicted, harassed.

Another person in the group:

Back in 2009 when we started, this whole problem of the tenants was ignored in public discourse. It was said it was the tenants' fault, "they can't find a job, they cannot adapt to the market economy", stuff like that. So the basic thing was to

bring the issue to the table and I think after so many years of protests and actions, I think, this also happened and is something that has changed the political landscape. Nowadays whenever politicians say that this problem doesn't exist or that it is the tenants' own fault, almost everyone knows that there is fraud going on and that the buildings are re-privatized in an unlawful way. For example there were owners who tried to evict people and our actions brought attention of the media and helped to stop these processes. And those tenants there have been fighting for three years or more and have already managed to challenge many of the claims of the owners. Other things we have been engaged in have been neighbourhood demonstrations and bringing the issues of tenants' rights to the local authorities and picketing or blockades or occupations of the local offices.



Picture 2. Demonstration organized by the *Committee* in February 2017. Photo: Komitet Obrony Praw Lokatorów

What we have been trying to do is to shift the frame, so to speak. The government wanted us to play a role that would be convenient to them, and to be able to talk to us as representatives. We did not want to play that role, we always push it a little bit further in our demands, and we are not keeping with what is legal. At the same time, we are also advising the tenants on their legal situation, but we are never limiting ourselves to what is legal. We always push for issues that are not currently covered by the law. And we try not to become this domesticated social partner that the city would like to have and some activism that is not dangerous for them. So one example is the thing that is going to happen on Monday, as a result of one of our protests in the City District's Office. The politicians invited one of the representatives of the tenants and they want to find a place for us to find a frame in the social partnership. And they say "You have to come alone" and I didn't tell them that we are coming as a group of tenants. So we refuse to be representatives, we will come with all the people.

So these are some of the activities we have been engaging with, gathering neighbours and informing them about their rights. We found out that the best way to mobilize people is to start talking about what is going to happen to them, in their buildings. There are some lists published of housing that is going to be re-privatized. First the government was not going to provide those lists and it was secret. But after many actions organized by the tenants' associations these were finally made public. So what we do is that we go to these addresses where people are going to be subjected to these sometimes very violent re-privatization processes, informing them on what is going to happen to them and how to prepare for their struggle.



Picture 3. A demonstration organized in 2011 to the memory of Jolanta Brzeska. Photo: Komitet Obrony Praw Lokatorów

This is one of the actions we did [referring to a picture of Jolanta Brzeska]. She was a tenant activist that later got murdered for her activity. We suspect that she was murdered because she was discovering some facts about the illegal re-privatization process. But this didn't prevent people from being active, quite the opposite. Her murder did not have the effect that the mafia expected. Among others because of our demonstrations, her case became very well-known throughout the city.

These are some of the things we managed to achieve as well as blocking some law initiatives. The city was continuously trying to implement some changes in the law that would make it more difficult for us to challenge rent rises and stuff like this. In some situations we managed to block these initiatives. And some of the practical things we have been doing are eviction blockades. We have had more than 150 successful eviction blockades, and they brought people together. Sometimes it's even possible to block with legal actions. And actions combined with legal actions bring activists together. And in many cases our activities were successful because there are young and old people and the cops didn't want to attack old people, they felt awkward doing that.

A Város Mindenkié/The City is for All (Hungary)

I am from the *City is for all* group in Hungary. I will start with introducing myself and how I got into the group and then I will continue with talking about the group. y story will allow you to see how politics work in Hungary and how easy it is to become homeless and how hard it is to get out of it.



Picture 4. The *City is for all* birthday party in 2011. Photo: Körmendy Tunde

Until 2008 I worked 200 km away from Budapest as a worker. And in 2008 that factory was destroyed by Hungarian politics. I was fired and almost everyone else was fired. Earlier 22.000 people were working in that factory and now only 500. The factory was demolished eventually. And then I got divorced in 2009 and I moved to Budapest, the capital. And that's where I tasted the life of homeless people. I was living in a self-build shed in the woods. In 2013 the owner of the territory next to my place decided to go to the police because he argued that I devalued his property. So they wanted to get rid of me and demolished my place. That was the time when someone told me about the *City is for all*. But at that time the politicians already hated the *City if for all* or

feared them. So initially without the group, we started to lobby for public housing and social housing units. But I also got lucky because at that time there was a local election. And because of local elections they wanted to get votes, and it was good publicity for them to provide me with housing so they gave me a social housing unit that was full with mould and the rent increased every month. I was actually allocated a public housing unit in a building which they had planned to demolish for 20 years. The local authority did not spend anything on the building but it did demand us to pay rent and increased the rent as well. And I have been living in that flat ever since. That's about it about myself and now I want to speak about what we do, what we want to achieve with the *City is for all*.

