



Edited by Nóra Ugron

# HANDBOOK OF RESISTANCE TACTICS AGAINST EVICTIONS

Collection of tactics from housing justice and anti-racist movements  
in Romania, Hungary, Serbia, Germany, Portugal and Spain



EUROPEAN ACTION COALITION  
FOR THE RIGHT TO HOUSING AND TO THE CITY



CĂMIN SOCIAL ACUM!



DESIRE



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Edited by Nóra Ugron

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# INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR STRONG ANTI-EVICTION NETWORKS

*Nóra Ugron, Social Housing NOW! (Căși Sociale ACUM!), Cluj-Napoca, Romania*

**The practice of forced evictions should be abolished worldwide.** Yet, evictions that leave both adults and children on the streets or in temporary shelters without adequate alternative housing make for an unjust reality that we are faced with every year. A vital question is left for the housing movement: **what tactics should we use to show resistance to evictions and solidarity with those affected?**

In order to find new answers and to share the wisdom of experienced groups in the field, between February and September 2022, Social Housing NOW! (Căși Sociale ACUM!) organized a series of eleven anti-eviction workshops. Of these, two were supported by members of our local Cluj group, whereas the other eight were organized by activists from other local and transnational housing justice and anti-racist organizations.

We offered the workshops to a group of 10-15 local participants, who wanted to learn more about anti-eviction resistance and solidarity tactics. Our goal was, and through this publication continues to be, to build stronger local and transnational anti-eviction networks, as well as to form more sustainable action groups for housing justice in Cluj. We also want to facilitate knowledge exchange and skill sharing between activists across borders.

## How do we define forced evictions?

According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the following elements, separately or combined, define a forced eviction:

1. A permanent or temporary removal from housing, land, or both;
2. The removal is carried out against the will of the occupants, with or without the use of force;
3. It can be carried out without the provision of proper alternative housing and relocation, adequate compensation and/or access to productive land, when appropriate;
4. It is carried out without the possibility of challenging either the decision or the process of eviction, without due process and disregarding the State's national and international obligations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, 'Forced Evictions. Fact Sheet No. 25/Rev.1', New York and Geneva, 2014, p.3, available here: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5566d6744.html>

The chapters of this volume were written by the facilitators of each anti-eviction workshop. We in the first place invited activist groups that we worked with throughout the years and who are part of a national network for housing justice, called the **Bloc for Housing** (Blocul pentru Locuire).

This network consists of the following movements: the **Common Front for Housing Rights** (FCDL - Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul la Locuire) from Bucharest, **the Right to the City** (Dreptul la Oraș) from Timișoara, the Roma feminist group **E-Romnja**, as well as the **Roma Lawyers Association of Romania**, also known as **RomaJust**.

We know our comrades from this local network well and have been fighting together for housing justice from an anti-racist perspective. However, oftentimes we lack the opportunity to discuss specific tactics together and we rarely have the opportunity to discuss with new people, who stand in solidarity with our actions.

The workshops gave us a chance to tighten our connections and get to know each other better. From my point of view, **it was crucial that, by inviting these groups, we could contextualize forced evictions as a form of capitalist violence, which is present at both national and global levels, but affect us locally variably according to class, race, gender, citizenship, type of housing and so on.**

Since **2017**, we have been fighting with the **Bloc for Housing** against forced evictions and more broadly, for housing justice. We stand for everyone's access to proper housing, regardless of their background.

Throughout these years we initiated campaigns and direct actions, by which we opposed specific eviction cases and supported survivors of forced evictions. On top of this, we managed to highlight the problem of evictions in many informative and educational publications.

The scale of evictions can be understood by reading our 'Report on Forced Evictions in Romania between **2008 - 2017**'. This is a phenomenon that is rendered invisible to such an extent that most people hear very little about concrete cases. In my experience, many people are not even familiar with the term. However, **forced evictions may have affected around 1 330 000 people in post-1989 Romania.**<sup>2</sup>

When we came up with the idea of this book and the workshops, we were also motivated by **the need to have a regional overview of evictions.**<sup>3</sup>

A large part of the evictions that we fought against in Romania was either from public properties or restituted properties. This is a typical phenomenon of post-socialist spaces.

Therefore, we invited two well-established groups from the Central Eastern European region: The City is For All (**A Város Mindenkié**) from Budapest and The Common Action for a 'Roof above our Heads', in short, The Roof **Združena akcija 'Krov nad glavom'** from Belgrade.

Furthermore, we also invited **Habita 65** from Lisbon – a group that has coalesced **against mass evictions** of precarious neighborhoods populated by racialized people.

We share this phenomenon in Romania, where we had several cases of mass evictions of mostly Roma people. For example, in Baia Mare in 2012, approximately 500 people were evicted from two

<sup>2</sup> In the Report, this number is estimated according to the frequency and the character of analysed evictions. The Report can be found here in both English and Romanian:

<https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Raport-Cercetare-Evacuari-2008-2017.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See also the series coordinated by the Eastern European Left Media Outlet - ELMO and titled 'Central Eastern European Housing Movements Resisting Neoliberal Urban Transformations', which can be read here in English and several local languages:

<https://lefteast.org/category/all-posts/elmo-series-cee-housing-movements-resisting-neoliberal-urban-transformations>.

marginal neighborhoods (**Craica and Pirita**). In Cluj, in 2010 the municipality evicted 350 people from the city and abusively relocated them to the landfill in **Pata Rât**.

The latter has been a generative event for the Social Housing NOW! movement, as several of our members have gone through this experience. We remember this eviction every year, by organizing marches, protests, and discussions on the 17th of December. At the same time, we remind the authorities and the people of Cluj of this bitter truth: that this city, advertised as a real estate paradise, is in fact built on racial and class segregation.

The ‘smart’ city – blossoming, advanced, and neat – is founded upon the work and the invisible existence of around 1500 people thrown next to a landfill. More on the resistance of Pata Rât people can be read in the first article of the volume.

We invited two other groups – the Housing Union of Vallcarca (**Sindicat d’Habitatge de Vallcarca**), from Barcelona and the Coalition against Evictions (**Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern**) from Berlin, both of which organize with tenants living in privately owned housing.

We lack this form of mobilization in Romania, despite the fact that there used to be an initiative under the name Tenants’ Association in Cluj operating between 2017 and 2020.

Together with many of these groups, we are part of the **European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City**. The Coalition and the **Rosa Luxemburg Foundation** supported the organizing of the workshops and this publication.

The Coalition consists of more than **35 groups from 20 countries**. By collectively organizing and sharing knowledge within this Coalition, we are

building a powerful transnational housing justice movement. Following the workshops, each group was invited to write a chapter.

**The goal of this publication is to be a manual, a toolbox that brings together tactics, methods, case studies, and various insights that work in very different contexts.**

The chapters vary substantively in terms of format, style, and length. This reflects the fact that each eviction has a specific character, grounded in the local context. Therefore, it requires diverse and well-thought tactics, tailored to each situation.

Nevertheless, there are recurring patterns both in the authorities’ and evictors’ methods, as well as in the possible methods for resistance. As such, the goal of this publication is to deepen our understanding of these tendencies and particularities.

In 2019, the Bloc for Housing edited a ‘*Guide for preventing forced evictions and for making the authorities responsible for providing proper housing to evicted people*’ in Romanian.<sup>4</sup> The European Action Coalition has a similar English language guide, ‘Resisting Evictions Across Europe’ from 2016.<sup>5</sup> I see these two as sister publications to the present volume. I hope that it will be useful to many people who want to stand against evictions, or who want to organize for housing justice.

**We are stronger together, and in our communitarian force, a new world can be manifested – a world without oppression, where everybody has a home.**

<sup>4</sup>See: <https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Ghid-Evacuare-2019.pdf> and also <https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ce-sc483-faci-la-o-evacuare.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup>See: <https://housingnotprofit.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Resisting-Evictions-Across-Europe.pdf>.  
<https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ce-sc483-faci-la-o-evacuare.pdf>.



The evictions from Antonn Pann street in 2018 in a highly gentrified neighbourhood. Photo: George Iulian Zamfir

# ANTI-EVICTION ACTIVISM: CĂȘI SOCIALE ACUM!, FROM POLITICS TO TACTICS AND BACK

*Enikő Vincze and Linda Greta Zsiga, Social Housing NOW! (Căși Sociale ACUM!), Cluj-Napoca, Romania*

## - INTRODUCTION

Căși Sociale ACUM! - which has been active since 2016 - and Fundația Desire -, active since 2010 - have organized a variety of actions to prevent evictions. A constant learning process developed as a response to a number of evictions led to our accomplishments.

**Our tactics were devised based on:**

- (1) the residents' desire for possible resistance to the eviction,**
- (2) the stage of the eviction process at the time we learned about it,**
- (3) the locations from which the eviction was being planned,**
- (4) our knowledge and experience of possible interventions.**

Overall, all evictions that we tried to stop and our efforts to obtain alternative housing for eviction victims, were from buildings or land owned by the state and/or local public authorities. The exception to this rule was one case, which was an eviction from a building that was restituted<sup>1</sup> to a church.

Of course, **the tactics by which we pursued several concrete goals**, were combined in different ways, depending on what we perceived in each case as our main aim: stopping or delaying an eviction, getting appropriate action from the authorities, etc.

**Our actions were always informed by our fundamental political goals:**

- ▶ holding the state accountable for creating situations where local institutions decide to evict, but also demanding solutions to prevent evictions from turning into forced evictions, i.e. evictions that leave people without a housing alternative;
- ▶ identifying the causes that lead to evictions - including causes inherent in the economic conditions of those being evicted, but also causes rooted in housing and state policies on homelessness, in the broad sense of the word (people without a roof over their heads, people living on the streets or temporarily living in shelters, people whose housing is characterized by inadequate conditions that endanger their health and/or are unsafe because they are not legally recognized);
- ▶ raising awareness among a wider public of the structural causes of forced evictions, but also of the existence of housing rights, including the right to be protected from forced evictions;

The above three objectives collectively aim at building political awareness of housing injustice and creating political solidarity around the cause of housing justice. The latter includes both improving the legal system that regulates

<sup>1</sup> In Romania, property nationalized by the socialist state was restituted in many cases to their previous owners or their heirs after 1989 - in this case a church - editor's note.

housing rights, as well as the whole system of policies and economic conditions, which ensure that all people are in fact guaranteed the

possibility to make use of their rights as defined in the legislation.

Figure 1. Types of evictions identified in Cluj between 2010-2021, in which our organizations were involved.

<p>(1) Evictions from apartments belonging to the old-state-owned-housing-fund, retroceded</p> <p>(Bulevardul Eroilor nr. 43, str. Croitorilor nr.11, str. Vlad Țepeș nr. 7)</p>	<p>(2) Evictions from dwellings built without authorization around buildings rented as "social housing"</p> <p>(str. Coastei fn, str. Meșterul Manole nr.2)</p>
<p>(3) Eviction from dwellings built without authorization around buildings with apartments owned by the tenants</p> <p>(risk on str. Stephenson nr. 15)</p>	<p>(4) Evictions by dismantling informal settlements that cannot be legalised on public and/or private land</p> <p>(str. Kővári nr. 32, risk on str. Cantonului fn, str. Meșterul Manole nr. 2)</p>
<p>(5) Eviction from damaged blocks of flats owned by the municipality on the grounds that the buildings are being renovated</p> <p>(blocul NATO din cartierul Gheorgheni/ str. Albac nr. 21)</p>	<p>(6) Evictions from publicly-owned dwellings on the grounds of erasing the dwelling from the stock of homes adequate for a living</p> <p>(Calea Turzii nr. 10, str. Oituz nr. 29)</p>
<p>(7) Eviction from publicly owned housing due to rent and/ or utility debts</p> <p>(str. Meșterul Manole nr. 2)</p>	<p>(8) Eviction from a publicly owned dwelling/building in case of illegal occupation or squatting</p> <p>(str. Avram Iancu nr. 21/ Casa Călăului, str. Platanilor fn/ modular houses, str. Meșterul Manole nr. 2)</p>
<p>(9) Eviction from non-residential premises owned by the municipality</p> <p>(str. Anton Pann nr. 22)</p>	<p>(10) Eviction from an apartment belonging to the old-state-owned-housing-fund with the aim to offer it in compensation to persons entitled to retrocession of other properties that could not be retroceded in nature (str. Câmpului nr. 42)</p>

Below, we will highlight in each case what the activists for housing justice did in Cluj. We will feature the factors that led to the evictions we review here, as well as the ways in which they were carried out or, on the contrary, prevented.

Beyond each particular case and our specific interventions, it is important to mention at the outset that **the whole of Cluj's housing justice activism has also grown through the anti-eviction actions we have been planning and implementing since 2010. And conversely, the latter were also inspired by the political beliefs and strategies of the housing justice movement in general, as they have evolved over the years as a response to the housing crisis.**<sup>2</sup>

## 1. EVICTIONS IN CLUJ SINCE THE MID-1990S AND RELOCATION TO CANTONULUI STREET, AND RISKS OF EVICTIONS FROM CANTONULUI STREET IN 2011, 2015 AND 2020

We learned much later about the evictions taking place in Cluj in the **1990s**. After 2008, some of us had our first meetings with the families who were already living at that time in the double-glazed wooden houses installed by the **Ecce Homo Association** and **Pro Roma Foundation** on Cantonului Street in Pata Rât to improve the living conditions of people living there. What could we do retroactively in relation to these evictions?

In 2016 we created the opportunity for people on Cantonului Street to talk about their repeated evictions and how exactly they ended up there. For this purpose, we made the documentary film

In order to draw conclusions about the anti-eviction tactics we used in Cluj over the years and the results achieved by them, we will group the eviction cases we encountered into three broad categories.

The first two relate to two areas in **Pata Rât** (the landfill zone within the administrative limits of the city), and the third relates to more recent evictions in other areas of the city. Even though we have been part of each action described here, we will try to present them not only through facts and a critical discourse towards the eviction authorities and the system that makes them act as such but also from a self-critical angle.

**'Dislocations. Eviction routes to Cantonului Street (1996-2016).'**<sup>3</sup>

By making the issue visible, we responded to the need expressed by the people we talked to: to learn about their dramas (especially in the context of public discussion about evictions in Cluj focusing mainly on the 2010 evictions on Coastei Street).<sup>4</sup>

In parallel, we got very close to the residents of Cantonului Street and reached a consensus on the need to submit applications for social housing to the city hall. The aim here was to

<sup>2</sup> More info on the Căși Sociale ACUM! movement can be found here:

<https://casisocialeacum.ro/archives/5505/un-deceniu-de-lupta-pentru-dreptatea-locativa/>, here

<https://casisocialeacum.ro/archives/7039/2010-2020-ultimii-10-ani-in-pata-rat-album/> and here:

<https://casisocialeacum.ro/archives/7082/comunitati-rome-din-pata-rat-si-activismul-antirasist-pentru-dreptate-locativa-2>.

<sup>3</sup> The film can be watched here:

<https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=2951>. There is also an interactive map based on the film, here: <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=2621>.

<sup>4</sup> More on this below in this article.

remind the authorities about the existence, and perpetuation of the Cantonului colony with their consent and cooperation, and about the need for social housing.

But something else happened before 2016. In May 2011, people living on Cantonului Street **were sued** by the Cluj branch of the National Railway Company (CFR). CFR requested the issuance of a presidential order without a summons or the imposition of a time limit for the removal of the improvised constructions on the railway company-owned land, as well as payment of damages.

Faced with this challenge, **we mediated the hiring of a lawyer by Romani Criss**. CFR lost the case, which was not reopened since.

In June 2011, at the **International Romani Art Festival - IRAF in Cluj**, **we took the stage to present the Cantonului case, along with the fact that we were collecting signatures against the forced eviction**. The message that we are still promoting today was already formulated then: while the Roma on Cantonului Street, of course, are not happy with the conditions in which they live, they cannot accept being evicted from there and having their shacks demolished unless and until they are provided with adequate alternative housing in other parts of the city.

In 2015, even though it did not pursue its case in court, CFR resumed its attempts to demolish at least part of the constructions: the shacks on the side of the disused railway track on Cantonului Street. These attempts were thwarted in large part because people refused to demolish, especially since they won the court case in 2011. Moreover, our organizations were there to support them.

All this happened at a time when the **Working Group of Civil Society Organizations (GLOC)** was set up in 2011 after the Coastei Street eviction became internationally notorious and managed to intimidate anyone trying to carry out similar large-scale actions in Cluj.

It was then that **we drafted a comprehensive document about the housing situation on Cantonului Street**<sup>5</sup>. We submitted it to the Cluj-Napoca City Hall, along with the request to find an adequate solution to the permanent risk of eviction and the inadequate living conditions on Cantonului Street.

It was also the moment when people facing eviction decided that **applying for social housing** was for them a way to refer their housing problems to the local public authorities.

For the past eight years, our group has been supporting annually over 70 households from Cantonului Street in their efforts to apply for social housing.

The first mobilization happened in 2015, which supported the legal action taken by the **Desire Foundation** together with the 70 families on Cantonului Street against the city hall against **the illegal criteria for allocating social housing**. We also petitioned the National Council for Combating Discrimination - CNCD with regard to **the discriminatory nature of many of these criteria**.

Both of these actions ended with our victory. Even if they did not actually change the housing situation on Cantonului Street, they played an important role in the long process leading in 2021 to the city hall's recognition that Cluj-Napoca needs more social housing.

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<sup>5</sup>The document can be read here: [https://www.desire-ro.eu/?attachment\\_id=3366](https://www.desire-ro.eu/?attachment_id=3366).

In 2020, in the context of the implementation of large infrastructure plans related to the restructuring of the area between the International Airport and Someșeni Railway Station, the residents of Cantonului Street were again confronted with the risk of eviction. The 'Study for the development of intermodal transport infrastructure at Cluj-Napoca Airport (2012-2014-2016)'<sup>6</sup> foresaw several uses for the strip of land where the Roma huts on Cantonului Street are still located, which is jointly owned by CFR and the Cluj-Napoca Municipality.

'Park&Ride' facility, or spaces that would connect the airport and the train station. The residents were not informed by anyone about these plans, so we started to approach the actors involved, informing them that there were more than 170 households in that area, asking that they be informed and consulted in as much as their living there would be affected by this project, or similar projects in the area. We were told that the implementation of the project has been suspended.

However, on 20 July 2020, someone verbally summoned the 16 families from the lower area of Cantonului Street near the CFR hall, without introducing themselves or presenting any documents to this effect. The summons demanded that they demolish their informal dwellings built on this land and leave the area by the end of July 2020.

People informed us about this. We launched a campaign to collect signatures in support of those who would be affected. We obtained the support of 16 institutions for the letter we sent to the City Hall of Cluj-Napoca, the Social and Medical Assistance Department of Cluj-Napoca, the Cluj County Committee for Emergency Situations, the Prefect's Institution, the People's Advocate,

the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, the Ministry of Public Works, Development and Public Administration, the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoptions, and the National Agency for the Roma.<sup>7</sup> We asked the Regional Railway Company of Cluj and the Municipality of Cluj-Napoca to identify whoever summoned the 16 families.

No one has claimed to be behind this. We also appealed to the need not to make any evacuation in time of the pandemic, i.e. state of emergency. Obviously, people did not demolish willingly. No one has approached them to that end since then and to this day.

