

A Field of Contention: Evidence from Housing Struggles in Bucharest and Budapest

Ioana Florea¹  · Agnes Gagy¹ · Kerstin Jacobsson¹

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Abstract The article offers a study of housing movements in Budapest and Bucharest, with the main focus on the developments since the financial crisis of 2008, stressing the role that both structural and contingent factors play in shaping the dynamics of this “field of contention.” It is argued that a structural view is enlightening for understanding the factors that form the interactive field between activists, such as differences in social positionality as well as ideological conflicts. Moreover, conceiving of a structurally produced field of contention can help explain the differences in housing contention in the two cities. The analysis situates housing movements and their allied, parallel, or opposing actors within the long-term processes of urbanization and global dynamics of commodification, including housing financialization. It demonstrates that to understand how structural and political factors interact in a complex field of contention, attention to processes beyond short-term local movements is necessary.

Keywords Field of contention · Housing · Social movement · Urban movement

Introduction¹

Housing is an area in which social conflicts play out in cities around the globe. Citizen mobilizations and protests arise in response to social challenges and intensified polarization which are the consequences of globalization and the neoliberal restructuring of cities (e.g., Brenner et al. 2012; Greenberg and Lewis 2016; Jacobsson 2015). Existing power structures and resource-allocation mechanisms in urban governance where global, national, and local forces intersect are particularly salient in the housing sphere, and so are the disparities between rich and poor. Housing is also a sphere in which multiclass alliances have been emerging in various parts of the world (e.g., Mayer 2013; Polanska 2016), illustrating Marcuse’s argument (in Brenner et al. 2012) that the 2008 global financial crisis created conditions for the formation of alliances between “the deprived” (such as the impoverished) and “the discontented” (otherwise constrained in exploring the possibilities of life). This article explores social mobilization around housing in two Central and Eastern European (CEE) capital cities—Bucharest and Budapest—focusing mainly on the period after the 2008 financial crisis, which involved new developments in national policies, delivered as austerity measures with profound impact on social relations and power structures.

In few regions of the world have the privatization and commodification of housing been more pervasive than in CEE countries. Numerous studies have documented the rapid state withdrawal from direct intervention in the housing sector after 1989, in addition to the residualization

✉ Ioana Florea
ioana.floreaa@gmail.com
Agnes Gagy
agnesgagy@gmail.com
Kerstin Jacobsson
kerstin.jacobsson@gu.se

¹ Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg/Göteborgs universitet, Box 720, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

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of public housing (e.g., Günter 2000; Hegedüs et al. 2005; Hegedüs and Teller 2007; Polanska 2016; Tsenkova 2009), resulting in problems related to the lack of social housing, housing stock deterioration, rising rents and energy prices, coupled with low incomes of the population, disparities between the construction costs and households' income, high rents on the commercial market, as well as the gentrification and displacement of the poor (e.g., Czirfusz et al. 2015). In the last decade, both Hungary and Romania have had high degrees of privatized housing (96% homeownership in Romania and 87% in Hungary), while public (including social) housing is scarce (around 2% in Romania and 5% in Hungary). While in Hungary the ratio of ownership with mortgage and tenancy with reduced price is higher than in Romania, Romania features the highest ratio of owner-occupied (non-mortgage) houses in the EU (Eurostat 2015). Unofficial renting (estimated by the World Bank at 15–20% of the housing stock in the large Romanian cities) complicates this picture as the high level of homeownership has created a shadow rental market (Hegedüs et al. 2017). Nevertheless, Hungary and Romania are among the EU countries most struck by housing deprivation and overcrowding (Eurostat 2013). The need for social and public housing is acute, reflected across the years in the housing struggles, the high levels of homelessness, and in the thousands of applications for subsidized housing.