First, that everyone has housing, and we are against evictions which is of much importance because in some of the districts of Budapest, there has been an increasing number of evictions. And we also want the laws that criminalized homelessness to be abolished, because someone that lives on the streets should at least not be harassed by anyone for it. And in terms of how we operate: There has been an increasing number of homeless people in Budapest. In order to do more work we are distributing the work among various working groups. One of our groups is the housing working group that is working against the evictions of tenants. Then there is the advocacy working group that focuses on people living in the sheds. Then there are several other working groups. We have a working group for internal matters that also deals with personal conflicts. And then there is the street lawyer group which has been integrated in the group before but now has become a specific organization. And we also try to organise activist cells, other cells in cities outside of Budapest.

I would like to talk about the tactics and strategies now. For example, we negotiate with local authorities and some of them do engage in discussions with us while some others don't. We also provide free legal aid, free of charge lawyers come every Friday from 3 to 5 to a square in Budapest to help homeless people that need it. We also provide free training for homeless people that can help them to get a job or and be more effective. We also organize meetings and picnics in green areas. And for some of these shed brothers we help to get housing. We also organize annual marches about homelessness and evictions. We also organize other types of protests and utilize civil disobedience as well. And we also organized blockades against evictions. Sometimes they are successful.



Picture 5. Demonstration of the *City is for all* in 2015. Photo: B. Molnár Béla

And finally I will talk about corporations or coalitions we are engaging in. We work for example together with the Hungarian anti-poverty network, we also work with the movement of workfare workers, workfare problems. And then there is organizations that were essentially created by The City is for All, that started within the group but have now become separate organizations. The first is the street lawyers' organization, which I am very proud of because they are increasingly successful in defending people's rights. We have 12 voluntary lawyers. They are lobbying local authorities to get access to public housing units in very bad shape, units that the local authorities have already abandoned and offering to renovate it and make it available for homeless people to live there. And there is also an organization called the School of Public Life which is providing training and free workshops for members. And finally there is the photography and activism project which trains our members to make nice photographs. And rely on our own images. But I want to add that we are independent from parties even though we are not independent of politics and we are developing from the bottom up. And 80 % of our members are homeless and 20 % are allies. And if we want to get something done or if we negotiate with those in power, we want to make sure that not the allied members

represent the group, but those people we are fighting for. But allied members do help the members to be prepared for such meetings and negotiations.

Dikmen Vadisi Barınma Hakkı Bürosu/Office of Housing Rights in Dikmen Vadisi (Turkey)

The name of our organization is the *Office of Housing Rights* which was established in Dikmen Valley, Ankara. My friend and I will provide you with some insider information about how this office is organized and about the current situation of the activism. Before I start I should say that I am an architect and now doing my PhD in architecture. My first encounter with the Office of Housing Rights actually dates back to 2013 and an event called “Summer school for children” also organized by the Office. I volunteered as a teacher there and was conducting some workshops called “Children and architecture” with children living in Dikmen Valley. Since that time, I participated in actions with the Office.

Before I start I want to explain you where Dikmen valley is, in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. It is very close to the city center, approximately 20 minutes by bus. Dikmen Valley has a long history of squatters settling there. Actually in 1970’s there was a rural migrational movement within Turkey, and some rural people from different parts of Turkey just settled there and occupied the land. And the profiles of these migration families are really wide-ranging, politically and ethically, religiously. The point is that Dikmen is heterogeneous in many different aspects. Like all squatter settlements, Dikmen Valley has also suffered from urban transformation projects, conducted by the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality. We are familiar with these kinds of processes, because of the general neoliberal politics of the government. The local government tries to transform many squatted spaces. In 1993, the first urban development project started for Dikmen Valley and the municipality divided this valley into five parts which they tried to implement this split stage by stage. The first three stages were executed, but the last two could not be realised. Partly because of our activism and the resistance in the remaining two sections. This is 10 years of resistance in the area. How the emergence of the resistance dates back to 2006. In this year, Ankara Metropolitan Municipality established some consensus offices in the periphery of the neighbourhood. Their aim was to offer people houses in the periphery of the city. They want to move these people away from the city but they want to give them a house.

Some people just accepted this offer, but others did not, and those who rejected the offer from the municipality, they organized with each other and they established The Office for Right to Shelter, against this approach of the municipality. They made two main decisions after they established the office.