**>> The Cantonului case, with all of its above-mentioned moments (evictions and eviction risks, as well as mobilization tactics), demonstrates that the successes that anti-eviction activism can hope for are largely dependent on the trust relationships that activists manage to build with eviction victims.**

**People can give timely notice to activists, who can then mobilize to find out what is behind the updated risks, collect signatures of support, and notify several institutions at various levels of state authorities about what is about to happen, requesting their participation in preventing forced evictions**

**But occasional successes also depend on the persistence of anti-eviction actions over a long period of time. Even if, as we see in this case, they have not improved the living conditions on Cantonului Street, they have at least shown that people refuse to have their homes taken away from them, without getting something better in return.**

<sup>6</sup> For reference check: <https://cjcluj.ro/studiu-transport-intermodal-aeroport/>.

<sup>7</sup> Please see the the text in Romanian here: <https://casisocialeacum.ro/archives/5042/cerere-sprijin-pentru-16-familii-de-pe-strada-cantonului-f-n-calea-dezmirului-din-cluj-napoca-amenintate-cu-evacuarea-fortata/>.

The activists offer solidarity, encouragement, and arguments presented to the institutions in the language of the international human rights system. They are thus formed in time as major actors in the city's housing justice movement, alongside people who are directly affected.

It is critical to reinforce the importance of political solidarity among people of various ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as their conviction in the movement's

strength. This needs to be done not only on the occasion of eviction risks but also through other actions carried out together.

However, we are aware that the halting of the evictions on Cantonului Street is also due to the fact that the large infrastructure projects, which would necessitate the displacement of the people there, are not yet in a state of great urgency.

## 2. EVICTIONS FROM COASTEI STREET IN DECEMBER 2010, RELOCATION TO MODULAR HOUSES IN PATA RÂT, AND RISKS OF EVICTIONS FROM THERE IN THE SUMMER OF 2021

From the point of view of our activist actions, the case of the December 2010 eviction on Coastei Street is marked by a contradiction: those of us who learned about the risk of this eviction in March 2010 (Desire Foundation and Amare Phrala Association) were not present on the day of the eviction on the spot.

This contradiction can be explained by the fact that we did not know which of the three communities mentioned in the City Hall's statements (Cantonului, Pata Rât/Dallas, or Coastei) would be evicted and forcibly relocated to the modular houses built by the City Hall near the Pata Rât waste ramps, nor did we have prior knowledge of the day of the eviction.<sup>8</sup>

These two aspects may seem odd<sup>9</sup> because between March and December 2010 we had several actions against the relocation to the

said modular houses, precisely on the basis of collaboration with the communities targeted by the municipality's plans.<sup>10</sup>

**The anti-eviction actions of 2010 were not able to stop the forced eviction and relocation of the Roma inhabitants from Coastei Street to the modular houses built by the city hall next to the old landfills in Pata Rât (the non-ecological household waste landfill, and the closed medical waste landfill).**

**Most likely, those of us who organized ourselves at that time did not pose any kind of danger to the municipality. Or at least not through the petitioning and consultation tools we used. The anti-segregation discourse or environmental justice considerations we alluded to had no effect on the decision-makers. These discourses took on a completely**

<sup>8</sup> More on the relocation of Roma people here:

<https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=3637> and here <https://casisocialeacum.ro/archives/4947/10-ani-pata-rat-10-ani-de-lupta/>.

<sup>9</sup> „We say 'odd' because we worked together with the Roma community from Cantonului street, which was at that time living in Pata Rât. These people did not want to be moved close to the landfill. The families on the Coastei street collaborated with the Roma Party. For this reason, they did not participate in the aforementioned actions.

<sup>10</sup> Petitions, public events, media communiques, proposals to the City Hall, more information about this in English is available here <https://www.desire-ro.eu/?p=671>.

different agenda than the city's priority of cleaning up the area through administrative decisions and intimidation of evicted residents, even in the absence of a court case.

Perhaps even more importantly, Coastei Street had at that time become a valuable real estate area. Moreover, the authorities did not expect that after the eviction, the case would gain so much visibility. It did so mainly due to the local activism, which they did not expect in 2010.

In January 2011 we contributed to the **collection of testimonies from the victims of eviction**, which ended up being used in a court case. In April 2011, **we filed a complaint with the CNCD**, which in November of the same year decided that the Roma evicted from Coastei Street were discriminated against.

In December 2011 the court also ruled in favor of the people, both in terms of their winter eviction and relocation near the city's old non-ecological waste dump. However, the lawsuit was lost on subsequent appeals by the municipality and is now before the European Court of Human Rights - ECHR.

In 2018 the Desire Foundation along with over 50 people living in the modular homes in Pata Rât **sued the city, the county council, the environmental agencies, and the companies managing the new landfills**. These landfills were authorized and opened in 2015, less than 1000 meters from the modular homes built by the municipality in 2010. The lawsuit is ongoing - even derailed, one might say since it has high stakes for all defendants.

Beyond the above one-off actions that made use of the toolkit of legal activism, since 2011 **we have started a large international campaign** to

make this displacement visible. Organizations such as **Amnesty International, the European Roma Rights Centre, DG Regio of the European Commission, and the Open Society Institute** joined the campaign.

In addition, **each December we organize street demonstrations to commemorate the 2010 evictions** with anti-racist political messages against evictions. We also go beyond them with calls targeting the general housing crisis and the aim of building solidarity between evicted people, tenants, and all those who can no longer afford to live in Cluj, the most expensive city in Romania in terms of real estate.

**Therefore, paradoxically, the very inability to stop the eviction on Coastei Street in 2010 paved the way for further self-organization and mobilization against evictions. Moreover, the eviction, the anger at the injustice and the activist energies (albeit failed, but rallied around it) were the sparks from which the whole movement for housing justice in Cluj started.**

However, in 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Cluj municipality made several more eviction attempts. This time they targeted young families in the Pata Rât modular houses, whose adults were children when they were evicted from Coastei Street in 2010.

What actually happened? After a few rooms in the modular homes were vacated in 2017, these young people who have since become adults and parents moved in. This was not only because they became vacant, but also because it became absolutely necessary for them to move out of the rooms their parents received (each of them being no more than 16 square meters), which several generations have been crowding since.

The City Council considered these moves abusive occupations of premises on its property and consequently took three families to court demanding that they leave these rooms voluntarily. Otherwise, they would be evicted through judicial enforcement.

Learning about these lawsuits, which unfortunately were all already pending, **we chose to call on the Romanian central state authorities, on the embassies of several countries in Romania, and on international institutions dealing with the right to housing** We asked them to intervene with the Cluj municipality and demand that it does not carry out the evictions pursued through the courts.

Before sending this appeal to the recipients **we collected signatures of support from 100 organizations in Romania and abroad, as well as 415 individuals.**<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, our Call was translated (besides English) into Hungarian and Serbo-Croatian. It featured in the local left-wing press in Hungary, Serbia, and Croatia, through the solidarity of the Eastern European Left Media Network - ELMO.<sup>12</sup>

>> One of the families targeted for eviction, whose case had been more advanced in court, received in August 2021 a summons from the bailiff in this regard. **We asked the ECHR to act on behalf of the family with three children on the basis of the legal instrument called 'Rule 39', whereby the court could intervene and stop the eviction.**

As part of its procedure, the ECHR sent a request for information to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which in turn requested the position of the municipality of Cluj-Napoca on the case.

In its response, **following pressure from several parties, the municipality promised to suspend the eviction. It went so far as to deny, in the local press, that it intended to carry out any eviction in the first place.**

>> In the case of another family, a three-year-old girl ended up being sued directly, without a guardian or parent, even though her father had vacated the occupied room within a very short time of first being notified. Faced with this case, **we challenged this procedure in court through a lawyer**, and the case has not yet been finally settled.

In addition, we also ran a **consistent awareness campaign on social media, followed by a street action - a flash mob in front of the town hall - and press releases sent out at home and abroad. The campaign targeted the housing policies of Cluj Municipality which systematically violated the rights of those entitled to adequate social housing, the right to be protected from forced evictions, but also the particular rights of vulnerable groups such as Roma and other marginalized people, people with disabilities and chronic diseases and the rights of children.**<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Find the appeal in Romanian here: <https://casisocialeacum.ro/archives/6321/apel-catre-autoritatile-statului-roman-si-organizatii-internationale-risc-major-de-evacuare-in-pata-rat-din-cluj-napoca/>.

<sup>12</sup> See here in English: <https://lefteast.org/increased-risk-of-eviction-in-pata-rat-of-cluj-romania-solidarity-call/>.

<sup>13</sup> See here: <https://casisocialeacum.ro/archives/6553/dreptate-pentru-lara-comunicat-de-presa-2/> and here <https://casisocialeacum.ro/archives/6379/dreptate-pentru-lara-comunicat-de-presa/>, in Romanian.

### 3. EVICTIONS FROM OTHER PARTS OF CLUJ BETWEEN 2018-2021

These can be grouped into three sub-categories according to their outcomes:

#### 3.1 Stephenson Street: The permanent risk of eviction in an informal settlement

We had the opportunity to get to know the housing situation in **Stephenson Street** in 2014 through a chance encounter with a family living in one of the shacks built around the old house, at this address. The building has five apartments, three of which are the personal property of the residents, while the rest belong to a private company. We learned then that people from two shacks built illegally were fined by the local police because they built them without a permit on state-owned land.

The fine came with a notice of voluntary and then administrative demolition, but the municipality also opened a court case.

By the time we got to know the situation, the families already had a court order for demolition, issued in 2014.

The people did not want to demolish their homes. Even though they were very small and uncomfortable, with no water or toilet in the house, this was their only affordable living space. Neither the court ruling nor the city's notifications ever took this into account. Neither did they take into account the fact that these shacks are not simply empty makeshift dwellings, but are living quarters - the homes of low-income families who continue to live there in the absence of an alternative, i.e. in

the absence of social housing, which, in fact, they have repeatedly requested from the municipality.

We used the time of our meeting with the families from Stephenson Street **to document the process by which this informal settlement was formed. We developed and submitted a paper with this information to the City Hall.**<sup>14</sup>

We described the socio-economic and housing situation of the families there. In addition, we asked the local public authorities to take this into account and to find solutions that would put an end to the risk of people becoming homeless in the event of the demolition. We have also notified the prefecture of this critical situation.

In 2016, City Hall replied that they would start working on an integrated solution. That same year we filed an enforcement case with a County Bailiff Office ("Birou Executor Juecatoresc" or BEJ in Romanian). We challenged the execution through a European Roma Rights Centre - ERRC - supported lawyer, but, as expected, the appeal was lost. The case was not discussed in court in terms of social issues, but only in terms of the unlawfulness of the construction.

Thus, in 2017 the municipality notified the BEJ to proceed with the compulsory execution of the demolition, but nothing happened until 30 August 2021, when the BEJ told the families to demolish the two shacks on their own accord within two days. Otherwise, the demolition sentence was to be enforced.

<sup>14</sup> See here, in Romanian: [https://www.desire-ro.eu/wp-content/uploads/Situatia\\_locativa\\_Stephenson15\\_aprilie20153.pdf](https://www.desire-ro.eu/wp-content/uploads/Situatia_locativa_Stephenson15_aprilie20153.pdf).

At that point, **we implemented the tactics that had already been used in Pata Rât. However, with only two days left, we could no longer collect signatures of support, but directly sent our Call for Support<sup>15</sup> to central institutions of the Romanian state, to embassies, and to international organizations.** In this call, we presented the situation and asked for their intervention to stop the evictions until alternative housing was offered to the displaced.

The call was also sent to the local and international press.

► We were asking the municipality to undertake a social inquiry into the demographic, socio-economic, and medical situation of the families concerned, before embarking on any intervention that would leave their members homeless.

● We were saying that the law allows the municipality to postpone the implementation of eviction court decisions.

► In parallel, also through the ERRC, **the two families filed applications to the European Court of Human Rights for the application of Rule 39.**

in this case, too, something similar to the Pata Rât case happened: on September 30, 2021, the City Hall replied to the ECHR through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that it *'will carry out, through DASM - Social and Medical Welfare Directorate, a thorough analysis of the situation, so that the rights of the citizens are respected, and the implementation of the sentence will not take place until the social situation of these people is resolved.'*

In the meantime, strangely enough, even at the proposal of the bailiff, by paying a bail of 1000 lei, we filed with the Cluj Court a request for provisional

suspension of the enforcement of the demolition, and also a request for suspension of the eviction. The request for provisional suspension was instantly granted, but the request for full suspension was eventually rejected and we are now appealing the court's decision.

If the case is lost (again), and if the bailiff restarts the action we will again file the families' applications to the ECHR to stop the eviction until they receive alternative housing.

**In our tactics to extend the time period in which the municipality pursues the eviction - through the existing avenues in the courts, or by putting pressure on the local government in other ways - we have relied on solid documentation of the situation and on requests made by families with the support of activists.**

**In the case of Stephenson Street, this tactic led to the delaying of the demolition and eviction decision for eight years. Even if the families have not received social housing in the meantime, despite repeated requests to this effect, at least they have not been left homeless.**

**Even if it has been and is still being prolonged, this demolition, which represents a genuine eviction, will not be able to be delayed indefinitely. The surrounding area (a former industrial zone) is undergoing massive real estate development with residential, commercial, and office buildings.**

### 3.2. Cases of evictions from public or private property

The evictions at **Anton Pann Street (2018)** and **Meșterul Manole Street (2018, 2021)** were evictions from municipal-owned premises and the

<sup>15</sup> See here, in English: <https://casisocialeacum.ro/archives/6408/imminent-eviction-in-cluj-napoca/>.

one at **Vlad Țepeș Street (2019)** from a building restituted to the Reformed Church.

**We gathered a group of about 15-20 people at all four evictions, in the hope that we could get a solution on the spot from the City Hall.**

However, knowing how strict the Romanian legislation is, we could not hope in any of the cases that the evictions would be suspended due to our presence and the media pressure we created.

>> The first situation that led us to get involved was the one on **Anton Pann Street in June 2018**. The family, which had been living there in a basement for 21 years, was paying a so-called abusive rent since the beginning of the lawsuit. The case was started against them by the authorities because the City Hall claimed it could not use its premises due to this occupation. It did not want to resist the eviction, yet was determined not to accept the municipality's proposal to place them separately in shelters for men, women, and children respectively.

Eviction from such a space comes as no surprise to anyone looking at the very ambitious real estate development in the area.

**The bailiff came with a team of police and gendarmes to ensure that the eviction would go 'smoothly', but he also notified the Social and Medical Welfare Directorate (DASM). We turned to the latter, appealing to the fact that the family included a young disabled man and two minor children. At the end of the day, after persistent discussions with the head of DASM and the social workers sent there, the family was offered a room in a local private homeless center supported (also) by city funding.**

The family lived there for a few months, but having to go to work and school, they could not adapt to the strict schedule of the center, nor could they bear the idea of being classified as homeless, like the other people there. Eventually, the mother found a private rental in a nearby town, making efforts to pay it and to continue working in Cluj.

>> The **2018 eviction on Meșterul Manole Street** went somewhat similar to the one above, except that at some point our discussion with DASM was passed on to the mayor. Thus, a group consisting of **the family who had rent and utility debts, with a disabled child in a wheelchair, together with several people from our team and a deputy from Cluj, was received in an emergency audience with the mayor. He arranged a housing solution for the family.**

**The solution was a two-bedroom and one-bathroom container-type dwelling located in the courtyard of the DASM Social Inclusion Centre.** The family is still living there, even though the solution was defined as temporary.

>> In **2019**, a group of former state tenants was evicted from a building restituted to the Reformed Church, on **Vlad Țepeș Street**.

**The bailiff was willing to engage with us and wait because we were insisting on supporting one of the families, with an elderly woman, two children, and her grandchild. We insisted that he wait and not force the family out of the apartment until a representative of the city moved in.**

But both the city hall and DASM refused any dialogue or offer of a solution. At some point, the owners of the building, backed by the gendarmes, started to break windows and parts of the walls, so the family left the apartment with us.

In the warmer months, the old woman lived on the street, sometimes staying with acquaintances, and applying for social housing, but without success. She passed away earlier this year.

>> Another eviction took place from an old state building at **Meșterul Manole Street**<sup>16</sup>, which was occupied informally by a woman and her two children. The room had been rented in the name of her ex-husband in the past. This eviction did not lead to an acceptable solution either.

On the contrary, **there was a very violent action, ending with the gendarmes throwing tear gas at the family inside the room where they were living, in order to force them out. Our presence there could not convince the bailiff to sit down and discuss with the family, or with us and explain how he could make an eviction in 2021 based on a 2013 court decision. The DASM representatives participating in the eviction did not offer any alternative housing solution either.**

At the moment of writing, the story goes on with two court cases:

- ▶ one filed by the gendarmerie against the boy in the family who verbally threatened the gendarmes;
- ▶ and the other filed by the family against the gendarmerie for using violence against them during the eviction.

**In addition to the evictees' homelessness and their obligations to pay the bailiff's costs, anyone who has ever wrongfully occupied a city-owned building in Cluj-Napoca is deemed ineligible for social housing. In these cases, housing injustice manifests itself in an inhumane, discriminatory, and illegal way.**

### 3.3. Eviction from a disused dwelling (2020)

This is the case of an eviction made from part of a residential building on **Oituz Street**. This building is part of the old housing estate owned by the municipality, which decided to decommission it due to the building's degradation.

The move was made with the consent of the residents, who were forced to move out because they could no longer live there.

**We supported the family at a meeting with the deputy mayor of Cluj and submitted a request on their behalf to be offered another home instead, from the public housing fund. In the end, they were offered emergency housing, but this does not meet the needs of the large family.**

In addition to the eviction, the case also reveals the problem of removing housing units from the public housing stock without offering alternatives to the tenants. This is based on the decision not to carry out the necessary repairs and investments in the old housing, but to get rid of it. At the same time, new social housing is not provided as a replacement.

#### Closing remarks

The national legal context, in which our anti-eviction activist interventions are situated, is one that is entirely unfavorable to people at risk of eviction or already evicted.

In this context, the legality of evictions, in the understanding of the state, or other large landlords, means assessing situations where landlords resort to eviction from the point of view of property as a legal relationship.

<sup>16</sup> As specified in our Handbook for Social Housing (Desire, 2022), housing from the old state fund has not (yet) been sold or restituted. It is still rented to the population by the municipality. This is different from social housing, which came into being with the 1996 Housing Act and cannot be sold.

Unfortunately, neither landlords seeking eviction, nor the courts

- take into account the human aspects of evictions;
- they do not analyze the economic and social situation or the state of health of the people whose eviction they decide.

This position is also in line with the mainstream thinking on housing, **which effectively considers housing to be a commodity and a financial asset and that what matters in the production and distribution of housing is its market exchange value and not its social value.**

Even though, legally speaking, the Romanian legislation has some provisions supporting citizens' right to housing, in practice many people do not have the material resources to make use of this right. The state authorities can afford not to fulfill their administrative obligations to implement this right.<sup>17</sup>

The housing policy needs to be radically changed and the number of social housing units or other types of non-profit housing not traded on the real estate market must be substantially increased. Until then, we cannot expect the Romanian state to prohibit evictions that leave people without adequate housing.

However, Social Housing NOW! together with comrades from Bloc For Housing are pushing this issue at the national level. For the moment, until we get a positive reaction to this demand from the national decision-makers, we have the local anti-eviction attempts carried out in various ways, such as those discussed in this article.

Due to systemic reasons, not all of our anti-eviction attempts lead to an acceptable end. However, if there were enough such interventions in different localities in Romania, they could have the potential to draw the attention of decision-makers to the dramatic effects of evictions on people's lives and health and to support the political need to ban such evictions through law.