Although both countries were severely hit by the financial crisis, its impact was different: Hungary experienced a severe mortgage crisis, with increasing housing debts followed by evictions profiting the banks and lenders (Bohle 2014), while Romania experienced severe cuts in wages, social benefits, and employment, leading to increased housing costs burden and overcrowding, followed by evictions profiting (especially foreign) real estate investors and developers. The financial crisis exacerbated previous social inequalities in both countries, affecting especially poor rural areas in Hungary, poor areas at the edge of larger cities, and poor rural areas in Romania. The effects of the crisis evoked a range of citizen mobilizations around these matters.

In this article, we investigate housing contention in Bucharest and Budapest analyzed in the context of post-socialist transformation as well as post-crisis economic development, to see how such economic and political conditions shape opportunities and/or constraints for protest, movement-building and alliances. In this social landscape, there are examples of emerging multiclass alliances between middle class and poor strata (including those struck by housing debt after 2008) in both cities (e.g., Florea 2015; Udvarhelyi 2010, 2015). However, housing contention is complex and conflictual, evoking new leftist solidaristic mobilizations but also conservative, neo-

nationalistic ones. To account for this complexity of housing contention, and the way in which it is structurally produced, we draw on Crossley's (2006, 2013) "field of contention" notion.

In concrete terms, our analytical approach entails identifying the structural conflicts rolling out on the global, national, and local scales that give rise to a distinct field of contention, the collective actors populating the field, as well as some of the enabling and constraining factors in attempts to achieve the politicization of housing issues. Based on secondary studies as well as our own local observations, we thus try to account for the major forms of housing contention in the two cities. For lack of space, we cannot herein describe in detail the programs or actors' positions; neither can we account for all structural conditions; instead we take a "bird's eye view" of housing contention in Budapest and Bucharest, revealing the importance of structural factors for housing movement analysis, leaving their detailed analysis for further research.

The article is structured as follows. First, we outline the theoretical approach that will guide our analysis. Second, we offer background describing the two city contexts in terms of urban fabric and housing policy. Thereafter, we present the two case descriptions before the article ends with a case-comparative concluding discussion.

A Field of Contention

Field approaches have become increasingly popular in the study of civil society and social mobilizations, reflecting a more general shift toward relational approaches. Relational approaches emphasize the interactions between different kinds of collective actors (informal groups, formal organizations) and their relationship-building, potentially discerning patterns of conflict and avoidance as well as cooperation (e.g., Johansson and Kalm 2015). Relational perspectives on civil society and social movements include network (e.g., Diani et al. 2010; Diani and McAdam 2003), coalition (e.g., Staggenborg 1986, Van Dyke and McCammon 2010), and field models (e.g., Fligstein and McAdam 2012; cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In recent years, Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) notion of a "strategic action field" (SAF) has been an influential attempt to combine social movement and field theories. These authors define a SAF as a meso-level social order in which actors are attuned to and interact with one another on the bases of shared, but not necessarily consensual, understandings about the field's purposes, the relationships to others, and the rules governing legitimate action (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 9; see also Domaradzka and Wijkström 2016).

In this article, we approach housing mobilizations in terms of a field, but without making strong assumptions about common collective identity uniting actors (as tends to be the case in the social movement network models), interest-based strategic action (as in the coalition or alliance models), or fields as structured spaces of positions, characterized by a distinct field logic and shared views of matters at stake (as in the field models). Both the coalition and field models tend to assume a rationalist framework, conceiving coalition- or alliance-building as a deliberate strategy that groups or organizations embark on when it serves their interests—as aptly illustrated in the title of Van Dyke and McCammon’s (2010) edited book *Strategic Alliances*. The activist groups we focus on, however, do not necessarily form alliances based on a common agenda or joint strategy; yet, as we show later on, they are all part of an increasingly dense field of contentious action in the housing area.

We therefore draw on Crossley’s notion of a “field of contention” (e.g., 2006, 2013), which proposes an understanding of social movements as fields of contention, emphasizing two key aspects:

Firstly, departing from traditional models of movements, which tend to view them as unified “things”, it draws our attention to the numerous groups and agents who interact within the internal space of a “movement” and to the relations, alliances and conflicts between those various groups/agents as they unfold through time. Secondly, it draws our attention to the embedding of social movement struggles within multiple differentiated contexts of struggle, each of which affords different opportunities for struggle but each of which makes different demands upon activists if struggle is to prove effective (Crossley 2006: 552).