Firstly they decided to demolish office of consensus set up by the municipality, which is what they did. One night they prepared and one night they destroyed the office. Secondly, they decided to resist for their right to shelter. And if the development project was successful, they would only settle for a house on their own land and they would not move to the periphery of the city, they would not move out. The office played an important role within this procedure. The second critical juncture in the history of Dikmen Valley was in 2007 when the municipality organized a really harsh attack against the squatters' settlement. They destroyed the whole the squats. Because of this action, the organization resisted, they really fought for their houses and won that battle in 2007. And this was really encouragement for the people. After 2007 the office began to flourish in terms of activities. The first thing that the office did was to select the representatives from the neighbourhood. And these representatives established a kind of neighbourhood assembly or people's assembly within Dikmen Valley. This could be seen as an example of self-governance because people directly decide for their future, what will happen for their neighbourhood, they got together and discussed all of the problems, all of the possible solutions, how we could resist, what could be done.



Picture 6. The Office demonstrating against the urban transformation project of the area of Dikmen Valley. Photo: Dikmen Vadisi Barınma Hakkı Bürosu

The self-governance is really important and especially the Sunday meetings. All of the tenants gather at the office and discuss their tactics and strategies against the urban development projects. The actions of the office are not limited to Sunday meetings or other house meetings. All activities are based on the principle of the right to shelter. For example the representatives of the assembly visited all of the houses and they informed people, like in the polish case, about their right to shelter and they try to organize people. Other activities are about creating a sense of community, giving the people the feeling that there is life here, yes, they are poor but it is life, and we don't want to get rid of our life, we are living here all together, we are different people with various backgrounds, but we all live together. The most important thing is to show the municipality and government that there is a vivid community here. One of the most important events that has been organised for that aim is the neighbourhood festival. The first one was organized in 2009 and it was mainly addressing the Ankara municipality. Other festivals are commercial events, but we were against those festivals and we said, there is an alternative and we will organize a free festival, where all people can come together and be entertained and enjoy themselves. The second important event we organized is the summer school for children. And this is also meant as a criticism of the government's politics of education. We advocate for free education, we want all of the people to have equal rights to equal education, some of children - rich people's children - can go summer courses and summer school, but here in our neighbourhood we also give children the opportunity. Therefore, we organized a summer school every year and including volunteer teachers. A third activity is the women's house in the resistance in Dikmen Valley. We see women as leaders of the resistance and we arrange some activities especially for women. For example on the 8th of March, the international women's day. Our activities are, however, not limited to our neighbourhood. We also participate in different public and social demonstrations and meetings in the city, because in the process of 10 years this right to shelter activism also evolves into the right to a good life. Hence, we participate in every mobilization for the right for education, for workers' rights, for women's rights. One example is when my university they tried to demolish the forest within the campus and the office was there to just support protesters against the demolition. So we see that in different parts of the city and also in different parts of Turkey, Dikmen valley - the office - was there to support the resistance. Now I am giving the word to my friend.

Another person from the same group:

I am a master degree student and I am an activist in Dikmen valley. I started with them five years ago. My friend already shared common experiences and general information, but I would also like to give you a little bit more detail

about our tactics and about our strategies, what do we do and how we could continue for 10 years.

Just to give you an idea about the area: there are around 1000 houses in our area. The people there are still living together, although they are very different. We don't have a homogeneous society, their religion, their language, their lifestyle, culture, everything! And it was a big problem for us in the beginning, because they don't want to sit together, they don't want to talk with each other. So we decided to just talk about housing rights and that's it. We do not need to talk about their culture, religion, their language, their lifestyle. Then we started to explain for them that the main problem for us is that the municipality wants to throw us out. But we all have a right to shelter, and if you want your right we cannot care about religion, lifestyle, culture etc. And housing is really the main problem for them, because they would not be able to move. Because they can't afford an apartment, and they can't buy an apartment. And even those who could said "no we don't want to go", because we don't want to change our life, we don't want to change our home, because we have memories here, and we built our home here, so we don't want to go. So the first step was to establish the right to housing and the next was to improve the living conditions. For example since the municipality dropped the attempt to evict us, we are without transportation and we tried to fix this problem. I mean to clean the valley, to find transportation for us, especially for old people. At the assembly we have one representative from each neighbourhood, who reports issues raised by the tenants and reports back to them.

We have 7 neighbourhoods in our area and everyone has a leader and its own assembly, and if they have a problem they decide together and solve it and also help each other in their daily routine. Our second tactic is the Sunday meeting. Every Sunday we meet in our office for 10 years and discuss our agenda, decide our actions and make a new plans for the new week. What we can do, what we will do if somebody got a problem in our area and our most important strategy is to not exclude anybody from the process. And I can say for me, we are successful with the Sunday meetings and in the assembly, because we still work and we can still meet after more than 10 years, and we still have a plan for the next week or the next month. But I can say we are less successful in control of people and control of leaders because sometimes it can become a problem in terms of sharing work. And yes, we have been organising, but the last three years we haven't had a formal organization, and for me to be honest: we don't need an organization, we have our leaders, we have our newspaper, we have our assembly, and it works like this. We have struggled in our area for 10 years now. We didn't have to change our area and we didn't have to go somewhere else, and now we have a cooperative. And we can say that the municipality has attacked our area for more than 10 years. They have burned our office three times, but we built it again and now we are writing a book about the story of Dikmen Valley.