This is the leverage that is necessary but by no means sufficient to improve the lives of low-income people who cannot afford adequate housing from their income. That's why **Social Housing NOW! argues that banning forced evictions and increasing the public social housing fund must go hand in hand.**

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<sup>17</sup> References to international and Romanian housing legislation can be found in these guides: <https://romacenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/03-GHID-DE-CE-ESTE-ILEGAL-SI-ILEGITIM-CA-SA-LASAM-OAMENII-EVACUATI-FARA-ALTERNATIVA-LOCATIVA.pdf> ; <https://romacenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/01-GHID-OBLIGATIA-DE-A-NU-DISCRIMINA-PRIN-POLITICILE-LOCATIVE.pdf>. see also: <https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/2022/04/06/dreptul-la-locuire-pentru-grupuri-vulnerabile-aspecte-si-recomandari-legislative/>.





Photo: George Iulian Zamfir

R O L E C T I A P U B L I C

Nicoleta Vișan  
& FCDL  
JURNAL DIN VULTURILOR 50  
povestea unei lupte  
pentru dreptate locativă

# THE ETHICS OF SOLIDARITY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF EVICTIONS.

## A Guide for How to Ethically Portray Evictions

*Assembled by Veda Popovici, Common Front for Housing Rights (FCDL - Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul la Locuire), Bucharest, Romania*

This guide is aimed at **people doing research, journalism, or art** and who want to ethically approach the topic of evictions.

It asks how do we:

- **represent**
- **document**
- **and participate as people in solidarity with the housing justice struggle?**

The guide's ethical approach is rooted in the experiences and the needs of those involved in organizing within the housing justice movement, as well as in fighting evictions.

Below is a condensed form of a larger guide, divided into two parts.

- ▶ The first part consists of a critical framework concerning the state of affairs. The representation of evictions, especially journalistic representation - while it may reflect good intentions - participates in marginalizing the survivors of housing injustice. It infantilizes people organizing against evictions and reinforces racism.
- ▶ The second part of the text puts forward a number of tools through which representation can be undertaken with respect and care for those involved in an eviction.

These tools are designed especially for people who want to carry out journalistic reports and artistic depictions.

This text is based on two anti-eviction workshops held by **Veda Popovici** - one co-organized by the **Common Front for Housing Rights (Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul la Locuire)** henceforth **FCDL** and **Social Housing NOW! (Căși Sociale ACUM!)** in **2022** as part of the **Anti-Eviction Resistance Tactics**, the second organized by **FCDL** and **Giuvlipen in 2017** and held together with **Mihaela Drăgan** as part of the **Jakhalipen project led by Giuvlipen**.

<< Photo: Nicoleta Vișan and FCDL, *Jurnal din Vulturilor 50. Povestea unei lupte pentru dreptate locativă* is a volume built around the testimony of FCDL member Nicoleta Vișan. She, her family, and her community were evicted in 2014 from 50 Vulturilor Street and then she and others in the evicted community participated in projects to self-represent their experience.

# I. HOW ONE WRITES ABOUT EVICTIONS

Most media articles reporting on evictions, insist on certain aspects of the lives of the evicted:

- **the precarious conditions in which they live,**
- **the way they look and are dressed,**
- **the number of children,**
- **whether or not they have a formal job,**
- **their level of education,**
- **whether or not they have legal housing,**
- **ethe extent of their debts, etc.**

These details are almost always approached from **a racist** and **classist** perspective, developing implicitly or explicitly into reasons to justify the eviction.

Moreover, in media reports, those who protest and oppose forced evictions are portrayed as rowdy, uncivilized, and profiteering.

**These aspects of the portrayal of evictions and those affected by them reproduce and reinforce racist and classist stereotypes. Based on these stereotypes, people affected by evictions are blamed for the loss of their homes. Moreover, they are dehumanized and debased as city residents.**

By reproducing classist and racist justifications for evictions, there emerges a consensus and a normalization of the phenomenon. Such representations **become complicit in the dispossession and dislocation of communities. In other words, the media often present evictions as if everyone agrees with them. In this way, the media becomes complicit in perpetuating acts of injustice, denying the**

**diversity and strength of their resistance to forced evictions.**

The mode of representation exemplified above **ignores and obscures the systemic causes of evictions. They are generated through public decisions and housing policies and through pressure from powerful agents (such as real estate companies, investors, etc.).**

Such depictions also ignore and conceal the social responsibility of the authorities. By blaming the evicted, the media plays an important role in reproducing and reinforcing the discourse of hatred towards the poor, along with justifying poverty as an individual choice and the result of laziness.

However, the media can also combat this type of hate speech and play a key role in protecting/promoting the right to adequate housing. **The media can make the struggle for adequate housing visible by accurately portraying both the eviction and the acts of resistance to it.**

## 1. Five common approaches

**I have identified five types of approaches or attitudes** that are widespread in journalistic and other writings that may have good intentions or at least a claim to neutrality, yet **unfortunately reproduce the same racist and classist stereotypes reinforcing marginalization and invisibility.**

► **Charity:** a mindset that depoliticizes injustice. A charitable approach hides the underlying causes of an unjust predicament: racism, capitalist exploitation, homophobia, etc.

>> For example, while charity only talks about how difficult an evicted person's situation is, there is no attention paid to their resilience and strength, or to the attitudes and actions of the authorities and evictors.

► **Denial of protest:** most of the time, the evicted people resist and protest in various ways. Due to a prevailing Western bias in society, both the media and sometimes also activist groups, have a very limited understanding of what can and cannot be considered an act of protest. Because of the specific ways in which evicted communities mobilize (spontaneous picketing at city halls, hunger strikes, street protest camps, etc., these actions are not viewed as protests.

► **Culturalisation and exoticization:** describing the events of an eviction as part of Roma or working-class culture always reproduces racist and classist stereotypes. **Such an approach is deeply offensive and can do great harm to the already dire situation of the concerned community.** The tone here is often one of: 'us' - the readers or listeners, the 'civilized' and 'commonsensical' people - versus 'them' - the evicted, 'outraged', 'non-integrated', etc.

When it is not explicitly racist and classist, this view suggests that the solution to the harsh situation of eviction is that the people in these situations ought to be 'integrated' and 'civilized'. The real systemic and structural nature of evictions is completely overlooked. The responsibility still falls on the shoulders of the most vulnerable.

► **Visibility at all costs:** in journalistic, artistic, or academic circles, the visibility of a particular phenomenon is often considered a very high priority. The fact that 'one ought to know about...' ends up being more important than the price or the risks that such visibility implies. In organizing a social movement, different levels of visibility are used: a specific activity can either be strictly internal, or it can aim towards other social movements, the authorities, etc.

These levels are chosen according to the risks involved and the resources devoted to a particular action. When a person producing journalistic, academic, or artistic material does not take these entanglements into account, they may bring unwanted visibility, thus hampering the strategy of that movement or even exposing or outing certain people.

► **Illegality.** There can be various aspects of legality and illegality of what is going on in an eviction. Often, people who are evicted do not have so-called proper legal forms for their homes even if they may have them at some point in time. Following an eviction, they may also be pushed into squatting without legal forms, to avoid living directly on the street.

Publicizing and focusing on these details can do a great deal of harm to the people concerned. In addition, this reproduces a number of racist or classist practices whereby Roma and/or poor people are being criminalized. Instead, focusing on the recurrent illegal actions of the authorities and evictors can help the community and draw critical attention to the real culprits.

## II. THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION – AN ACTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

### 1. Key questions for an accountable approach

An accountable approach seeks to clarify the purpose and audience of a journalistic or an artistic piece (?). It honestly reflects on the relationship with the people represented and carefully weighs the consequences of the published material. Therefore, I suggest the following key questions to outline the responsible dimension of the message.

#### A. Purpose and audience

1. Answer as honestly as possible: what is the purpose of your material?
2. Who are you making the material for? What is your target audience?
3. Is the form of circulation suitable for the audience?

>> For example, if the target audience is the authorities, circulating the material in the press is not necessarily the most effective way of making your message go through.

#### B. Informing the people who are being represented

1. To what extent are those represented informed about the production and distribution aspects of the material? Do they know the context, purpose, and circulation of the material? Do they know who will see/read it?
2. How do those represented to participate in making the final form of the material? Can they check the final version of it?

3. Are the represented persons informed about the risks of publishing the material?

#### C. Consequences

1. What confidential or sensitive information should you leave out? Consider not only personal information but also the unlawfulness of certain activities.
2. What are the real consequences of publishing the material?
3. What are the possible unintended consequences of publishing the material?
4. Is it worth the risk?

### 2. How can you represent people affected by evictions in a dignified way?

■ **Recognise forced evictions as a form of injustice!** Clarify and repeat in your materials that, **according to international human rights conventions and laws on preventing and combating poverty, everyone has the right to decent living and housing.**

■ **Let the evicted people speak for themselves!** Give them space in the material to represent their struggle and do not make assumptions about why they are in this situation. An eviction is an extremely traumatic event that will scar the people affected for life: they see their own homes forcefully taken from them, with no control over the process. Respect this and do not reinforce their trauma by seizing control over how their lives are being represented.

■ **Evictions, like poverty, affect Roma people disproportionately.** Although these are consequences of structural discrimination, the media, by highlighting the ethnicity of evictees, presents the phenomenon in cultural-ethnic terms. In other words, the eviction becomes associated with the specifics of Roma culture, thus ignoring the deeply political nature of this process - a deeply racist association! Therefore, if you specify the ethnicity of evictees, you need to explain why you are doing so and how socioeconomic status and ethnicity intersect to restrict the right to housing. Otherwise, you risk repeating and normalizing commonplace racism in society.

■ **Acknowledge the evictees and respect their struggle!** Portraying the displaced people's protest as a brawl minimizes, exoticizes, and ridicules their rebellion. It disrespects and dehumanizes the efforts of some people to defend their lives. Wherever there is abuse and oppression, there is resistance. The fact that their resistance does not fit the media's understanding of a 'protest' does not change the deeply political nature and the resilience of their reaction.

■ **Write in an accountable way, regardless of the legal status of the community at risk!** Write in a way that avoids exposing or further rendering vulnerable those affected. The fact that a community is not (anymore) living with legal forms in a particular space, is often used in the media to legitimize their eviction. The housing justice movement asserts that eviction without proper relocation is never justifiable, regardless of the legal status of the residents!

■ **Protect the identity and personal information of the people being evicted.** Sometimes disclosing their names or details of their

situation (including the area or address where they will move) puts them at risk: it can attract the attention of authorities, other landlords, or malicious neighbors. The practices of the press can have serious repercussions on the unfolding events, and therefore disclosure of any personal information should only be made if it is for the benefit of those affected.

■ **Photographs and videos that become public should be made only with the consent of the evicted people.** In addition, make a consistent effort to protect: the identity of minors (do not film or photograph them); the privacy of people who are evicted, i.e. do not photograph/film their personal belongings; the dignity of evicted people with disabilities.

Also, emphasize:

- ▶ a) the acts of self-representation of the evicted people: talk about what happens to them in their own terms and
- ▶ b) the acts and actions of the evictors, especially the bailiffs and the police.

■ **In the case of audio or video interviews: first and foremost, ask the evicted for their consent;** prepare them first, tell them what you would like to ask them and whether they agree to answer; let the concerned people speak, without constantly interrupting with new questions; remember that the trauma of the eviction is extremely strong and some questions can be tiring or trigger strong emotions.

■ **Ask what the authorities are doing!** In doing so, highlight the social role of the state. When writing about an eviction include the following issues:

- ▶ Have the local authorities carried out adequate social welfare measures to prevent the eviction?

- ▶ How were the evicted people consulted/ involved in finding suitable housing solutions?
- ▶ Were the police violent during the eviction?
- ▶ Did the local authorities provide suitable alternative housing?
- ▶ How did the representatives of the authorities behave and speak to the evicted people?

■ **Follow the actions of the police!** Most of the time, the police act violently. Beyond the violence of the evictions themselves, often law enforcement breaks the law, insulting with racist and classist slurs, intimidating evictees with threats and lies, handling people's objects, or even using the gear they carry (batons, tear gas, etc.). The presence of people filming or photographing (especially if they appear professional) can stop them or at least temper them.

■ **Contextualise the eviction!**

- ▶ Find out what kind of eviction it is (from housing that is restituted<sup>1</sup>, social, public, etc.).
- ▶ Find out if there are any real estate interests behind the eviction and find out who will profit from it: the local government, a real estate developer, etc.
- ▶ Find out if there are similar cases in the area - most of the time there are! First ask the evicted people if any of their relatives, friends, or colleagues are facing similar situations.
- ▶ Find out/observe whether the eviction was made following legal procedures and whether the affected people were able to: a) defend themselves, b) were consulted by the authorities, c) were offered relocation solutions.
- ▶ Find out about the stories and trajectories of those evicted; some are portrayed in the media as 'illegal' although they had had tenancy contracts with the state for decades; others are portrayed as 'illegal' but their years-long struggle

in poor housing conditions is not reported. Often, people evicted are not dislocated for the first time.

■ **Solidarity, not charity!**

Represent the evicted not as victims in need of help, but as individuals and communities resisting and fighting back against structural processes of urban transformation that deepen the marginalization and social exclusion of the most precarious.

3. How can your material become a form of participation in the struggle?

As a person producing journalistic, academic, or artistic material, your involvement can be limited to a respectful but spot-on representation of an eviction.

A good place to start is **by sharing all the information you have collected with the activists involved in the situation.** All the details you have learned while preparing your material, your notes, pictures, and recordings can be very useful to activists working with the evicted communities.

However, your involvement can go further. For example, **your interest can extend in the longer term** by producing more material that supports and empowers the struggle against evictions and for housing rights. Such an involvement amounts to **participating in that social movement**, contributing with your own knowledge, skills, privileges, and resources to strengthen the struggle.

Similarly, **your professional knowledge (artistic, academic, or journalistic) can empower the community** to produce self-representational

<sup>1</sup>In most Central and Eastern European countries, private property was nationalized by socialist and communist regimes in the 1950s. With the advent of neo-liberal capitalism, these properties (residential, commercial, industrial, land and forestry) have entered a complicated process of being restituted. In the Romanian context, this effectively means that housing built before the 1950s is returned to the heirs of the original owners and current residents are evicted.

materials: posts, articles, books, exhibitions, plays, films, etc. co-produced by the community on their own terms and representing their vision. Your role can be to support the production, promotion, and dissemination of such self-representations.

Finally, **the content you produce can be an active part of a social movement's strategy**: a media article or an artwork placed at the right time, in the right place, can significantly help the success of a political message.

Such interventions are ideally made together with the network of groups, communities, and individuals that are part of the social movement.



After the eviction in the Torontalului neighborhood. Photo: Tania Strizu

# EVERYDAY STRUGGLES FOR THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

**Tania Strizu, Right to the City (Dreptul la Oraş), Timișoara, Romania**

## STORY I - THE FABRIC NEIGHBORHOOD, TIMIȘOARA

I met the family in Fabric around 2019, when they asked for assistance in getting their ID cards made. They are a Roma family of 6 people: 4 children and 2 adults. The father is in prison while the mother takes care of the 4 children.

With our group, the Right to the City (Dreptul la Oraş), we have kept a direct and close link with the family, even celebrating birthdays together. The family did not receive any social aid, the only income being the children's allowance, which paid for the rent. But the housing situation had always been a problem.

The landlord was not respecting any of his obligations to preserve the property he rented in the Fabric neighborhood. We helped the family with repainting and renovations when necessary. Moreover, the house was always infested with cockroaches and on two occasions it was necessary for professionals to intervene in order to pest control, throwing out all the furniture and personal belongings from the house.

Before ending up in this location, the family lived in an abandoned building where the housing conditions were even more difficult:

*'Before the pandemic, we used to live in an abandoned building; we were more than 10 adults with 5-6 children per family. We were all Roma living there, except one old lady, who was Romanian. One day the police came and gave us a one-month notice to leave the building,*

*and when the month was over, they threw us out and we stayed outside with the children and the luggage. But we didn't take much, because we had nowhere to take our things. I can never forget how they put big chains and padlocks on the gate. The mayor, some policemen, and some masked men arrived because some people started shouting and crying. We lived there for 10 years, the house belonged to an Italian man. There were a lot of children and old people, but the masked men came, closed the gates and we stayed in the street with what we could take and we all left wherever we could.'*

Meanwhile, the family immigrated in 2022 to Belgium, due to difficulties in finding a job and affordable rent (in relation to income) in Romania.

## STORY II - THE TORONTALULUI NEIGHBORHOOD, TIMIȘOARA

Before the pandemic (in 2020) we got in touch with a Roma family from the Torontalului neighborhood, which consisted of 8 relatives who lived on a plot of land. There, during the 5 years they had been in Timisoara, they built their own makeshift houses.

The land was highly sought after by real estate agents, as the area was undergoing a so-called development.

A week after the end of the pandemic was announced, they were forcibly evicted at 5 am, with police assistance. We mobilized the next day by bringing the press to the site, and

they contacted the authorities to find out the documentation behind the action. Unfortunately, no official information was ever made available. We believe it was carried out abusively, in the absence of an eviction order. Moreover, the lawyer we contacted could not find this information either.

Furthermore, they were never offered any alternative accommodation. The family lived on the streets until the winter of 2021 when they found a similarly precarious rent in the area of the North Train Station. We continue to support this family occasionally with rent payments and basic food through donations to Right to the City.



Before the eviction in the Torontalului neighborhood. Photo: Tania Strizu

## STORY III - THE ARADULUI NEIGHBOURHOOD, TIMIȘOARA

With the increasing militarization of the Croatian-Bosnian border and within a generally hostile environment towards migrants, the Balkan route shifted towards Romania during the last months of 2020.

Since October 2020 there has been a sharp increase in the number of people crossing the border into Serbia and arriving around Timisoara or even in the city. In **2020 alone, the number of asylum applications in Romania tripled from an annual average of 2,000 to around 6,000 people.**

The local refugee center is basically a camp, with several dormitories and an open space **designed for 100-150 people.** Indeed, **the center cannot properly manage 300-350 people,** as it currently does. The pictures we have obtained from inside this place are shocking: overcrowded spaces, makeshift and precarious living conditions, dirty mattresses, kitchens, bathrooms, etc.

F., a young woman from Syria who walked all the way from Greece to Romania, says that she has not seen anything like these conditions in

any of the other countries. Lacking any other accommodation options, most migrants arriving in Timisoara find shelter in various places around the city.

**Each time, there are around 200-300 migrants sleeping in the open, in abandoned buildings, or in open fields, sometimes in sub-zero temperatures.**

One of the main squatting sites is in the Aradului neighborhood, behind a shopping area consisting of several supermarkets. They live in a hollowed-out container and keep themselves warm with coal or wood, even over winter.

Therefore, we can see simultaneously two symptoms of the capitalist system: the excess of consumerism represented by the supermarkets and the people struggling to survive in the cracks of the system.

We continue to offer support, usually by providing a hot meal to these people, and every Tuesday we collect goods to support refugees in Timisoara.



Refugees in the Aradului neighborhood. Photo: Tania Strizu



# HOUSING AND EVICTIONS FROM AN INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

*Anca Georgiana Nica and Magdalena Roxana Oprea, E-Romnja, Bucharest, Romania*

## I. THE S.O.R.A. FEMINIST COMMUNITY INTERVENTION METHOD

In July 2022, E-Romnja celebrated its **10th** anniversary. Why was there a need for a Roma feminist organization? Mainly because of the lack of safe spaces for Roma girls and women; because the need to put Roma women's issues on the agenda of local authorities is urgent; because we live in a racist society that works with stereotypes and prejudices against Roma women; and because we need to be visible, heard and listened to.