Loosely inspired by Norbert Elias (along with Bourdieu), Crossley saw actors in a field of contention as forming relatively autonomous configurations: that is, sometimes they exchange resources and sometimes they compete; sometimes they cooperate and sometimes they conflict. The positions groups take relative to one another, Crossley argued, are just one among a number of emergent relations produced within the field (2006: 553).

We suggest that this approach has several advantages. First, it recognizes emergent properties and field dynamics without making strong assumptions about common understandings of the rules of the game, as the more closely Bourdieu-inspired approaches tend to do. Moreover, it is as much interested in the unintended consequences of field dynamics as in the conscious actor strategies. More than Crossley, but consistent with his approach, we stress the structural factors that formulate the conditions of group

formation and struggle, thus returning to the understanding of social movements as part of long-term structural processes. We conceive of structural factors as elements of the field of contention, which both produce the conflicts around which contention arises, and influence relationship-making among actors, both by enabling and constraining collective action. Conceiving of our field as one where social movements interact with actors and processes of various scales is partly similar to what Minkoff and McCarthy (2005) defined as “organizational fields.” However, while these authors refer to a field made up by different organizations operating in similar spheres, we see the field of contention as made up by a more heterogeneous set of factors, including non-organizational actors and non-intentional processes.

Finally, through following various levels of processes that simultaneously shape housing conflicts, our analytical use of the field concept emphasizes the multiple scales of interaction that are implied in a field of contention. Global movements of financial capital, national and local politics, as well as activist groups’ movements and alliances/conflicts within these processes, are simultaneously active in what we perceive as the phenomenon of housing conflicts. A multiscale approach to the field of contention is thus useful, in tracing how the “localization” of broader political and social conflicts happens throughout interconnected scales of social action.

The Structural Context of Housing Contention

Consistent with our structural approach, we start by placing urban and housing development for each city in its longer historical perspective. We discuss intertwining structural factors that create the conditions for housing needs and insecurities, and for the emergence of housing contention. The following section discusses pre-war uneven development and property investments, socialist policies of housing construction and redistribution, post-1989 privatization policies, the development of the real estate market, the mortgage boom and 2008 crisis, state responses to it, and finally the world-economic phenomenon of housing financialization.

Urban Development Before 1989

Budapest’s modern form was built in the decades following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise after the 1848 revolution. Besides the political aim to make Budapest a regional center competing with Vienna, in material terms the city’s unforeseen growth was fueled by the financialization effect of the world economic crisis of the 1870s that boosted infrastructural investments by Western capital (Hilferding

1910; Raviv 2008) and channeled Hungarian landlords' wealth from the previous grain market boom into urban development investments (Gyáni 1992). The sharp uneven development between Budapest and the countryside was noted as a problem undermining economic growth by the turn of the century, remaining a problem to date.

Bucharest's development into its modern form involved the nineteenth century industrialization, a long series of regulations intended to curb urban growth, and the formation of a new poor class of contracted workers and day laborers. In 1863, church properties were secularized and passed into state ownership which paved the way to new real estate investments. Uneven development was not as sharply distributed between Bucharest and the rest of the country as in the Hungarian case, but rather between regions and ethnicities—with North-East Romania and Southern regions marked by poverty and the Roma structurally dispossessed (emancipated from slavery in 1856, without any compensation or access to property). In both capitals, urban growth involved the inflow of rural workers, the attraction of the metropolis exercised on rural areas resulting in intra-urban polarization, and the formation of slums that served as transitional areas between rural–urban mobilities. These sociospatial divisions proved hard to overcome until today.