Frente Popular Francisco Villa de Izquierda Independiente/ Popular Organization of Independent Left "Francisco Villa" (Mexico)

In the mid-twentieth century, Mexico experienced both an intensification of industrialization and discouragement of farming. This led to displacement and concentration of the productive forces in the main cities, giving birth to urbanization, a new phenomenon that brought serious problems, unsolved by the Government, in which the population grew excessively, being forced to survive within the informal sectors of economy and to increase the belts of misery in the periphery of the big cities.

In the early eighties, the first neoliberal policies are implemented in Mexico and with its fever of privatization, more than one thousand companies were sold to private corporations, and the Mexican government, obeying the plans of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, allowed the economy to be commanded by the law of supply and demand. What in the past was considered a right became a commodity: education, healthcare, housing, justice, they are only available to those who can afford them.



Picture 7. "Acapatzingo" Settlement of the Popular Organisation of Independent Left "Francisco Villa" in Mexico City: Photo: Organisation of Independent Left "Francisco Villa"

This context frames the beginning of our organization in 1988, in our need for a place to live which was (and it is) an inaccessible right for the majorities. This is due to the negation of this basic right by the political and economic system that allows the speculation of suitable lands for housing, it directly benefits to the real estate agencies, it keeps high costs of construction, it implements inefficient programs of social housing and it allows government's corruption.

For many years we tried to solve our housing problems individually but we were not heard. That is why we decided to get together and used mobilization as a weapon that allowed us to exist, that made us visible for the bureaucracy. Against the high costs of land, we decided to occupy it, defending it and to organize so we could solve the immediate problems of services and the issues derived from living together. We built precarious houses while we started saving money for a more permanent solution. Additionally, we had to resist repression and the attempts of eviction. Years later we managed to build permanent houses by combining loans with community work. With these collective strategies we saved an important amount of money that went to housing extensions.

Currently, the Popular Organization of Independent Left "Francisco Villa" has several settlements in different peripheral districts of Mexico City. In the district of Iztapalapa there are three settlements: Front 9 with 450 families, and Fronts Acapatzingo and 9 1/12, both with 600 families each. In the district of Tlahuac there are two settlements: Buena Suerte with 100 families; and Totlalzin with 60 families. Cisnes is a project in process and it will receive soon 200 new families. Finally, in the district of Iztacalco there are three settlements: the community Doroteo Arango with 70 families; Felipe Angeles, with 100 families; and Centauro Norte with 100 families. The construction of a fourth settlement is about to start in this district, with the building of 70 new houses for members of the organization.

Along with housing, we decided to develop self-managed projects of education, healthcare and urban agriculture, among others; all projects that improve our life conditions. We strongly believe that when these practices become life projects, we counteract the indifference and selfishness imposed by the system we live in and we create economic alternatives to the precarious salaries and services offered in my country.

Our organizational structure considers the assembly as the maximum authority, that is to say, the decisions are made by all the members. Besides, there are teams integrated by a certain number of families, depending on the size of the community and specific commissions dealing with specific tasks. Every working team name a representative.



Picture 8. Demonstration organized in 2015 by the Organisation of Independent Left "Francisco Villa". Photo: Organisation of Independent Left "Francisco Villa"

We stay away from traditional political practices and we don't have relationships with political parties. Our political practice is independent and anti-capitalist. We don't believe or participate in the electoral politics. This has led us to be in constant confrontation with the Mexican government and to suffer several episodes of repression, some of them ending in jail and murder. Despite these consequences, we can assert that our strategies have allowed us to learn and prove that we can develop alternative social, political and economic relations, outside the system.

Regarding our participation in other political networks, we are constantly trying to connect with other political forces. At a national level, we coordinate with collectives, organizations and communities from the rest of the country with diverse problems, aims and projects. Some examples are workers' organizations, sex-workers organizations, community police projects, community radios, associations of drivers and so forth. Now we are part of the National Campaign in Defence of the Earth and the Territory, along with more than one hundred

organizations and communities from the country that are resisting massive corporative projects that have not taken us into account, seriously affecting the environment, contaminating the water and lands, modifying Biosystems and destroying nature in favour of profit.