E-Romnja is currently active in 3 communities: **Valea Seacă (Bacău County)**, **Mizil (Prahova County)**, and in **two neighborhoods in Giurgiu municipality**. A few months ago, we started to replicate our **S.O.R.A. working method** in two other communities (Bahna, Neamț County, and Breasta, Dolj County) and we will do this for 2 years in a partnership with **Save the Children** and **Bahna town hall** (Neamț county).

Each of these communities has its specific issues. Roma settlements are not all the same: there are several Roma families, some are Romani speakers, others are not; some are traditional, others are semi-traditional, preserving only certain traditions, customs, or language, while others are not traditional at all.

Many were forcibly assimilated under state socialism and lost their Roma identity. There are also Roma people that have the privilege of white skin and that navigate through all these systems and sometimes do not acknowledge their Roma identity, precisely as a means of protection. Racism takes many forms and is sometimes so treacherous

that it is difficult to identify or recognize. There are dark-skinned people who have chosen white-skinned partners so that their future children are not born dark-skinned and do not suffer as much from discrimination.

The **S.O.R.A.** feminist community intervention method was developed by E-Romnja and comes from the abbreviation of our working steps:

**S** stands for **study**, meaning that when we start to work in a community, we do an analysis of the existing community profile. We gather information from both official and unofficial data. Research is done using traditional methods, with questionnaires administered to the authorities, but also to key people in the community. When we approach a community, we either go together with the healthcare mediator who works there or with a school mediator.

**O** comes from **organizing**. If in the previous step, a need has been identified, in the second step we start drawing up the work plan and setting up the steering group. Once trust is built with the women in the community, the **Reclaiming** begins, because women become aware of how things should be and begin to see the solutions that best meet their needs and contexts.

**Advocacy** is the stage through which demands are directed to the authorities. At this stage, women collect signatures for various petitions, attend and monitor local council meetings, organize various community actions, marches, protests, etc.

## II. INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF HOUSING IN THE COMMUNITIES WHERE E-ROMNJA OPERATES

The issue of housing has surfaced in our work from the very beginning and can be defined in a much broader sense than the actual living space. Women have taught us this over time because they are the ones who have built or changed our agenda.

For example, in **Mizil** we learned how important it is to have a clean, decent, safe home that is hooked up to water, gas, and electricity, or to have pavement on the street.

▼ Not having electricity means you are always living at risk of a fire. The lack of drinking water affects mainly Roma women who take care of the household. Since **2013**, when we started to work in Mizil, there has been neither pavement nor running water in the community.

▲ **The Roma women mobilized and got heavily involved. They started to monitor the local council meetings and managed, in the first phase, to bring two water pumps to the community.**

All the work E-Romnja has done in Mizil over the last 10 years has been strongly focused on **community organization and civic and political participation**, with Roma women fighting to be present in the local council meetings.

When they started to stand up to the local public authorities and gained the courage to express their point of view and support their causes, things changed.

▲ **Roma women learned that together they could make a difference, and in 2016 they mobilised for their first protest in front of the town hall, demanding their right to infrastructure. Today, 8 out of 12 streets are paved, and now there is sewerage and running water in the community.**

There is still a lot of work to be done because these neighbourhoods are growing fast and when you feel like you've built something, you realise that there are other families that need support. New generations are always coming and they need help, and often you have the feeling that you are always starting again and again, because the state moves slowly or not at all, especially when it comes to the predominantly Roma neighbourhoods.

Over time, we have also noticed another phenomenon: for example, in Mizil, the Roma of 10 years ago have visibly improved their standard of living and therefore also their housing situation. This was due to their freedom of movement in Europe, where they were able to earn money.

As a result, the old neighbourhood developed. However, this coincided with the emergence of class differences among the Roma people. The poor moved to the back of the rich Roma neighbourhood. Having noticed the dynamics of the groups, we started to address the issue of power relations in the community, especially power relations among Roma women.

One example is the issue of electricity, which comes with a lot of frustration, but also with a lot of safety measures, one has to take.

In **Valea Seacă** we have a community centre located in the middle of the poorest and most segregated neighbourhood in the village. Although it is a house like any other, at the time the centre opened, it was the only house on the street legally connected to electricity. And we did what we thought was natural and so necessary: we helped to connect 36 households in Valea Seacă safely and legally.

**The gender perspective was always present and important to us.** During the Covid-19 pandemic, unfortunately, the phenomenon of domestic violence increased and became more visible because the home turned into an unsafe space.

In all the communities where E-Romnja works, the Roma live in more crowded conditions than the majority of people. **Roma girls and women cannot have privacy and they lack their own private space.**

We tried to provide online psychological counselling for girls who have either experienced abuse or have gone through all kinds of traumatic experiences. Sadly, we realised that you can get electricity, internet or a tablet, but if you do not have a space of your own that you do not share with parents, siblings or other relatives, you cannot talk about yourself with a psychotherapist.

During the pandemic lockdowns, women had nowhere to go, and the authorities failed to mention violence or domestic abuse as a reason for leaving the home when you had to fill in the affidavit to get out of the house.

Throughout this period, there have been at least four instances of sexual abuse that we

got involved in. These cases happened in the community and most seriously, in the home, which stopped being a safe space. This just goes to show that women will always be exposed and vulnerable in their private space.

In these cases, **domestic violence** has been a constant danger, exacerbated by the pandemic, but one that did not stop with the end of the pandemic imposed mobility restrictions.

▼ Women also suffer from inequality because the police do not intervene. When they talk about Roma women, the police always motivate violence in a racist way. Also, most of the time when they are called, they act more as mediators of conflict than as law enforcers.

Unfortunately, **there have been women in our communities who have been killed because of violence, as the police did not intervene.** There have been situations where women have called 112 and even then, they did not get help. The calls are recorded, so you can go on the record and prove that you called, and the state failed to deliver justice.

In our work, the presence of journalists is welcome and they are often invited to the actions we organise with the aim of amplifying the voice of people who are unjustly treated by the system and the racist authorities.

When it comes to housing, E-Romnja takes an **intersectional approach.** The more vulnerable you are as a Roma woman, the more the systems of oppression against you multiply.

>> Qualitative research recently carried out by Carmen Gheorghe and Cristina Mocanu<sup>1</sup> shows that there is a close link between living in a segregated, ghettoised, traditional or informal

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<sup>1</sup> Carmen Gheorghe, Cristina Mocanu, Challenging intersectionality: Roma women's voices and experiences. Experiences of discrimination of Roma women in housing, education, health and employment - Comparative research on multiple discrimination in Finland, Italy and Romania, Bucharest, March 2021 (research within the 'Intersect Voices in Europe – combating discrimination against Roma women' project, funded by the European Union's Fundamental Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020).

Roma women's community and lack of access to infrastructure (paved streets, transport, street lighting, sewage, drinking water, electricity, etc.).

▼ **Poor housing is also associated with low access of Roma women to health and other essential services.**

For example, a Roma woman living in a marginalised community or a poor or segregated neighbourhood is likely to be treated with less respect when she goes to the doctor.

▼ Moreover, **poor housing is closely linked to low levels of education, high levels of discrimination, racism and humiliating treatment, and low access to the labour market.** These vulnerabilities are exacerbated

when you throw in issues such as dark skin or being a member of a sexual minority.

**In Romania, citizenship is conditioned by property<sup>2</sup>, and this hits vulnerable people the hardest.**

Throughout our work, we have often met people who were outside any system, and who did not legally exist.

>> At one point, we had to do some DNA tests to determine the age of a person who had no ID, not even a birth certificate.

**If you do not exist in an administrative sense, how can you have access to education, health, housing or other services?**

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## Evictions

We have also joined in solidarity with actions against evictions, for example with comrades in Cluj and Bucharest working for housing justice.

In particular, we have been involved in eviction proceedings in the community of **Giurgiu**, but also in **Mica Indie**, a community in Bucharest, very close but at the same time very far from the centre of the capital, where there are major real estate and financial interests.

There the problem is structural, and within the community, the power relations between people have become extremely polarised.

What we found when we went to our first evictions in Bucharest is that we enjoyed the solidarity from our allies. We were not surprised by the way the

authorities acted. The way the police behave when something happens in a Roma neighbourhood is totally disproportionate: **they send maybe ten times more forces than necessary.** Therefore, there are big inequalities when we talk about evictions with a higher number of Roma people involved.

For example, there are always Child Protection agents present, who come in and threaten families with taking children into the state system instead of developing sustainable plans and strategies to prevent family separation.

Television stations are also present, but sadly often they report events in a sensationalist and accusatory way.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In Romania one needs a legal residence in order to receive an ID from the authorities - translator's note. 1950s is returned to the heirs of the original owners and current residents are evicted.

<sup>3</sup> For a guide to ethical media representations of evictions see the article in this book from the Common Front for Housing Rights, assembled by Veda Popovici - editor's note.

## Lack of systemic intervention

**Giurgiu** is an urban community where we started working in 2014. The community is divided into four Roma neighbourhoods and each area has its own specificity. These are the **Obor, Spoitori, Rudăria and Istru neighbourhoods**.

In 2017, in **Istru**, we were notified of an eviction that was underway. When we arrived there, we found that the building was in a derelict state, not connected to utilities.

What was actually happening? The poorest Roma were given this social housing, **without an integrated service plan being drawn up**. These people had never lived in a decent house before, they did know how to use the utilities, they did not have a stable job or a stable source of income, and they did not feel that the space was theirs.

The local authority has an obligation to take all these realities into account and carve up an intervention plan. In reality, however, the authorities spend money from the public budget, to renovate housing facilities, yet people leave because they don't know how to live there and because they cannot actually afford to live in such housing since living in an apartment comes with other costs than living in a house with a yard.

The ghetto in Istru was created by the local authorities, in the sense that they allocated some social housing **but did not come up with sustainable integration policies in time**.

They rented them out to poor people, who were not able to pay their utilities, and over time the building deteriorated so much that there was a risk of collapse. Indeed the conditions were

inhumane, one could not live there. We were notified because people were given eviction notices and the authorities were planning to demolish the building.

Coincidentally or not, the building was inhabited only by Roma people! We went there and mobilized all the authorities, we stood in solidarity with other colleagues, we spoke to the mayor and we managed to stop the eviction.

**We made identity documents for all the people** and some of them renewed their social housing files. After we got the deadline extended, some families went to rent privately or to different relatives, others were placed in night shelters for homeless people.

About 50% of the people there got social housing, but the rest are still staying where they are able to because the criteria for social housing and the excessive bureaucracy exclude and discourage even those in need.

In the Istru neighbourhood, **we took on the role of mediating discussions between the people and the municipality**, whereas, in Obor, another neighborhood where we are present, **we did community development** up to a point, and then we stopped and **monitored the interventions of the authorities**. Now we see a potential for women in the neighborhood to reorganize.

The situation is different in this case, as the offered accommodation consists of houses with a garden, which has created a greater degree of integration and adaptability for the community there.

For large families, living in a house with a courtyard is different from living in a block of flats. The costs are lower and this gives people

more flexibility. However, only the houses along the main street had utilities, and the houses on the smaller streets lacked pavement, electricity and water.

Over time, **we helped the women petition the local authorities.** The municipality paved the streets and built the sewage system. Yet, the problem of electricity remains, as it is the most expensive to introduce.

There is a railway line next to people's houses and children have to cross it to get to school, putting their lives at risk every day. The same lack of safety can be found in Rudari, a suburban neighbourhood crossed by heavy trucks.

>> In 2019, the tragic death of a Roma woman due to trucks driving through the Roma neighbourhood brought the Roma community to the streets. With our support, the people demanded their right to infrastructure and safety. Nevertheless, the problems in the neighbourhood are far from being solved, and this is due to the racism of the authorities.

## Institutionalised racism

Institutionalised racism is highly visible **in the Mizil community.** No social housing has been built there until 2020, although the need has always existed.

Two years ago a social housing block was built, but no Roma person has benefited from such housing.

The relationship between Roma women in Mizil and the local authorities may be the subject of a surrealist novel. Yet it is worth noting that, through perseverance, Roma women were consulted and became dialogue partners with the authorities.

▲ **The Roma women of Mizil have learned that where the state shrugs its racist and uncaring shoulders, they can bring about change together.** Where the state stumbles over unnecessary justifications and bureaucracy to mask its failure and racism, we create a safe and inclusive space where Roma women stand together, find solutions to community problems and have the courage to claim their rights.

## The legacy of slavery

**The community of Valea Seacă** is located in Moldova. The story of how this became a Roma community goes like this: **at one point, a priest arrived from Transylvania with some Roma slaves, with the idea of building a church.**

After slavery was abolished in **1855**, the Roma who came there as slaves were granted some land. This land was outside the rest of the community, behind the creek, on a hill where nothing could be cultivated. It did not have access to anything, therefore, it generated geographical segregation.

To this day, there are no property deeds for houses, not even a concession. Nevertheless, the local authority was surprisingly open to cooperation and, when we connected the community to the electric grid, **the town hall issued a certificate stating that the inhabitants indeed had the right to live at those respective addresses.**

On the basis of this certificate, **we were able to conclude contracts with the electricity supplier. Another success was connecting the community to the drinking water network.**

Roma communities do not have access to sewage, and this lack of access comes with a

higher degree of pollution. People are unable to reduce pollution, and the authorities completely discourage the most marginalized.

The authorities are not making things work for anyone. During the pandemic, the community's water source broke and the authorities refused to fix it in order to **'teach them a lesson'**. Even though we were in the middle of the pandemic, **the women mobilized and went to the town hall to demand their rights.**

## Real estate mafia

**The Mica Indie** (meaning 'Little India') community is an area with huge so-called real estate potential, being close to the Soarelui highway and the center of Bucharest.

Some of those who live here have some form of a rental contract, but their situation is not very clear. Half of the community is on public land, owned by the town hall, and the other half is on private land, but we do not know who owns it. The problem is very serious there.

Together with colleagues from **Common Front for Housing Rights (Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul la Locuire - FCDL)** we managed to stop an eviction. The authorities keep trying to evict the Roma from this community and we are trying to stop or postpone it from one period to another.

Over time, some of the infrastructure and living conditions in the community of Mica Indie have been resolved, but there is still a risk of eviction for the people there, as the economic interest in the area grows year by year.

As mentioned above, in E-Romnja we try to approach the topic of housing from an intersectional perspective. We know that when

evictions take place, it is Roma women who suffer the most. It is also Roma women who are disproportionately affected by the lack of decent housing conditions, as we have tried to portray in this article.

Unfortunately, state interventions are minimal, discriminatory, or non-existent. In large cities, where there is social or public housing, local authorities have very selective criteria that can be met by people who can more easily afford private rents.

In other cases where authorities have allocated social housing in one form or another, there has never been any other form of social intervention that contributes to people's well-being.

In the situations we have documented, the final interventions that the authorities often devise are forced evictions, either because the area in question becomes financially attractive, or because the area becomes ghettoized with only Roma and/or poor people whom society does not want to see in the centers of large cities and pushes them to the suburbs or next to garbage dumps, as in the case of Pata-Rât<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>For more about the forced eviction and dislocation of 350 Roma people from a central area in Cluj-Napoca to the landfills of Pata Rât see the article from Social Housing NOW! in this book, written by Enikő Vincze and Linda Greta Zsiga - editor's note.



## ANTI-RACIST JURIDICAL VIEWS ON HOUSING JUSTICE ACTIVISM - THE STRATEGIES OF ROMAJUST

*Eugen Ghiță (RomaJust) and Corina Andreea Preda, Romania*

We founded the **Roma Lawyers Association in Romania, RomaJust**, in **2015**. It was the first of its kind in Europe, **having the aim to provide legal advice to Roma people facing discrimination and rights violations, as well as to support young Roma lawyers at the beginning of their professional careers.**

Over the years, we have also been active in the fight for housing justice. Below, we will present some cases in which we have been involved. We will outline the state of affairs from the moment we were asked for help, followed by the ways in which we acted to tackle discriminatory measures.

### Focșani

În **2017** we were made aware by two people in Focșani of a residential building where **88 families** were at risk of eviction - **the G2 block in the Bahne district.**

People had already received eviction notifications and, after we officially sent an appeal to the Town Hall, the local officials justified their decision by saying that the building was no longer suitable for habitation and needed renovation.

The tenants did not comply with those notices, so the administration adopted a different strategy. They issued a local council resolution, whereby they changed the use of those apartments from

old state housing to social housing (incidentally, the resolution covered several other blocks in Focșani).

This allowed them, through a second decision, to cancel all the rental contracts, despite them being valid. They also took the tenants to court, in order to evict them. Our organization sued the local administration for both local council decisions at the Administrative Court of Vrancea.

We later learned that the Focșani City Hall had commissioned a seismological and structural assessment of the building to determine its strength and to assess the cost of renovation and/or demolition.

The expert who carried out the assessment estimated that the costs of renovation and demolition would be similar, but did not make a recommendation on the fate of the building. The city decided that the block should be demolished.

However, the next step was to take the City Hall to the National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) over a third local council decision, which set criteria for eligibility for social housing. One of these was to not be indebted to the local budget.

We won the case because the criteria were discriminatory, but the City Council challenged

the decision. We won again in both stages, both at the First Court and at the Court of Appeal. Simultaneously, by issuing another decision, the local government conditioned emergency aid on the same criterion.

Once again we filed a lawsuit with the CNCD and won, and the City Hall has finally not appealed the outcome, and will now implement the necessary changes, eliminating the criteria on indebtedness for both social housing and emergency aid.

▲ **In our battle with the Municipality, we have sent several requests and defended people in court. There have been around 40-45 eviction lawsuits before the court. Several people won the case and it was found that the termination of their lease was abusive.**

However, the City continued the discriminatory actions. **The Mayor of Focșani issued a press release, publishing a list of all 88 debtors with names, surnames, and the amount of money they owed. The list was accompanied by a text explaining to the residents of the city that those amounts would be paid out of their own money.**

We referred this article to the CNCD, because it was hate speech. The CNCD agreed with us and **fined the mayor 2000 lei**<sup>1</sup>, but he appealed this as well. So we went to court again. The last term of this trial took place on 19 November 2022 and at the end of the year our **organization received the final sentence and won the trial.**

Thus, in 2020, in the space of six months, there have been three confirmed cases of discrimination in our fight with Focșani City Hall. However, there is still legal ground for the demolition of the G2 block by the Local Council decision.

The people were not actually evicted, but the town hall continued to make their living conditions worse. For 2-3 months, the water in the building was turned off, followed later by the electricity. Because of these unfit conditions, people gradually moved out, even though they had won court cases over their leases. Eventually, the block was demolished.

We managed to have the abusive decisions of the local council canceled. We also managed to force the administration to change the regulation on access to social housing, by eliminating a number of discriminatory criteria. Yet, our fight continues.

Currently, the mayor wants to adopt the same strategy for two other blocks. He has received a grant from the Ministry of Development to renovate social housing. He justifies the renovations by saying that they cannot be made with tenants in the houses, as the work is quite extensive.

In June 2022 he began sending out notices to tenants to vacate their homes. People did not leave voluntarily and everything happened through administrative channels. Now the administration is trying to evict them by taking them to court. With the lawyers from our association, we began to defend the tenants and we have already attended a few court cases. We hope that in the end, things will work out for the benefit of the people and that these blocks will not be demolished.

This fight against racism is a long one, and much action is needed so long as the city is run by a mayor who has time and again displayed racial hatred.

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<sup>1</sup>2000 lei would be about 400 euros with the exchange rates of 2022 at the moment of publishing - editor's note.

## Eforie Sud

We have been handling the EforieSud case since **2013**. The mayor wanted to clear a plot of land on which 22 houses had been built without permit and later demolished them with bulldozers.