The socialist housing construction that took verve from the 1960s in Hungary targeted greenfield projects around cities (Illés 2009: 10), and the distribution of apartments followed the hierarchy rank in redistributive power (Konrád and Szelenyi 1979). In rural areas, most of the population was excluded from central housing policies (Misétics 2017) or offered bank credits rather than state housing (Illés 2009: 126).

Similarly in postwar Romania, providing for the acute housing need became a central policy preoccupation (Zahariade 2003). The main housing policies were the nationalization of large private properties and the construction of state owned apartment blocks in cities and industrialized villages. Already by 1968, a series of laws allowed the sale of state-built apartments for state tenants, on state supported mortgages. As in the Hungarian case, the quality of housing differed according to party rank, work qualifications, personal contacts (Chelcea 2000: 57), and ethnicity. Despite high levels of social mobility, this effect, coupled with that of socialist urban revitalization projects in city centers, partially reproduced the pre-war social inequalities in the two cities and would later constitute the base-layer for post-socialist housing inequalities.

Privatization

In Hungary, as in Romania and other CEE countries, under the influence of international financial institutions such as

the World Bank and the IMF, “privatization, deregulation, and cuts in state funding became the three main principles of housing reform” (Stanilov 2007: 176). The privatization of state housing aggravated the inequalities of previous distribution, and propelled spatial segregation. The decrease in social housing, together with the decentralization of social policies in Hungary (Vigvári 2008), had strong limiting effects on social housing policies. Meanwhile, falling incomes and surging unemployment coincided with bringing energy costs to world market prices and decreasing public expenditure for housing benefits (Misétics 2017: 268) which induced increased household utility costs (Bohle 2014: 117). The combined effect of rising unemployment, housing pressures, and workers' homes disbandment led to a visible growth in homelessness. Housing policies tended to favor construction and ownership (available to middle and upper strata) over housing costs benefits that could prevent housing and energy poverty. Those hit by poverty were squeezed into urban segregated neighborhoods, or further out from the cities, migrating toward rural areas and often turning their small privatization gains from selling their apartments in the city (which they could not sustain) into hopes of existence in cheaper locations (Illés 2009: 175). The rural areas they headed to, however, often turned out to be long-term repositories of unemployment and growing poverty.

In Romania, one of the first laws in 1990 allowed tenants in state-built apartments to buy them on low prices. In 1995, tenants living in nationalized dwellings were allowed to purchase them, often coming into legal conflict with former owners/their heirs. Moreover, following the European Commission's pressure on the Romanian government to pass a comprehensive legislation speeding up restitutions (SAR 2008), property restitutions to former owners were boosted by Law 10/2001. These privatization mechanisms fueled the real estate market, as well as structural dispossessions: living conditions worsened in apartment complexes in poorer areas, becoming stigmatized as “ghetto neighborhoods” (Rughiniş 2004), while tenants of formally nationalized dwellings faced property conflicts and evictions (Chelcea 2000). Following previous housing inequalities, Roma tenants were disproportionately affected. Overall—and different from the Hungarian rural–urban divide—severe poverty and precarious housing were mostly concentrated at the urban outskirts (Stănculescu and Berevoescu 2004).

Mortgage Boom, the 2008 Crisis and the Financialization of Housing

In Hungary, after the first government of present Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (1998–2002) initiated a program of state-aided housing loans, benefiting the upper 20%

segment of the income scale (Misetics 2017: 275–276), the following socialist government reduced those subsidies and channeled housing mortgages toward foreign currency loans. A forex mortgage boom followed (largely in Swiss francs) and changes in currency rates were externalized to households. Following the global financial crisis in 2008, between 2008 and 2009, households' debt service on forex loans grew between 30 and 60% (IMF 2012), coupled with a new wave of unemployment and income decrease. In face of the economic crisis, the socialist government took an IMF loan and implemented further cuts, including in housing subsidies (Bohle 2014: 21; Misetics 2017: 278).