At first, the people were relocated to a sports hall, and then, at the insistence of the **Roma Centre for Social Intervention and Studies, Romani CRISS**, they were offered prefabricated, so-called modular housing in a field one and a half kilometers from the village. They were connected to electricity through street lighting. In other words, they only had electricity when the lights turned on.

They had access to water only through a simple cistern, which was not enough for all the people residing there. People live in those modular houses to this day. As far as the law is concerned, **Romani CRISS**, with the support of the **European Roma Rights Center - ERRC**, sued the City Hall.

The lawsuit started in 2013 and in the end, in 2016, we obtained a court ruling that was declared final in 2017. **This ruled that the eviction and demolition were abusive and that the people should receive social housing and damages of 2000 lei<sup>2</sup>**. From 2017 to 2020 no further action was taken, and the case has stalled.

In 2020 one of our staff members started working as a human rights monitor in Romania for the ERRC. While checking the procedures and the stages of the court proceedings, we found that the local administration did not respect the final court decision. It did not provide people with social housing and with financial compensation.

Therefore, we had the right to sue the administration. The people relocated to modular housing were divided into three groups. We chose the strategy of going to court with several lawyers in different groups.

In case one group lost a case, we would not all lose altogether. We also thought that different judges would handle the cases differently.

We were right to adopt this strategy. One group lost because the judges claimed that the city should not have to pay penalties for that delay in implementation. We followed suit with a lawsuit at the European Court of Human Rights - ECHR.

Another group went through several lawsuits and won. Each person was offered 128 300 lei<sup>3</sup>. The compensation was calculated for each day of delay in implementing the judgment from 2017 until 15 November 2020. This group is now in the enforcement phase through the bailiff.

With the third group, we demanded, based on Art. 24 para. 4 of Law 554 of Administrative Litigation, to fix the amount owed by the city for each individual person as a victim of demolitions and more specifically, for the non-enforcement of a court judgment. We are still waiting for a decision in this case.

It is very important that everyone in the group receives the compensation to which they are entitled; this is the first step in the support we are offering so that people can rebuild their lives. While we filed these lawsuits, all the municipality could do was stop the electricity or the water supply.

Subsequently, it sued people for not paying their debts, which would have meant paying electricity, water, and rent.

<sup>2</sup> 2000 lei would be about 400 euros with the exchange rates of 2023 at the moment of publishing - editor's note.

<sup>3</sup> 128 300 lei would be about 25 950 euros - editor's note.

This is absurd and completely abusive, as they have not had access to these utilities for most of the time they were being charged. The rents were modest, they were very small amounts, for which some families are being sued to be evicted.

Eviction from where? From those modular houses, not suitable for decent living, and situated more than a kilometer away from the last house of Eforie Sud.

## Other cases

In some cases we did not go to court but rather managed problems through administrative means. This was the case in **Mangalia**. After an eviction that involved the local police and the gendarmerie, people were relocated to a military unit, in some kind of stables, or some small rooms where soldiers used to sleep.

The spaces were about **16-17 m<sup>2</sup> and up to nine people lived in one room**. They had accumulated rent arrears, but again it was a modest amount for which they were sued by the municipality.

To show that this was abusive, we used **Ordinance 8, which states that arrears, penalties, and accrued interest cannot be more than the debt**.

For the 1000 lei debt that the tenants owed, the Mangalia town hall was asking for 10000 lei<sup>4</sup>. So we went to negotiations and had meetings with local authority representatives to settle the case. Since then, the town hall has not sued people. Instead, the problems have been solved administratively.

Another case that we finally managed to solve, albeit with some difficulty, was the one in **Constanta**.

Some 23 families had built shanty houses on a former site owned by the Orthodox Church. The land had been nationalized and after **1989**, the municipality kept its ownership.

In **2018**, the church claimed the land. At this point the families living there contacted us. We documented the case, checked the legal status of those buildings, and devised a strategy to find suitable housing for the affected people.

At that time, the local administration was offering housing in **Henri Coandă**, the largest social housing district in the country, with around **650 apartments**. However, the families could not access these apartments, because they did not meet the eligibility criteria, as they were in debt to the state.

We managed to negotiate with the local administration, which eventually agreed to defer their debts. This meant that all 23 families received social housing.

However, this measure was only viable in the short term. People still had debts and the municipality was sending out notices to get their money, so further negotiations were needed.

During this time we stayed in the community and looked for solutions, especially for those who were in very difficult situations, with debts over 30 000 lei<sup>5</sup>. We managed to reach a settlement with the town hall, which sued them for community service.

The people lost the case and paid their debts by doing the necessary hours of work. To illustrate the scale of the work: **one person with debts of around 55 000<sup>6</sup> lei performed 87 days of community service**. People still currently live in Henri Coandă.

<sup>4</sup>For the approximately 200 euros debt the municipality of Mangalia asked for 2000 euros - calculated with the exchange rates of 2023 at the moment of publishing - editor's note.

<sup>5</sup>30 000 lei would be about 6000 euros - editor's note.

<sup>6</sup>55 000 lei would be about 11 150 euros - editor's note.

Unfortunately, this does not guarantee that they have adequate living conditions, because problems continue to be created by the authorities.

These are situations that organizations and experts working in the field admit to having become almost cliché: interest and tax penalties, lack of utilities, lack of access to various services, and decaying housing, among others. They occur in many social housing neighborhoods across the country.

In addition to all of this work, RomaJust supports other organizations in the country, which are involved in the fight for housing justice: it provides victims of eviction in other cities such as Cluj or Iași with assistance and representation in court.

In collaboration with the E-Romnja Association, we helped some people in the town of Mizil to draw up the necessary documents to obtain the ownership documents for their homes and we looked for the legal basis to obtain them.

It's an uphill battle. In some cases, we have to come back again and again. Like those in Focșani and Eforie Sud, where the fight will not end easily. And similar circumstances occur constantly in other localities, a recent example being an eviction in Arad.

**Our aim every time is to bring cases to the ECHR, where justice is usually achieved.**

In Romanian courts, vulnerable people do not have the right to a fair trial. You have rather a right to injustice, rather than justice and social exclusion is very close to there.



# ON RESISTING EVICTIONS: THE ANTI-EVICTION EMERGENCY SERVICE AND THE USE OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

*Bálint Missetics, The City is for All (A Város Mindenkié), Budapest, Hungary*

*Evictions deprive people of their homes, and often of the prospect of having a home ever again. The prevention of homelessness requires social and housing policy reforms, enforceable social rights, and a more egalitarian distribution of wealth and income.*

*However, those who are threatened with eviction need immediate solidarity. Nonviolent resistance to evictions can be an effective tool for both defending people from losing their homes and for dramatizing and politicizing the violence and injustice of evictions.*

Evictions of the poor in Hungary, as elsewhere, often go unnoticed. However, a group of activists sometimes engage in **civil disobedience**, and – usually after having unsuccessfully sought to prevent the eviction through all other available means – **defy bailiffs and the police** in a final attempt to defend a family from being expelled from their home.

The City is for All (**A Város Mindenkié**, hereafter: **AVM**) has been organizing such anti-eviction human blockades since **2010**.

What follows is a pragmatic summary of how AVM addresses individual cases of evictions, including how nonviolent direct actions are organized and why they are useful – **even in those cases, when they fail to succeed**.

## A Város Mindenkié

AVM is a grassroots housing **advocacy** group founded in **2009** by activists directly affected by homelessness and their allies (activists with secure housing). Since then, AVM has been **organizing campaigns, protests, and non-violent but disruptive direct actions** around injustices related to housing and homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

It is not a legally registered organization, relying almost exclusively on the volunteer work of its members. For years, the group's activities were mostly confined to **Budapest**, but since **2015**, there is also a partially independent subgroup operating in **Pécs** (a major town in the South of Hungary).

AVM is an experiment in inter-class cooperation.<sup>2</sup> **The political mobilization and empowerment of homeless people** is both the organization's founding idea and one of the features which distinguish it from the variety of NGOs and religious organizations providing services to, or advocating on behalf of, homeless and poor people, without involving them in their organization or operation.

The more direct struggle against the eviction of the poor is, however, one of the group's activities that have been less suitable for the involvement of the group's homeless members.

<sup>1</sup> See Udvarhelyi, É.T., 2019. Building a movement for the right to housing in Hungary. *Urban Research & Practice* 12(2): 192-200. In Hungarian, see Sebály, B., 2015. Közösen akarnak tenni és tesznek a megbélyegzés és megaláztatás ellen. *Ezredvég* 25(3): 127-139.

<sup>2</sup> Missetics, B., 2017. Homelessness, citizenship and need interpretation: reflections on organizing with homeless people in Hungary. *Interface* 9(1): 389-423.

## The Anti-Eviction Emergency Service

The Anti-Eviction Emergency Service of AVM combines radical social work, legal aid, **advocacy**, and nonviolent resistance to prevent the eviction of impoverished families, mainly, but not exclusively, from the public housing sector.

**The ideational foundations** of the Service's approach are the following:

- 1. housing is a human right; everyone is “worthy” of housing, regardless of their class position, income, ethnicity, or any mistakes they might have made;**
- 2. evictions can cause serious, long-lasting, and often irreversible harm to those affected;**
- 3. the technical legality of eviction is not sufficient for its justification;**
- 4. evictions, without the provision of a minimally adequate alternative, amount to cruelty and the violation of fundamental human rights;**
- 5. civil disobedience to unjust evictions is therefore justified.**

While there are ongoing discussions among its members about a more sustainable mode of operation and the necessity of establishing a formal organization (with paid staff), the Service currently relies entirely on volunteer work. Its members are usually trained in, and working in the field of, social policy or social work.

It is an emergency service that emerged specifically to deal with cases where the threat of eviction is imminent. The Service purposefully takes on cases that are – from almost every other perspective – **“beyond remedy”, “hopeless” and “lost”**.

## “Lost causes”

These are “lost causes” from the point of view of the landlord or the local authority, from the perspective of institutionalized social services, and often even from the perspective of those threatened with eviction.

They seem **“hopeless”** because they – “the clients” – were labeled by social services as “not cooperating” and therefore “unworthy” of further support or another chance; because the amount of their arrears is “unmanageable”; or because it is “too late”, all legal remedies have been exhausted or all deadlines have been missed.

There is nothing in the Hungarian legal context or welfare system that would guarantee the prevention of homelessness in case of eviction. Evictions, even if they induce a downward spiral into increasingly inadequate and insecure housing conditions, often do not lead directly to homelessness.

However, the Service receives most of its requests for support from people residing in public housing. In these cases, the threat of homelessness is usually direct and immediate.

They frequently entail the threat of long-term or lifelong homelessness as well, caused by the massive difference between rents in the private rental sector and the income of the families concerned.

Institutionalized social work is often unequipped to handle these cases. In the case of evictions from the public housing sector, when the landlord is a local authority, social workers might also be unwilling or unable to assist, because family assistance centers are also run by the local authorities. Furthermore, mainstream social

services are usually understaffed, underfinanced, and overburdened.

This allows or even encourages caseworkers to use such categories as “non-cooperation” to ration services and exclude those who are most in – or in most immediate – need from receiving them. **Referrals to homeless shelters or just a list of their addresses are sometimes the only help that someone receives before their eviction.**

The actors initiating the evictions (mostly local authorities in the Service’s practice), however, **have full discretion over stopping or postponing the execution of an eviction order – anytime.** This creates a leeway for the Service to prevent evictions – by leaving no stone unturned – even until the last moment.

While the methods and instruments utilized in preventing evictions vary, most cases are won by a combination of:

- ▶ a proactive social work,
- ▶ quick legal aid,
- ▶ assertive advocacy,
- ▶ and negotiations.

AVM’s bargaining position is, however, partially dependent upon the extent to which the group can inflict costs to whoever has the power to decide on going forward with, or halting, an eviction. It is in this respect that the willingness to – and capacity for – engaging in civil disobedience is of crucial importance.

## Civil Disobedience Against Evictions

AVM uses **nonviolent resistance – human blockades – against evictions as a measure of last resort.** The use of civil disobedience should be responsible toward those whose eviction

is being resisted, it should be justified, and it should also be perceived as such.

This means that civil disobedience should be preceded by diligent attempts, made in good faith, to prevent the eviction through “normal appeals” and legal means.<sup>3</sup>

It is obvious that anyone threatened with losing their home and becoming homeless should be provided with all available support for the prevention of their eviction: **those who are willing to organize civil disobedience in their support should first work hard to make the use of civil disobedience unnecessary.**

**It should also be obvious to the public that it is the fault of the evictor, and not of the disobedient citizens, that it came to the use of such confrontational and disruptive methods.**

The possibility of civil disobedience is, however, an important tool for ensuring that there is no need for its use.

**One of the reasons why AVM can often dissuade local authority leaders from evicting someone is through their understanding that the group can inflict political costs by publicizing and politicizing the eviction.**

Civil disobedience is certainly not the only way of achieving this, but probably the most powerful way of doing so.

Nonviolent resistance therefore should not be understood in contradistinction to, or as the opposite of, negotiations and compromise. On the contrary: civil disobedience, or the even implicit threat thereof, might be the precondition of open-ended negotiations and an acceptable compromise, as it counterbalances the essential

<sup>3</sup>Rawls, J., 1999. *The Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press. 327-328.

power imbalance at hand: between the evictee and their evictor.

Paraphrasing Martin Luther King's answer to those of his critics who questioned the fruitfulness of direct action and called for negotiations instead: **"Indeed this is the purpose of direct action." For it seeks "to create such a crisis and establish such a creative tension" that a decision maker, who has "constantly refused to negotiate" is forced to do so.**<sup>4</sup>

In the Hungarian legal context, the definition of a misdemeanor stipulates that such acts should be *"dangerous to society"*.

Therefore, as a matter of principle, it is the position of AVM that participation in an anti-eviction human blockade is not a misdemeanor, since it is not nonviolent resistance against unjust evictions which is dangerous to society, but the practice of unjust evictions.

Nonetheless, it is never the goal of AVM to avoid any reasonable legal responsibility for disobedience. AVM's approach is in line with the classical tradition of civil disobedience: one who disobeys an unjust law or an unjust court order must do it **"openly"** and **"with a willingness to accept the penalty"**<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, if an anti-eviction human blockade is followed by any misdemeanor charges, the consequent court hearings, if handled strategically, provide further opportunities to raise awareness of the injustice that civil disobedience aimed to redress.

## Nonviolence and Nonviolent Discipline

When it comes to civil disobedience – the obstruction of eviction through a human blockade – **nonviolence and nonviolent discipline are of critical importance for at least three reasons.** It is important for AVM, first and foremost, **as a matter of principle.**

It is also **of strategic importance** since civil disobedience is an inherently communicative act, addressed not only to whoever is in a decision-making position about the eviction in question but also, crucially, to the public.

In Hungary as in many other contexts, people are more likely to sympathize with the use of disruptive tactics if they perceive it to be a "battle of Right against Might"<sup>6</sup>. Besides obstructing injustice, those who engage in civil disobedience should want the public to pay attention to that injustice, and not to any violence committed against the police.

The same applies, to a certain degree, to any violence committed by the police: while any acts of police brutality and even the unnecessary or disproportionate use of force should be publicly problematized and legally dealt with, the strategic goal of anti-eviction blockades is to hinder and disincentivize the eviction of the poor.

This goal is achieved through the mediation of public opinion. This mechanism of effect requires public attention to be focused on the original injustice – the eviction of the poor; on its victims – who are not the activists; and on its culprit – who are not the police.

Thirdly, nonviolence is also **of legal importance.** While participants of an anti-eviction human

<sup>4</sup> King, Martin Luther Jr., [1963] 1991. *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*. In Hugo Adam Bedau (Ed.), *Civil Disobedience in Focus*. London: Routledge. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Gandhi, M. K., [1930] 1999. *A message*. In *"The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi"*. New Delhi: Publications Division Government of India. Vol. 49., 13.

blockade are usually required to accept at least the risk of a short arrest and a misdemeanor charge, any violence against the police would almost surely entail a longer arrest and a more serious criminal charge.

For all these reasons, **those who take part in any of AVM's direct actions are required to participate in a brief instruction on nonviolence and nonviolent discipline.** The instructions always include, aside from practical behavioral rules, their philosophical underpinnings as well.

This is important because civil disobedience against an eviction should be both powerful and dignified, and this is more likely to be achieved through the participants' understanding of – and identification with – the ethos of nonviolent resistance than by mechanical adherence to behavioral rules, however, elaborate they might be.

## Failures are not Futile

In Hungary, AVM has succeeded to prevent many evictions through civil disobedience, or by achieving a solution through the risk thereof – entailed by AVM's involvement in any eviction case. Nonetheless, human blockades often fail to prevent or even delay an eviction.

Even if that is the case, **it can still genuinely mean a lot to someone who's forced to leave their home: that there were people who "did everything they could" in their defense, that they were not abandoned, left alone, or deemed unworthy of solidarity and support, and that justice – their justice – was at least articulated and heard.**

People who are evicted often also appreciate the fact that their resistance and the publicity

it received – even if it was not enough to save them from losing their home – might help others in a similar predicament.

Evictions are scandalous events – but most of them remain under the radar, and the violence inherent in evictions is made invisible through the law and routinized administrative procedures. Anti-eviction human blockades, and especially their breaking up by the police (when civil disobedience could not prevent that particular eviction) have the capacity to expose that invisible, structural violence.

Well-executed and well-publicized instances of civil disobedience against unjust evictions, even if they fail in their purpose of "**specific deterrence**", can – through bringing this structural violence to the surface in an undeniable, raw form – provide powerful disincentives to execute evictions in other cases and therefore are valuable tools of "**general deterrence**".

Furthermore, if such occasions are used strategically:

- ▶ if personal problems and tragedies are successfully transfigured into public issues,
- ▶ if individual cases of injustice are convincingly connected to structural injustices and to legal and distributive reforms these call for,
- unsuccessful resistance can also play an important role in what is essentially a cultural struggle over the boundaries of what we can and cannot do to each other; of what we can and cannot allow to happen to each other.

**A decent state does not make its citizens homeless. In a decent society, we do not let each other become homeless.**

Resistance to evictions, including the use of civil disobedience, is both justified and necessitated by these axioms. It can also contribute to their realization: evidently when it succeeds, but even if it fails. It either prevents the eviction, or fails to do so – but thereby exposes its violence which otherwise usually remains unearthed, unwitnessed, and unnoticed.





# THE IMPORTANCE OF TACTICS, KNOWLEDGE AND PARTNERSHIPS IN PREVENTING EVICTIONS

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## The Purpose of Preventing Evictions

The Roof<sup>1</sup> started preventing evictions in **2017** with two goals, one of them political/ideological — **to promote the right to housing** — and other more practical — **to help people keep their only home**<sup>2</sup>.

This has shaped our activities ever since and we have always prioritized people's welfare. This means **we are ready to sacrifice an ideological goal if it would harm the people we help**.

After all, our political goal serves to help them and not vice versa. This also means we recognize that we operate within a particular system we many times disagree with but need to get to know to help people keep a roof over their heads.

For example, not once have people that were facing eviction called other groups we politically disagree with to help them. We have never dissuaded them. Or we accompany them in negotiations with banks even though we think banks act like predators and should be completely transformed rather than negotiated with. We never push people to resist the way we think they should.

This is why we mostly advertise our activities as **'buying time'** for people to find a permanent solution to their problem. Even though we are called reformists by some, hey! — so far we have prevented more than 100 evictions and more than 10 families have permanently kept their homes.

**To buy people time and successfully prevent evictions, you need to build tactics, knowledge, and partnerships.** So, if you agree with these basic ideas, you may find further reading useful.

## Tactics

The crucial tactic for successfully preventing eviction is **standing in front of the door instead of standing beside it**. People peacefully blocking the door with their bodies make it much more difficult for the bailiff<sup>3</sup> and the police to enter without using physical force.

And in Serbia, they are not willing to do so because it does not look good. So you always want to bring a smartphone with you. **You record the eviction** from the beginning and stream it directly on social media. Bailiffs are not very popular in Serbia and they do not like being recorded.

<sup>1</sup>In Serbian: *Združena akcija 'Krov nad glavom'*, which literally means *The Joint Action 'A Roof Over Head'*. The English name the organisation uses is simply *The Roof*.

<sup>2</sup>The reasons for being evicted in Serbia are numerous, including different kinds of debt (mortgages, loans from usurers or bank credit), various kinds of frauds (such as flats being sold to two buyers not aware of the existence of one another in a grey economy), restitution, and sometimes unpaid utility bills

<sup>3</sup>A bailiff or a law/public enforcement officer in this case is a person assigned public authority for enforcement activities, i.e. for enforcing court decisions. One of these enforcement activities are evictions and forced evictions – the removal of people from their homes/the only housing they have. The majority of people that have asked for our help belong to unprivileged groups – the bailiffs and creditors are especially aggressive when debtors are poor, single parents, persons with disabilities, refugees from the nineties' wars, minorities (Roma people above all), old, and so on. This is because these people lack power, money, connections or knowledge to fight for their rights.

Some of them completely avoid appearing in public — which is understandable as the job has made them millionaires. You also want to consider having more than one person ready to record in case something happens (a phone runs out of battery). Recording the whole event is crucial for making the situation safer and less violent.

The second tactic is **to speak about the situation without verbally or physically provoking the officials**. In Serbia, offending an officer is a criminal offense that applies to policemen and bailiffs alike.

Don't talk to them, but explain the debtor's situation<sup>4</sup> to your audience on social media. What you say during the eviction (and there is a lot of time to explain everything) will also attract people — particularly, those who may be in similar situations and the media.

This is why **you want to have relevant information about each case beforehand** (such as their legal situation, housing history, income and family situation, etc.). Other people will be attracted by a tense situation and will watch to see you arrested or beaten up by the police. But that is fine, they will also spread the word. Let them enjoy the potential spectacle.

However, avoid very general remarks — like the debtors being victims of capitalism. Try to be more specific. De ce se află în această situație?

- ▶ Why are they in that situation?
- ▶ What could they have done to prevent it?
- ▶ Question the laws and opportunities people have in your country.
- ▶ Think about what would make people empathize with the evicted, and imagine situations that could potentially happen to them.

>> We once had a case where someone borrowed money from a usurer (a loan shark). Many times people say something like “How naive, it's their own fault”. But we explained that the man had a very ill brother he had to take care of. The company where he worked offered him a transfer that he refused to be able to care for his ill brother. He got sacked and as they had no savings he borrowed money to start a small business. As he was unemployed, he couldn't have taken a loan from a bank. The business failed and eventually, the family lost the house. The usurers were two young men in possession of suspiciously large sums of money they were lending to people in town.

Who is to blame? Keep in mind that the story affects all your listeners — including the policemen and the bailiffs.

Third, **it is useful to inspect premises before the eviction**. Look for back entrances to the house, the garden, or the building — after a couple of attempted evictions, the police may surprise you or you may like to use that rear entrance yourself.

Ask around, and see if they have good relations with the neighbors. See what the condition of the house/flat is. You may hear from the bailiff or the creditor that the family has elsewhere to live. But if the house is in poor condition and the neighbors know them and support them, you will be sure the family is telling you the truth. If neighbors don't support them, ask yourself why.

>> Once a single mother called the Roof to help her. We hadn't had the time to visit the flat before the eviction. It turned out she had lied to us — that was not her home, it was a flat she wanted to sell (she was a real estate agent). If someone had visited her, they would have seen that there were no toys around and probably the neighbors

<sup>4</sup> In most cases we defend poor debtors from rich creditors, but not all debtors are weaker than creditors. An example is a company owing salaries to its workers. In order to avoid paying its debt, a company can bribe a bailiff to let it go bankrupt — which suits both of them. The bailiff gets the money they are after, and the company pays less than it would have in order to pay all the salaries to its workers.

would have confirmed that the flat was empty. This does not happen often, but stay alert as it can be used against you in the media.

Bailiffs in Serbia like to mention all the mistakes we made to present us as naive or corrupt. It doesn't contribute to reducing the stigma of debtors, either.

## Knowledge

To come up with successful tactics, activists need to acquire relevant knowledge about the system within which the evictions are carried out. **You must familiarise yourself with the laws that regulate evictions and bailiffs' powers, but also with the limitations to said powers.**

For example, until 2020 in Serbia police officers present at the evictions were able to assess risk and act per this assessment, independently of bailiffs and their motives. Their role at the eviction was to ensure that no one would harm themselves or other people. This meant that they were not a direct threat if they were not provoked.

Many police officers in Serbia have such a background that makes them and their families potential targets of richer creditors and bailiffs and they are not particularly aggressive at evictions. Many of them just stare at their feet and avoid intervening.

But amendments to the Law on Enforcement changed this from 2020 onwards. They allowed bailiffs to give direct orders to the police, even remotely from their offices. This has led to some of the most brutal evictions we have seen.

The debtor threatened to hang himself and despite that, the bailiff ordered the police to

break the door. The policemen were left to invent gruesome tactics to discourage him from doing it (we heard one of them telling his colleague — “quick, bring his wife downstairs so he can see her and she can scream at him not to do it”). Before this happened, activists were able to remind the police of their neutrality during the eviction.

Also, before the amendments, police officers were not forced to identify people present at the evictions. Now the police ask for the IDs of those present at evictions and thus ensure that bailiffs can fine or press charges against them.

This is why **it is important to know the laws and understand each party's behavior.** The amendments were made to discourage people from supporting poor debtors. This meant that we needed to come up with new tactics.

It also extended the battlefield to the courts where we are now regularly invited as accused of obstructing evictions. Being familiar with the law and its amendments also enables us to anticipate what will happen and how we can adapt in advance.

>> For example, knowing that the bailiffs will be able to command the police and that they will ask for IDs or directly arrest us if we don't present them, we came up with the idea of setting a physical barrier between them and us. It can be a bench, a huge table, a gate, whichever object will make it more difficult for them to get close to us without using physical force to remove the barrier — it does make them look even more like brutes if they try to, which they want to avoid.

In addition, understanding the legal framework of evictions, the procedures, and the practice enables you to give the right advice to people

who are not familiar with them. This is also why they start trusting you — not only because you are there to stand in front of their door.

For example, many people do not know that if they lose their case in court, they will have to cover all the costs of it, including the costs of their eviction.

>> A woman called the Roof because of a problem with her ex-husband in whose house she still lived. He wanted her out and she thought that he would have to pay for all the costs of evicting her, whereas the opposite was the case. When she found out about that from a call she made to The Roof, she decided to file a suit against his aggressive behavior, but not remain in the house and resist the eviction as it would worsen her position even more.

>> In another example, the eviction was postponed because a social worker was not present at the eviction of a family with an older person in the household (this is necessary according to the Law). We stressed this in the video. There are many more examples of this, but you get the idea.

## Partnerships

Finally, **your partnerships and alliances are of no lesser importance than your knowledge and tactics.** Besides obvious potential partners such as similar organizations, you would want to look in unexpected places as well.

In a couple of situations, we found allies in **officials** and **people engaged by the creditor.** Observe their behavior at the eviction — are they reluctant to offer assistance? Are they uncomfortable?

**Locksmiths** play a key role in entering a flat. It happened more than once that a locksmith gave up picking the lock because he missed appropriate tools.

**The fire brigade and the police brigade** refused assistance due to safety reasons. Even if they are present, it doesn't mean they are willingly there and many times these are common people with a better understanding of the situation than we may think. It is a mistake to underestimate them.

Apart from this silent alliance with the debtors, some of them are willing to give you useful information about when the next eviction is due, who will come, what they are like, and so on.

**Social workers** are informed about the evictions in advance. Can you get in touch with someone from social care? Or even from a bailiff's office?

**Lawyers and other legal experts** can also be of great assistance even if they do not completely agree with your viewpoints. You can surely find someone supporting your story and willing to help you. That knowledge will strengthen your position.

Finally, **the media** are your big allies. If they find your story interesting and provoking they will make it even more popular. This thing alone is not enough, but they will spread the word and raise awareness in public about the problem.

>> The Roof has made the profession of public bailiffs so unpopular through the media that in the last parliamentary elections seven out of nine largest candidates mentioned some amendments to the Law or the institution of public bailiffs.





TRAVAR  
AS RENDAS  
PARAR OS  
DESPEÇOS

DIREITO  
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## AT THE ORIGINS OF THE HOUSING MOVEMENT IN PORTUGAL - THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE DEMOLITION OF SELF-BUILT NEIGHBORHOODS

*Carlotta Monini, Habita 65, Lisbon, Portugal*

In the early nineties, the presence of self-built neighborhoods on the outskirts of Portugal's major cities began to be perceived as a social problem to which the government and local authorities were increasingly urged to find answers.

Springing up in the metropolitan suburbs of Portugal's major cities, the exponential growth of these neighborhoods in the decades that followed the end of the dictatorship (1974) allowed for sheltering a greater influx of migrants coming from Portugal's former African colonies.

Many newcomers lacking the economic capacity to access formal housing have settled in these self-built neighborhoods. Adding to the number of earlier occupants, the new arrivals erected and improved already existing constructions, making a living and building up a community life even in the absence of any institutional support and basic amenities such as adequate sewerage, running water, and electricity.

By the end of the eighties, while the first wave of financialization of housing was taking place in Portugal, many of the areas where self-built neighborhoods arose under the gaze of haughty indifferent governors, suddenly became more and more attractive to real estate developers.

With the rise of real estate interests and the increasing valorization of areas hitherto left in a

state of neglect, the issue of slums in Portugal started to receive increasing public attention.

Over this period, debates that focused on slums, spatial segregation, and degraded living conditions as an environment particularly conducive to various kinds of social harm and deviancies, started to call upon state intervention.

Passing from being hidden from public view to greater mediatization that depicted shantytowns as a main threat to sustainable urban development, the so-called bairros de barracas became a public question to which the Portuguese government - which at that point had recently entered the European Union - was now increasingly pressured to address.

Under these auspices, in 1993 the government launched the **Special Resettlement Program (Programa Especial de Realojamento - PER)**. Created with the objective of demolishing the self-constructed neighborhoods that were mainly located in the peripheral areas of Lisbon and Porto. The program promised to relocate tens of thousands of residents living under precarious housing conditions around the country.

However, the chronic underfunding of the resettlement program undermined the program's capacity to respond to the housing needs of people living in self-built neighborhoods, thus resulting in the so-called PER exclusions: forced

evictions without housing alternatives<sup>1</sup>. These growing deficiencies in public funding along with increasing pressure from real estate investors turned the PER into an instrument of forced evictions that local municipalities used to “clean” many degraded suburban areas and get rid of its undesired population, mainly composed of racialized and poor people.

It is precisely in the face of these developments, that the political mobilization in the self-built neighborhoods has risen. Born under the urgency to stop demolitions and forced evictions, the victories, and failures that the housing movement experienced in self-built neighborhoods still offer many valuable tools that continue to serve the struggles we are faced with now.

It is this knowledge gathered at the very early stages of the housing movement in Portugal that we share in this article. We believe that these historical accounts still represent an insightful source of inspiration for the fight for our rights in Portugal and elsewhere.

## From the Migrant Movement to the Right to Housing and the City: A Chronology

The struggle for the right to housing and the city in self-built neighborhoods lay at the heart of the housing movement in Portugal.

In **2004**, a group of activists working on migration-related issues - organized under the umbrella of the **Solimi Association** - believed that for migrant and racialized populations living in shanty towns, the right to housing was paramount. Demolitions would not happen in silence. The political struggles taking place in several communities threatened by demolitions were further

consolidated with the creation of **Habita65**, formally founded as an association in **2014** by a core group of activists that initiated this struggle.

Over the course of two decades, the struggle in self-built neighborhoods faced two major phases of political mobilization.

- The first one, following the launch of the **PER** program, started in **Azinhaga dos Besouros (2005-2006)** and in the following years continued in **Fim do Mundo, La Mariana as well as Alto da Maia (2006-2007)**. The second wave started after the European austerity memorandum, in the neighborhoods of **Bairro da Torre (2011), Santa Filomena (2012), and 6 de Maio (2014-2017)**.

The first phase made it possible to denounce the institutional violence generated by the demolitions. This finally forced the government to launch a new resettlement program that now included the majority of inhabitants that were previously excluded by the PER program.

- The second phase of mobilization took place in the aftermath of the financial crisis when austerity measures introduced under the dictates of the European Union and the European Central Bank drastically downsized the new resettlement program.

This was also the moment when the liberalization of the rental market together with the increased role of global real estate investors in the housing market paved the way for a new phase of the financialization of housing in Portugal.

From 2012, the long-standing housing crisis in Portugal - historically represented by the degraded housing conditions in self-built

<sup>1</sup>For reference see “*Queixa relativa à violação dos Direitos Humanos, com vista a suspender os despejos massivos e forçados e as demolições na Amadora Portugal*”, 18 July 2012, available online in Portuguese here: <https://habita.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Santa-Filomena-Queixa-ProvedorJustic%CC%A7a-PT.pdf> (retrieved on 9 April, 2023).

neighborhoods - progressively extended to an increasing number of lower- and middle-income urban tenants.

As such, Habita65 now had to deal with two very different fronts of struggles and social realities:

- ▶ on the one hand, the new housing problems that an increasing number of urban, dispersed population of tenants was facing because of real estate speculation,
- ▶ on the other, the resumption of demolitions in self-built neighborhoods that the EU austerity package required from municipalities.

We will show how our strategies have changed over the course of the last two decades, first by presenting one of the most telling cases of our long-standing struggle- **the mobilization in Azinhaga dos Besouros** - and then by discussing one of our most painful defeats - **the violent demolition of Santa Filomena neighborhood** - we will see how strategies over the course of two decades have evolved and constantly re-adapted to the ever-changing political conjuncture.

From suffering setbacks to gaining victories, the struggle for the right to housing and the city is far from linear. We will reflect in this piece on the difficulty of recognizing the long-term results of the housing struggle. Taking a broad perspective on the multiplicity of strategies adopted over the course of two decades and on the long-term political implications and policy shifts that our struggle has produced will ultimately allow us to answer the question:

- ▶ What does it mean to win in the housing struggle? Or how can our struggle bring about effective systemic change?

## The Housing Struggle in **Azinhaga dos Besouros-Amadora (2004-2006)**: To Win, We Need Multiple Strategies of Resistance!

In the early 2000s, **Azinhaga dos Besouros** - a self-built neighborhood of shacks and degraded houses located in the Lisbon metropolitan area - was inhabited by almost three thousand dwellers (900 households), including Portuguese, Cape Verdeans (the majority), São Tomeans, Angolans, Roma people, and Eastern European migrants.

Almost all of them arrived in the 1980s, although some have been living there since the 1950s. The area, targeted as a top priority by the PER program, was destined for demolition and its residents were assigned to resettlement.

Based on the census data published in 1993, the PER was expected to rehouse the neighborhood into 760 units located in Casal da Mira. To this premise, which largely underestimated the inhabitants' needs, many discriminating criteria were added.

Access to rehousing required in fact to formally prove long years of permanent residence both in Portugal and in the neighborhood. A condition that many of the inhabitants living in self-built neighborhoods failed to fulfill. Thus, the growing number of residents declared ineligible by the program were informally called "**os sem direito**" - in English "**those without rights**".

In the following years, the first cases of forced evictions in **Azinhaga** did nothing but reveal the scale of the problem: exclusions from the PER program were estimated to amount to about 40% of the population residing in the neighborhood.

This meant that the so-called "**os sem direito**", were progressively being evicted without

alternative housing solutions and their homes were being demolished.

It is precisely in the face of PER exclusions and forced evictions that in 2005 a decentralized group of experienced activists came together and started to locally support **Azinhaga's** struggle.

Over the course of two years, a complex set of strategies of resistance have progressively been employed to negotiate adequate housing solutions for the greatest part of the **Azinhaga** community.

Horizontal Community-Building: "Unity is not Given but it is work"

► **The horizontal assembly-based method** constitutes the first key element used to organize the political mobilization in **Azinhaga dos Besouros**.

In the weekly assemblies, both directly affected inhabitants and not affected supporters participated.

Often carried out with bulldozers at the doorstep, the assembly was the setting that allowed for the building of a collective organizing strategy for the neighborhood:

■ to define problems and needs, strategies and political actions, as well as to evaluate their effectiveness.

Whereas in order to advance with demolitions, public authorities' strategy was to divide people and negotiate case-by-case, the work made in the assembly was precisely aimed at **countering the individualizing approach** that institutions were employing.

Other than helping to prevent greater divides among inhabitants and elaborate common strategies of resistance, presenting the community as a united group of inhabitants claiming the right for all to access adequate and affordable housing was also a crucial aspect of negotiating solutions with public authorities and ultimately, to amplifying the impact and effectiveness of the **Azinhaga** struggle.

Empowering the inhabitants: never replacing inhabitants nor leaving them alone.

In **Azinhaga**, as much as elsewhere, the weekly assemblies were places where any member of the community could practice and reinforce community self-organizing.

**Empowering the inhabitants** in these contexts, allowed several members of the community to become "leaders" of some aspects of the political struggle: some became speakers for the community, others took a greater part in the organization of actions inside the community or dealt with institutional actors and the press.

**Self-organization and informal leadership** were constantly supported by experienced activists who never replaced affected inhabitants, but neither did they leave them alone.

► **Empowering meant that no activist group who were not living in the neighborhood went alone to negotiate with public authorities without the inhabitants themselves. Nor the other way around.**

Throughout the mobilization in **Azinhaga**, negotiations with public authorities were always held through a **committee - composed of directly affected people and activists** - that was

chosen by the assembly and recognized by the community as the best suited for that purpose.

## Azinhaga's Political Mobilization: An Escalating Strategy

*Addressing public authorities' responsibility and asking for dialogue: the zero level of conflict.*

Starting with a zero level of conflict, the mobilization in **Azinhaga do Besouro** gradually involved **escalation**.

At this level, the conflict started by **constructing a different narrative of the neighborhood** and continued with **several attempts of dialogue with public institutions**.

The launch of public communiqués, open papers, and petitions allowed us to first put **Azinhaga's** problems and proposals on the table.

**Asking for meetings, participating in public initiatives, and using the institutional spaces set up for discussion with the citizenry** represented a second fundamental step that - although frequently ineffective - exerted greater pressure on public authorities and further legitimized the escalation of conflict.

Through, the construction of a different narrative, aimed at fighting invisibility and public stigmatization we demonstrated the neighborhood's attempts to have a peaceful dialogue with public authorities.

Disobedience in Azinhaga dos Besouros was thus legitimized by this first stage, in which attempts to negotiate solutions with public authorities turned out to be unsuccessful: after having organized several peaceful protests in

front of the city hall, talked in the city hall's public assembly and asked to negotiate, the inhabitants could denounce publicly that **"the institutional mechanisms do not work"**.

Moving on to disobedience, resistance to demolitions was thus presented as the ultimate means to protect the neighborhood from the institutional assault on the inhabitants' personal safety, that of their homes, and their families.

### **Disobedience**

**Disobedience in Azinhaga dos Besouros** was done in two ways:

- ▶ by stopping forced demolitions and
- ▶ by occupying institutional spaces.

In the first instance, **it was required to gather a group of people sufficiently large to physically defend the houses destined for demolition and to prevent the advance of the bulldozers**.

Located in front of the block of houses destined for demolition or alternatively, on the rooftops, the collective body composed of both activists and inhabitants acted as a barrier in the face of bulldozers.

**Another efficient strategy was to physically occupy institutional spaces such as the municipality or the Ministry of Housing** (50 people). The occupation of institutional spaces often proved effective in forcing negotiations with public institutions:

- ▶ **demanding adequate housing solutions for those who had already been evicted and more broadly**
- ▶ **calling for a halt to demolitions until solutions were found.**

Acestea au fost cele mai frecvente solicitări adresate.

The fact that **Azinhaga's** community was geographically so close, had certainly simplified the organization of disobedience actions. But the marginality and social stigma that characterized the neighborhood, meant that police violence was extremely present.

In order to avoid the escalation of police violence, ensuring public visibility and press coverage represented a crucial aspect of organizing an action.

This meant inviting trusted journalists, to whom information about the action was confidentially relayed in advance, to accompany the action with cameras, videos, and newspaper articles. Or, if professional journalists were not available, participants documenting or pretending to be journalists, also helped to control the possibility of police violence escalating.

## Legal Strategies

A successful case of legal strategy at this early juncture of the housing movement was **attaining a collective protective order**. Aimed at preventing an administrative action initiated by the state, the protective order was used to delay demolitions in **Azinhaga dos Besouros**.

What did that allow us to do? The court forcing the municipality to suspend demolitions gave one year for the political mobilization in **Azinhaga** to grow and strengthen.

This time was used to build a case around the neighborhood as well as to organize various types of actions that could give strength and visibility to the community. When the period of relief ended, **Azinhaga dos Besouros** was already at the center of public debate.

## Political alliance building and mediatization of the **Azinhaga** struggle:

*Creating bridges between the political mobilization in Azinhaga and political groups or public personalities who had notoriety and power to speak has been essential to increasing the visibility of the struggle.*

Using the right to housing enshrined in the Portuguese constitution to advocate for the case of **Azinhaga's** inhabitants, an alliance named **Platform Article 65** was established between several public personalities, architects, anti-racist associations as well as some well-known left-wing personalities, and politicians.

So while we organized assemblies and direct actions in the neighborhood, the platform did more institutional and public work to mediatize the case.

Several actions were undertaken in this regard: debates, dinners, and a Christmas celebration organized in the neighborhood were bringing well-known personalities to **Azinhaga** and thus ultimately increased the neighborhood's visibility.

When the protective order ended, the political pressure exerted against forced demolitions and the visibility that **Azinhaga's** struggle had gained through Platform Article 65 was very strong. And when the neighborhood committee sat to negotiate solutions with institutions the balance of power had shifted significantly.

## From Victories in 2007 to a Defeat in **Santa Filomena** in 2012: A Long-Term Look on the Advances of the Housing Movement

When a national demonstration against the forced demolitions of self-built neighborhoods took place in 2007, **Azinhaga dos Besouros** had already been demolished, but other self-built neighborhoods were under the threat of forced demolition and eviction.

The mobilization culminated with the occupation of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Housing, and the housing movement obtained a meeting with the Secretary of State who promoted an alteration to the resettlement program. The law was altered and for people "**sem direito**" it introduced a new program called **Pro-Habita**, in which people left out by the previous resettlement program were recognized as eligible to be rehoused.

"Pro-Habita" was launched precisely at the time when the global economic crisis of 2008 plunged Portugal into a severe depression.

The consequent freezing of public investment in housing fundamentally compromised the future resettlement plans. Demolitions restarted in 2011 in **Bairro da Torre, Santa Filomena**, and later in the **"6 de Maio" neighborhoods**.

At a time when the Portuguese people were suffering from austerity, the long-standing problems affecting self-built neighborhoods seemed trivial. Pension cuts, unemployment, and household indebtedness were taking center stage in public debate, while the advancement of demolitions in self-built neighborhoods remained largely overshadowed.

This was strikingly manifest in the case of **Santa Filomena** where all the strategies used

by the previous political mobilizations against demolitions turned out to be ineffective: throughout one year of political struggle and despite the many attempts, no political alliances could be built, no case around the neighborhood demolitions could successfully reach public attention, no table of negotiation with either the municipality or the government could be opened, last but not least no demolitions could be stopped, and actions against demolitions suffered from a tremendous level of police violence.

Because of the ever-growing violation of inhabitants' rights and their violent evictions from **Santa Filomena**, **two legal complaints were presented to the national Ombudsman and the United Nations**<sup>2</sup>.

Seen as the last resort to denounce the situation, the convictions that followed served the struggle of self-built neighborhoods that continued in the following years.

Although legal complaints did not manage to stop the municipality of **Amadora** from destroying **Santa Filomena**, the convictions that the Portuguese State accumulated have greatly pressured the government to cool down the escalation of violence.

Retrospectively, the legal strategy used to defend **Santa Filomena**, which resulted in a two-year long investigation promoted by the Ombudsman and the special rapporteur visit following the UNs conviction, has in fact significantly eroded the legitimacy of demolitions in self-built neighborhoods. And finally, in 2018, a new housing plan was approved.

<sup>2</sup> See the formal complaint "Queixa apresentada às Nações Unidas por abusos de Direitos Humanos pela Camara Municipal da Amadora" [Complaint on Human Rights Abuses regarding housing, in order to halt forced and mass evictions and demolitions in Amadora, Portugal] in English here: <https://habitacolectivo.blogspot.com/2012/07/abuso-de-direitos-humanos.html> (retrieved 9 April 2023).

## Conclusion:

What does it mean to win in the housing struggle? The importance of acknowledging the long-term advances and step-by-step victories of the housing movement

The two cases of political mobilization analyzed in the context of this publication can allow us to make some important conclusive remarks that, we believe, are essential to gain a better insight into the significant advances of the housing movement in Portugal.

The story of resistance in **Azinhaga** and **Santa Filomena** particularly displays how mobilization in self-built neighborhoods - which after the popular movement that followed the end of the dictatorship represent a new start for the housing movement in Portugal - **have managed to empower inhabitants in several ways.** Despite the longstanding social invisibility and institutional discrimination they suffered, the political struggles initiated in self-built neighborhoods allowed inhabitants to take control of their stories and bring their claims for rights and dignity to center stage of the public debate.

The mobilizations in **Azinhaga** and **Santa Filomena** equally show the slow but very effective advancement of several fundamental legislative wins that made mass evictions more difficult for public authorities. And even though negotiations of adequate housing have never managed to stop the violent destruction of these neighborhoods, their community life and solidarity networks, **many of the inhabitants initially targeted as “not having rights” were successfully rehoused.**

Behind these accounts, the common thread running through the entire story we have told can be resumed to these fundamental questions:

- ▶ what does it mean to win in the long-lasting and seemingly never-ending struggle for the right to housing and the city?
- ▶ How to interpret the partial victories of the housing movement as well as some of its most painful defeats?
- ▶ Last but not least, under which conditions and by which means the struggle for the right to housing has produced a reversal in power relations, and further, has it managed to produce wider systemic changes in public policies?

Mobilizations in self-built neighborhoods represent a valuable opportunity to reflect on these issues. Considering the partial victories of the housing movement and its momentous defeats, some activists find it hard to recognize the step-by-step advances and partial victories that it has been producing.

We believe that in a context where power relations are often unfavorable to evictees and activists, it is important to be able to recognize the slow progress one makes and the importance of the negotiations one manages to bring home.

The ability to reflect upon what victories are possible within a given political conjuncture as much as to promptly understand and be able to recognize when and in which stakes the social movement advances or, on the contrary retreats, is something quite essential to make this struggle sustainable both from an individual and collective point of view.

Now, quite ironically and precisely at the moment when this text is being written, we are once again confronted with the demolition

of one self-built neighborhood: located over a drainage ditch at risk of collapse, the brutal demolition of the **Segundo Torrão** neighborhood and its inhabitants forced displacement into temporary shelters is being currently justified by the municipality to protect residents' "safety".

Thus, this is the first time we see a temporary housing program - designed for natural disasters - to be used in situations of structural problems whose resolution could have been planned a long time ago.

Since this decade-long problem in **Segundo Torrão** has been existing, no long-term and stable resettlement has been planned by the local municipality. And now - using the emergency as a pretext to evict inhabitants - the demolitions are advancing.

Hence, after several years where demolitions received a general "halt" and wider public condemnation, we can see that new arguments are being effectively used to bypass the law and justify demolitions.

One could therefore wonder: Was all this struggle for nothing? On the contrary, many of the strategies of resistance developed in the past can now be used to force adequate housing solutions for the **Segundo Torrão** inhabitants.

First of all, we must say that compared to the earliest stages of political mobilization, **today we have more rights to appeal to**. The political struggles carried out over two decades have produced several condemnations that forced institutions to legislate. These rights, in spite of not always being fully recognized by our democratically elected institutions, can be

used today to reinforce our strategies of legal struggle and political resistance.

The "**first right**" enshrined by the law since **2018 is a legislative framework that - thanks to yesterday's struggles - institutions and the government now cannot ignore. As established by the Decree-Law No. 37/2018, of June 4 - 1st Right - Support Program for Access to Housing, is designed to promote housing solutions for people living in undignified housing conditions and who do not have the financial capacity to bear the cost of access to adequate housing.**

Today, these laws represent fundamental tools that the social movement can and must resort to defend the self-built neighborhoods from demolition as much as to claim adequate housing solutions. But precisely because of this long history of resistance, we know that this is not enough. Before we can enforce the law, many things today, as in the past, are necessary to change the current interplay of forces.

Last week many houses were demolished, but the longstanding experience of the housing movement has allowed us to promptly elaborate several protective orders.

And while community self-organizing through assemblies and protest actions are advancing even with bulldozers at the doorstep, public *comuniqués*<sup>3</sup> and alliance building amongst inhabitants, locally settled associations such as Canto do curió and Association of the Inhabitants of 2º Torrao, and the wider housing movement is currently allowing to mediatize the case.

By addressing public authorities' responsibilities for this emergency, the social movement aims

<sup>3</sup> See Demolições e desocupações no Bairro 2º Torrão, available in Portuguese here: <https://habita.info/demolicoes-e-desocupacoes-no-bairro-2o-torrao/> and <https://cantodocurio.pt/2022/11/22/peticao-sem-chave-nao-saio-2-torrao-em-resistencia/> (retrieved 9 April 2023).

at reducing the legitimacy of demolitions and more broadly at altering the relationship of power among the parties involved in a fundamental power reversal. Succeeding in this instance will give the chance to put a halt to the demolition process as well as negotiate long-term housing solutions for the neighborhood.

Encouraged by the "First Right" legislative framework, these are some of the strategies that we are once again using to claim recognition for essential rights that, after so many years of struggle, these inhabitants have earned and yet are still not fully recognized.

We are aware that, although far ahead from the departing point in **Azinhaga dos Besouros**, many struggles still must come. After raising our collective voices once, twice, and many more times, the common struggle for housing justice cannot be discredited nor the people's need for adequate housing be made invisible.



DIREITO DE PREFERÊNCIA = A CASA A QUEM A HABITA

QUERO VIVER ONDE QUISER DIREITO À HABITACÃO

TRAVAR AS RENDAS PARA OS DESPESOS

EXISTE RESPEITO E SOLUÇÃO EM TODAS AS CASAS PARA TODOS

TANTA CASA SEM GENTE TANTA GENTE SEM CASA

CASAS PARA TODA A GENTE

AS MORADORAS CARENTE 25

PELAS NOSSAS VIDAS!



# EVERY EVICTION IS ONE TOO MANY!

## **Coalition Against Evictions Berlin (Bündnis Zwangsäumung Verhindern Berlin), Germany**

**The Coalition Against Evictions Berlin (Bündnis Zwangsäumung Verhindern Berlin) is a diverse alliance from Berlin, supporting people in their struggles against being evicted.**

We came together from different social and political backgrounds, but with a common understanding that **evictions are the last and most violent expression of the exploitation and displacement processes experienced under capitalism.**

Beyond that, evictions are a stage of these processes directly executed by the state, and thereby exemplary to how property rights and private interests of the owner class are privileged over our human needs, or even over other rights that are in theory recognized by the same state.

That is why since the beginning of our ten years of activity we saw **the struggle against every individual eviction as the struggle against an entire system of exploitation.** We often say “each eviction is one too much” (*jede Zwangsäumung ist eine zu viel*) - meaning that we do not recognize any eviction as legitimate and that even if each case has to be pushed toward a solution that after all benefits the victim, on the long term, we don't want anything less than a world without evictions!

We are a **direct-action based group.** The core of our work is our **weekly assembly**, where we

decide on strategies and plan our actions. For us, the assembly is both a space that is always there for all and a structure that allows us to stay in touch with people in danger of eviction. The assembly allows us to react steadily and plan actions.

This is important because one of our main principles is that **we never decide about anything in the absence of the affected person.** We believe that the best expertise in each case is that of the victim's, as it is the only perspective that truly considers their mental health, fears, and willingness to continue their struggle.

**Our work is political** as we are building and maintaining a space, and its practices to keep fighting evictions outside the legal and institutional frame, strictly through solidarity and social interaction.

If neighbors come together they can stop an eviction even if lawyers or legal support claim they cannot! But a common political work can only occur if those affected are conscious about its nature and actively participate in it.

In fact, we are trying not to even discuss a case in the absence of those affected. There are exceptions to this rule, but we generally think that even information and evaluation have to be acknowledged by the affected person.

All that is mentioned above has **anti-authoritarian aspects** too - another important principle of our assembly. Since we are very conscious about existing hierarchies through different levels of experience, participation, and network capital, we consider it essential to keep on working on a structure that evens such hierarchies and doesn't exclude anyone from discussions and decision-making.

We have certain roles that will be redistributed week by week, and that imply very specific tasks, such as answering emails, answering the phone, or writing the minutes during assembly.

The moderation of the assembly is the role that involves the most authority, as the person doing it is responsible to facilitate discussions, keeping the time limit and not allowing them to go off-topic, keeping an eye on participants' needs, and eventually cutting off excessively long or abusive speeches. No sexist, racist, ableist or any other form of xenophobic or discriminatory expression will be tolerated at our meetings.

In some assemblies, the moderation might even be supported by someone leading a speakers list, and moderating the access to speaking time eventually prioritizing non-cis male speakers or those closer to the case.

Once we agree on strategies and propose actions, participants have to agree to participate in it. In case no one wants or can join we will look for other instruments or new timeframes for action.

Our main focus is **civil disobedience**. The other instruments we use live out of the potentiality of civil disobedience actions. For example, when we write a letter to a landlord we start with a rather friendly tone, but we also mention

what other forms of action we have been using in the past and link our website for detailed documentation.

We tend to use **an escalating strategy**, starting from an invitation to discuss, through pressure by

- ▶ publicity,
- ▶ go-ins,
- ▶ manifestations,
- ▶ and protests.

If wanted, we also organize blockades to physically stop the police and the executors from entering the apartment. But this is not always the case, in practice, every case is different, and needs a different strategy. And every strategy has to be approved by the people threatened by the given eviction.

Through our discussions, we often come up with new ideas or adopt and modify earlier forms of action depending on context or the experience with landlords and authorities. Visiting landlords and companies - whether private or public - in their offices or other properties has become one of the most frequent actions we have been doing in the past years.

We consider various actions of solidarity as part of our collective work, most notably **we accompany people to court**. In case their eviction could not have been prevented we can **offer emotional support**.

We are quite explicit about not being either social workers or service providers, and we are careful about not taking over certain types of emotional labor. Yet it is important to recognize that the space we create through our assemblies clearly plays a role in empowering and emotionally

supporting affected people. It is a social space where people listen and are being heard. The best evidence of this is that many of those once supported by us stay in touch, or even become active members to support others.

Another important part of our political work is the **collaboration with other groups, like building networks and a coherent movement in the city, on a federal, and international level.**

In the past years, the Berlin tenant movement grew significantly as a reaction to the increased pressure of gentrification.

The continuous attacks on squats and other alternative spaces have also been on the rise, culminating during the pandemic in the largest wave of large-scale evictions since the early 2000s.

Although our main focus is on individuals and small businesses, we are also involved in other struggles in the city by showing solidarity and sharing our experiences. Berlin is a big city with a long tradition of urban struggles. The movement is composed of many different groups that are quite specific in their work. Some groups are focusing on particular projects, or choose different instruments to fight for access to safe housing and to the city.

We have been always working together with such groups, and have been participating in common assemblies or organizing neighborhood meetings to unite struggles. Collaborations are also reflected in the participation in our assembly, we might have up to 20 active members but sometimes we grow to double in size.

We build friendships and networks on broader levels too. In Germany, we are in exchange with

many groups in other cities and we regularly participate in the **Right to the City Forum (Recht Auf Stadt Forum)**, one of the main meetings of the movement in the country.

We are also part of the **European Action Coalition to the Right to Housing and the City** and in 2019 we organized the **General Assembly in Berlin**, together with **Solidarity Action Neukölln (Solidarische Aktion Neukölln)**. This year we visited our comrades in Cluj, Romania to discuss our work in Berlin.

It is notable that since we started our activity the number of forced eviction in Berlin has been sinking. And our work definitely has a role in this tendency. Some of our actions are simply raising awareness.

>> For example, during the past months, we have been visiting public housing companies to protest against evictions. In Berlin (and Germany) these companies are maintained similarly to private corporations that are under pressure for efficiency.

Although significantly less than their private competitors, they have been evicting people too. We believe that public housing companies and cooperatives should pave the way towards a completely eviction-free infrastructure, especially in times when a strong movement is focusing on the de-privatization and re-municipalization of the housing stock.

Our work has constantly been changing during the past ten years. This has to do partially with the fact that the presence and tactics of the Berlin police have also been changing and intensifying. Violent evictions are not new to Berlin as such, but they were typically applied against squats and other radical spaces or to make space for big development.

What is new is that authorities would apply similar strategies to evict single families or small businesses if necessary.

In some way, it is also our success, a sign of our strength that this has often become the case as resistance has been growing.

Thereby we have shown how much effort and money those in power are prepared to invest in enforcing property rights against people's needs, crucial to contemporary capitalism and its reflexes against resistance to market interests. Our work has political meaning in this sense too.

As we got inspired and learned from our comrades at the Spanish network **La PAH** 10 years ago, we are trying to be a relevant example of radical action against evictions to our neighbors.

We know that we alone cannot stop all evictions. But when we see that other groups such as “**Stop Evictions**” from **Bremen** take inspiration from our practices and further develop it, we know that many of us together will be able to stop all of them!



# JUNTES FINS AL FINAL



# DON'T PANIC, ORGANIZE! FIGHTING FOR HOUSING RIGHTS IN BARCELONA

*The Housing Union of Vallcarca  
(Sindicat d'Habitatge de Vallcarca), Barcelona, Spain*

Barcelona is one of the cities with the most expensive rents in Spain.

**In the past 5 years, rental prices have suffered an increase of 28,7%.** This rise is, in part, due to the low supply and very high demand for rented flats. One of the major causes of the lack of supply is the unsustainable levels of tourism.

In 2019, Barcelona, a city with a population of **1.6 million inhabitants**, hosted more than **8 million tourists** in hotel establishments alone. The emergence of companies that offer homestays for vacation rentals and tourism, such as **Airbnb**, is removing flats from the rental market.

Rent is the only housing option for most citizens of Barcelona and, nowadays, it supposes spending more than half of our salaries on housing.

**Allowing this to be a market commodity means gambling with our lives.**

The Spanish state has been supporting profiteering and speculation for decades, at the expense of the popular classes. In 2020, a law came into effect that had the goal of containing and moderating the rental prices in Catalonia.

This law imposed a maximum price for rent in 61 Catalan municipalities. The law was proposed by "El Sindicat de Llogateres", a housing union that operates throughout Catalonia, organising tenants and fighting for policies and laws that guarantee the right to housing. Five months later, the Constitutional Court declared the rent regulation law "unconstitutional", ruling it ineffective.

## HOUSING UNIONS IN BARCELONA

In response to the housing situation, around 7 or 8 years ago, some communities and neighborhoods of Barcelona, and other cities around the country, started to organize housing unions. Nowadays, there is one in almost every neighborhood in Barcelona.

Our neighborhood, **Vallcarca**, is one of the areas

of the city most affected by the City Government's urbanistic plans.

The first General Metropolitan Plan (PGM) dates back to 1976: even though it wasn't fully executed, it still affects a big part of the neighborhood, blocking the rehabilitation and maintenance of many buildings and houses.

In 2002, a modification was approved that precipitated the start of a gargantuan gentrification process: **it proposed the destruction of all the ancient small houses and workshops from the neighborhood center, in addition to making a road that joined the center of Barcelona and the mountain of Collserola and also building new and more expensive apartment blocks.**

In the following years, many houses and buildings were expropriated and demolished

and many neighbors were kicked out of their homes. This process went on until 2008 when it slowed down due to the economic crisis. Many construction companies - but mainly, **Núñez y Navarro** - took advantage of this situation to buy real estate with the aim of making a profit.

In the meantime, small pockets of resistance grew, organized, and started to defend the right to live in Vallarca: from an anarchist group to a squatted community center, from the neighbor's assembly to the housing union.

## WHAT IS A HOUSING UNION?

**The Housing Union of Vallarca** was born in response to the neighborhoods' housing problems and needs.

Its main objective is **to defend our homes against speculation** (responsible for pricing us out of the area) **and gentrification** (responsible for replacing us with people with greater purchasing power), but also **to work on collective tools and solutions for meeting such a basic** - yet so poorly guaranteed - **need as access to decent housing.**

### Principles

Our principles are based on

- ▶ anticapitalism,
- ▶ mutual aid,
- ▶ self-management
- ▶ și "assemblearisme" (collective assembly-based organising)

We are **against capitalism**, recognizing it as **the economic and political system that allows rentiers to exist while extorting money from the**

**popular classes, who suffer as a result of the precarity of their housing situation.**

**Managing housing-related problems collectively** helps us to understand that we are not talking about "isolated events", but about recurrent situations, constituting a form of structural violence that affects us all.

In addition, as individuals we often don't know what tools we have at our disposal, nor do we have the technical or legal knowledge to defend ourselves.

Therefore, by organizing ourselves and sharing our problems and struggles, we can find ways to defend our homes and, simultaneously, feel accompanied in the process. **We believe in neighborhood solidarity because we know that in struggle, together we are stronger!**

We believe that **the collective must function autonomously and outside of the state institutions** (Social Services Housing Offices, etc.), in order to address all of the housing issues

that are ignored by precisely those institutions. In this way, as neighbors, we can intervene directly in the problems that affect us and find practical solutions that fit our needs.

We believe that the way of dealing with all these particular (but pervasive) situations is in **an open assembly**, which any neighbor can attend, use and contribute to.

## How We Function?

The Union works through **weekly assemblies**. The assembly is the space where members update the group on the previous week's work, developments in individual cases, and collective decisions.

Several roles are assigned at the beginning of the assembly, such as moderation, taking minutes, taking turns, etc. Then, in an orderly way, every member of the union with a housing case presents their updates.

Together we respond to the situation, bringing knowledge, ideas, and advice on how to proceed. At the end of every member's intervention, work paths and assigned tasks must be clearly specified; once this is complete, we move on to the next case.

It is very important to try to get each member to assume one task or another, and it is always emphasized that each person is the leader of their own case: **the union cannot be a place where only solutions are sought, it is necessary to contribute and collaborate.**

## Objectives

**The main objective of the union is to break with the capitalist dynamics that permeate our private, political, and social life.**

We believe and aim to transmit the idea that we can stop being victims if we organize ourselves, that together we have power, and that through collective direct action, we are capable of recovering what is ours.

## Tactics

### Communication

It is very important to denounce the housing situation and to spread the word that it's possible to organize, fight, and win. We use different ways to do this: from hanging posters in local shops and in the street, to talking about the union in schools, from writing an opinion column in the neighborhood newspaper to calling a press conference to talk about the next eviction.

We are committed to having a very public face: **a change in public opinion is essential to turn around the current housing problem.**

### Direct Action

Each person is the protagonist of their own struggle and does not need intermediaries to transmit their demands to anyone. We are those who confront and stand up to speculators against the injustices we suffer, taking matters into our own hands when the state fails to guarantee our basic right to decent housing. This way we make sure the decision-making capacity of each individual is respected. We do not want anyone to decide for us, neither about our lives nor about our homes!

### Negotiation

The first step to follow when a new housing unit (family or group of people sharing a home) arrives at the union with a housing problem is **to contact the owner of the property.**

This first contact must be made through the union's formal communication channels (email or mobile phone) in order to let the landlord(s) know that the family has the support of the union. Using the advice offered in the assembly, the housing unit must decide on the demands that will be made to their landlord(s). These demands should be clearly reflected in this first contact in order to start negotiations.

Negotiations can be done by email, mobile phone, or face-to-face. In any case, the decisions made have to be agreed upon by the housing unit and the union. In face-to-face negotiations, a minimum of 2 people from the union must accompany the housing unit. The maximums and minimums they are willing to accept must be very clear before meeting the landlord(s).

### Occupations (offices)

Sometimes, the negotiations break down, and we do not receive any answer to our demands nor any other information. In this situation, a strategy very commonly used by housing unions is to **occupy the offices of the landlords** (usually banks and royal state offices). The idea is to gather 30 people and enter the offices, making lots of noise, in order to stop them from working and to force a negotiation on the spot. Roles and instructions must be very clear, in order to prevent unexpected and counterproductive scenarios.

### Evictions

Often, the negotiation does not work, and we head toward an eviction.

In this case, members of the union **gather outside the house of the affected person on the day of the eviction in order to block it from being**

**carried out** (this involves both negotiating with the relevant parties, attracting media attention to the injustice of the case, and physically blocking the police from entering the property by creating a barrier of people ).

Stopping evictions is one of the most frequent and rowdy activities that we carry out, as eviction attempts are so common in Catalonia: **In 2021 there were 1755 evictions in Barcelona alone.**

All of the housing unions in Barcelona are in constant contact. There is an information channel where evictions of members from various unions are published as calls for support.

The union that convenes an anti-eviction action is responsible for preparing the strategy, leading the supporters who have come (usually a mixture of union members and neighbors), and transmitting the instructions for action that have been previously decided.

Going through a situation like this generates a lot of stress and can have a bad ending. However, successfully blocking an eviction is a powerful reminder of what can be achieved through collective direct action. Standing up to landlords, police, and judges in this direct way also makes you realize how important it is to support each other and how far we can go when we collaborate through mutual aid.

### Squatting

**Squatting** is a housing alternative commonly used by the union in situations where people have either been evicted from their homes or are unable to continue paying rent.

We think it is an outrage that there are so many empty homes in a city like Barcelona, where there

are so many people without a roof. Therefore, we support people to squat empty flats - usually owned by banks or vulture funds - as a way of meeting their basic need for housing.

### Looking for "Rair Rent" Housing

In 2019, we started a campaign under the slogan "**fair rent**". The targets of this campaign are small property owners who are willing to rent houses and rooms below the market price. At union meetings, we deal with many cases of people - often entire families - living in substandard situations, despite having a regular income and being able to pay between €300 and €500 a month for rent.

With this campaign, we invite these small property owners to help neighbors have access to decent housing.

>> When we started this campaign, a neighbor went to the union and offered to rent his property at an affordable price. Now, a woman and her child, who were in a very vulnerable situation, and did not find any solution from the State Administration, live in a decent home for a fair price.

### Movement Coordination

One of the key aspects of the "housing movement", is that it's very transversal: **everyone is directly affected by the housing situation.**

That makes it a very extensive and diverse movement. People from very different backgrounds come together and fight for their right to worthy housing, and public opinion sees the movement in a positive light. Another key aspect of our work is the **coordination with housing unions of other neighborhoods.**

Every time there's a housing union that has an eviction (almost every day), people from all around the city, and from many different housing unions, attend the anti-eviction actions.

If there's more than one eviction a day, we split forces geographically and strategically (the evictions are really different if it's the first attempt or if it's the 7th. We also take into account if the riot police are requested by the judge), to ensure we have the best chances to stop all of them.

We've also done some campaigns with other housing unions against landlords/owners. The housing ownership situation in Barcelona (and the entire country) is that **~30% of the houses are owned by a person/company that owns 10 or more houses.** In the past 15 years, the situation has been getting worse, since there are now vulture companies, from Spain and abroad that are buying whole buildings, evicting tenants out, and rising the rents.

By coming together with other unions, we've won some campaigns against big companies, forcing them to sit down and negotiate. There was also a nationwide rent strike during the Covid-19 lockdown, with the motto of "**If we can't work, we're not going to pay rent**".

Our strength resides in numbers since the law is (almost) never on our side.

### Limits

Every organization has its limits and it is crucial to be aware of them.

### Problems we face

One of the great difficulties we face is being aware of the work we can take on and setting

limits. In a city where there is poverty and hardship, it is very easy to get carried away by either despair or the wish to achieve everything. However, we must be aware of how far we can go.

>> For example, one decision we have had to take is to **not provide housing to homeless people who come to us**: we are not equipped or prepared for dealing with these kinds of cases, and we have to recognize that they fall outside of the remit and capabilities of the union.

### Repression

The State's response to the growth and power of the housing movement is, as expected, fines and repression. From March 2019 to October 2021, **364 fines have been documented for housing-related activism**, 351 of which related to evictions, for a total value of 206 141 euros. We are charged with obstruction, disobedience, and disrespect<sup>1</sup>.

Having militants being penalized has made it increasingly difficult to maintain our line of action. That is why it is important to constantly rethink and propose new strategies.

### Activist burnout

Due to the extent of the housing problems caused by speculation and gentrification in a city such as Barcelona, it can feel like there is always more to be done and that the work is never enough. This can lead to burnout of our members, who can take on too many tasks on a regular basis and can begin to feel overwhelmed.

We are trying to **tackle the issue of burnout by ensuring that tasks are evenly distributed in the assemblies each week** and that one person does not have too many tasks.

This struggle is a years-long process, so we need to think in the long run. **It's always better to leave a task unattended, than losing a member of the union because they've burned out.**

### "Assistentialism"

We always insist that each person is the protagonist of their own struggle and must be proactive in finding a housing solution: **the union is not a place to come and have others "solve" your case.**

We believe that the model of **mutual support**, whereby people both help and are helped, is preferable and more empowering than a model of "assistentialism".

It is through collective struggle and experience that people become experts in housing matters: **we reject a hierarchical model of "activists" and "victims".**

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<sup>1</sup>In Catalan, see for example:

<https://malarrassa.cat/destacats/el-moviment-per-lhabitatge-es-planta-davant-la-repressio-i-les-multes/>.



## LISTA GRUPURILOR CARE AU CONTRIBUIT LA ACEST VOLUM, ÎN ORDINEA APARIȚIEI



Mișcarea **Căși Sociale ACUM! (Social Housing NOW!, Cluj-Napoca, Romania)** started as a civic-activist initiative in the framework of the Desire Foundation. In 2016 it announced the need to politicize social housing in the city of Cluj. This was in the context of the drastic reduction of the state housing fund and the transformation of housing into a real estate business in recent decades, as well as the limitation of access to social housing precisely to people who are entitled to inhabit it. In 2017, the movement continued to advocate for disadvantaged working class Roma people to become a public actor fighting for an anti-racist and equitable public housing policy. We define this policy as a tool to ensure belonging to the city in the broad sense of not only having the right to live in the city, but to participate in political decisions on its development. Also in 2017, members of the campaign (together with FCDL, The Right to the City, and E-Romnja) were among the initiators of the platform named Blocul pentru Locuire (The Bloc for Housing).

The goal of turning the campaign into a driving force of the local movement for public housing and housing justice was realised through our actions from October 2017 to June 2018. In order to boost the development of a city for people, not for profit, as a political-activist movement we propose for Cluj a growth model that expands the state housing stock, including social housing; allocates an adequate budget for related public investments; ensures access to adequate social housing for the lowest income groups and those living in deprived conditions; provides support for alternative housing models, such as various forms of collective housing, from the public budget.



**FCDL - Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul la Locuire (The Common Front for Housing Rights, Bucharest, Romania)** is an initiative of people whose right to housing is endangered or infringed.

The group was initiated by a group of evicted and threatened evictees from Bucharest, together with their relatives and friends, activists, artists, NGOs. FCDL is a platform for housing activism at the national level. We reach out primarily to the evicted, but also to ordinary people not affected by evictions who support the right to decent housing; civic organisations, independent political groups, but also the media, policy makers, local and central authorities.

People from a variety of backgrounds, spread across the countryside and cities, are constantly affected by violations of the fundamental right to housing. We see cases everywhere of abuse and oppression carried out in the name of profit and power: whether it's a property development company that is breaking into a neighbourhood to increase house prices and rents, or a city council that is failing to provide the right support to vulnerable families, or a local council that decides to isolate a community on the basis of ethnicity.

We believe that real change can only come through solidarity and self-organisation. That is why the FCDL is an initiative with two main goals: 1, to make it easier for people to organise themselves in the face of violations of their housing rights and 2, to put this issue on the public agenda of the media and the authorities.



**Dreptul la Oraş - (The Right to the City, Timișoara, Romania)** is a democratically and non-hierarchically organised critical analysis and direct action group that wants the city to belong to all inhabitants - present and future, temporary and permanent, privileged and marginalised. We also want a fair city in which all of us, regardless of class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc., have fair access to resources and social services, a city in which we all participate in decision making and public policy formulation, because only through this emancipatory process do we become full citizens. We want a city that puts people and nature before economic profit.



**E-Romnja:** We are a group of Roma women activists and our aim is to empower Roma girls and women to fight together so that our rights as Roma women are respected in the community and in society.

Why an association for Roma women in Romania?

- because Roma women exist on the public agenda only in areas such as care and health;
- because the Romanian society is permeated with negative stereotypes and prejudices about Roma women and there is a need to dismantle them;
- because there is a need to create a framework in which Roma women can express themselves: a community in which Roma women can find themselves and which represents that part of their professional and personal lives with which they can associate;
- because they need to be visible in the public space through the contributions they make to their communities or to Romanian society;
- because there are not enough Roma women's organisations that reflect their interests in the public and private sphere.



**Roma Lawyers Association of Romania - RomaJust** is the first Roma lawyers' organization in the country and in Europe, established by young Roma lawyers. RomaJust was founded on 4th July 2015 and is made up of Roma graduates and students of law faculties in the country.

RomaJust was founded as a result of the awareness that in the last decade a considerable number of young Roma graduated from law school, especially in countries where the Roma Education Fund scholarship programme operates. However, there had been no visible progress in the number of Roma lawyers, notaries, judges, etc. Especially as Romania is a country with a significant Roma population. There are many cases of discrimination and violation of the rights of Roma people, many of whom require legal assistance. Similarly, Roma organisations that use legal instruments in their work do not have enough or any lawyers to work on the cases they take on. This represents a gap in the legal profession as well as in the ranks of Roma professionals.



**A Város Mindenkié - AVM (The City is for All, Hungary)** is a grassroots housing advocacy group founded in 2009 by activists directly affected by homelessness and their allies. The group's Anti-Eviction Emergency Service combines social work, advocacy, legal aid and civil disobedience to prevent evictions.



**Zdrružena akcija 'Krov nad glavom' (The Joint Action 'A Roof Over Head' or shortly The Roof, Belgrade, Serbia)** is an organization founded in 2017 in Serbia

with an aim to support the struggle for the right to housing. The Roof stands for the basic principle that the right to home is a fundamental human right: everyone deserves a roof over their heads.

Since Serbian legislation began allowing private individuals to enforce court decisions in 2011, the number of forced evictions has increased, fueled by the fact that the only interests of private bailiffs are their own profits and the benefit of the clients they represent. We advocate for immediate law reform – right to a home for everyone and the abolition of private bailiffs.

Through self-organizing and solidarity actions, we aim to support and assist the most vulnerable members of our communities. We organize various direct actions aimed at drawing public attention to this issue and exerting pressure on the private bailiffs, local governments, courts, banks and others responsible for throwing people out of their homes and onto the streets. Through struggles and consistent research about housing issues we also aim to devise a bottom-up housing strategy for the many in Serbia and possibly the rest of the world.



**Habita 65 (Lisbon, Portugal)** is a non-profit activist association fighting for the right to housing and to the city since 2005. Composed mainly by women working with women from different backgrounds and academic/professional areas, we belong to all people and communities. Our struggle is intersectional, anti-capitalist,

feminist, anti-lgbt-phobic and anti-racist. We denounce exclusionary housing policies that have further disempowered people by the exploitation of housing as a commodity. Such policies have promoted displacement, precarity and homelessness as well as affected the access to healthcare and education. Amid this systemic violence that reinforces racial, gender and social inequalities, we prioritize alliance-building and engage with other social movements via national and international alliances. Through direct action we contest the political space and strive to produce a systemic change in housing policies.

Over the years, Habita has worked with people affected by evictions; lack of housing alternatives; overcrowding; with communities living in self-built neighbourhoods in danger of demolition; with people living in social housing and highly segregated neighbourhoods that lacks the utmost basic equipment and services; families with difficulties in paying credit or speculative rents. We develop our strategies and actions through daily practices together with people directly affected by the housing crisis. For this, we hold bi-monthly collective assemblies where we are faced and organise around multiple housing problems, mutually engaging in the elaboration of personal and collective political strategies of resistance along with legal advice and solidarity action.



**Bündnis Zwangsräumung Verhindern Berlin (Coalitions Against Evictions Berlin, Germany)** is a diverse and direct action oriented grassroots alliance from Berlin, supporting people in their struggle against being evicted. We came together from different social and political backgrounds, but with a common understanding that evictions are one of the most violent expressions of exploitation and displacement processes experienced under capitalism, and that every eviction is one too many.



**Sindicat d'Habitatge de Vallcarca (The Housing Union of Vallcarca, Barcelona, Spain)** is a neighborhood collective based in Vallcarca, Barcelona. Fighting gentrification since 2016 through mutual aid, solidarity and direct action!

## HOUSING JUSTICE ACTIVIST NETWORKS WE BELONG TO:



**Blocul pentru Locuire (The Bloc for Housing, Romania)** is a network of groups fighting for housing justice in an anti-capitalist, feminist and anti-racist mindset. We are: Social Housing NOW!, FCDL, E-Romnja, Right to the City, RomaJust.



**The European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City (EAC)** is a convergence process between more than 35 movements from different cities in 20 European countries fighting for the respect of these fundamental rights. After having campaigned independently for years, those movements (grassroots groups composed by tenants, slum/ self-built neighborhoods dwellers, squat residents, victims of inadequate housing, victims of eviction or affected by indebtedness, professionals and researchers) felt the need to gather in order to strengthen this fight to take common action and common positions on European housing issues.



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AT PREZZATURE  
PER VOI  
SAN MARCO  
GRUPPO

ALCANTARA  
ALCANTARA  
ALCANTARA