In Romania, after 2002, the launch of the first private mortgage program corresponded to the advancement of the real estate boom. At the same time, local authorities refused to allocate budgets for social housing, while engaging in selling state properties on the market—thus facilitating the commodification of housing.² This was especially the case for Bucharest. The real estate market peaked in March 2008. During the first crisis year, prices fell 41%. In response, in 2009, the Democratic Party government launched the state-backed mortgage program “Prima Casă” (First Home) in collaboration with several major banks. The main beneficiary group was the young middle class. The program's immediate effect was stabilization of the real estate market, limiting the dramatic drop in prices. That same year, the government took a 20-billion-euro loan—conditioned by austerity measures, administrative decentralization, and deregulations (in fiscal, labor, health etc. legislation)—from the IMF, the European Commission, the World Bank, and EBRD. Until today, “Prima Casă” remains the main housing policy in Romania, especially benefitting real estate agencies and the main foreign banks.

Both the Hungarian and Romanian housing mortgage boom fit into a regional wave of foreign lending (Bohle 2014; Raviv 2008) fueled by the dynamics of the world-economic phenomenon of “financialization of housing” (Aalbers 2008). Within that process, the financialization of housing in CEE had a specific position. Similar to the nineteenth century wave of financial investment in the region (Hilferding 1910; Raviv 2008), the 2000s foreign lending boom happened as an extension of the financialization process of Western capital under a push to penetrate into emerging markets. This relation involved a hierarchical distribution of losses, with the household sector in CEE taking up more risky loans and the rates of nonperforming mortgages reaching higher scores than in Western Europe (Pósfai et al. 2018: 8). Forex housing mortgages and the new financialized real estate boom are essential factors of

the structural context in which distinct fields of housing contention have emerged in the two cities.

Dynamics of Housing Contention in Budapest: Mobilizations on Opposite Ideological Poles

While tenants' interest groups were active in public debates in the first years following the regime change in Hungary (Gyori and Matem 1997), tenants' activism, characterized by a constituency of high and middle status, has not remained part of the contention field after the privatization of the overwhelming part of rental housing. The two issues that produced political contention over housing and that define the field of housing contention up to the present day are that of homelessness, which has been on the agenda of progressive activism since the regime change, and housing debt bore by debtors with forex mortgages, an issue that burst out in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, and that is represented today by right-wing debtors' groups. Characteristic to the field of housing contention in Budapest is the parallel practice of housing activist groups at opposite ends of the political spectrum, addressing effects of the same broader political-structural situation, but not working together or reacting publicly to each other.

The Politicization of Homelessness and Housing Poverty by Progressive Activist Groups in Budapest

Homelessness in urban spaces became probably the most visible and most thematized aspect of housing conflict in Hungary after 1989. The first civil organization targeting the problem of homelessness was established in 1988 (the Social Committee for the Homeless, SCH). When homeless people organized a spontaneous demonstration in 1989, as the Hungarian Railways prepared to close train stations for the public at night, this organization stepped up as a mediator between homeless demonstrators and local government. In 1990, it took part in founding the Shelter Foundation, the first official homeless care provider in Hungary. Three waves of homeless demonstrations between 1989 and 1990, together with efforts of allied activists of the Social Committee for the Homeless, the Fund for Supporting the Poor, and the initiative National Council of the Disadvantaged, achieved that the official system of homeless shelters was established in 1990–1991, and the issue of homelessness was shifted from the realm of policing to that of social policy (Gyori and Matem 1997; Csongor 2010; Udvarhelyi 2015). Nevertheless, the problem of housing poverty remained, pushing people toward poorer regions and the streets. After 2010, the criminalization of homelessness became an official policy, with Hungary becoming the first country in the world to inscribe

² Housing treated and promoted as a commodity and not as a social need.

this criminalization into the constitution (Udvarhelyi 2015).

Activist groups began to raise again the housing issue as a political question by the mid-2000s. Social worker activists, members of the Hungarian branch of the Humanist Movement, and of the larger alter-globalist mobilization wave funded the organization called “Man on the Street.” Its aim was to break the issue of housing poverty out of the existing frames of charity, homeless shelter infrastructure, and social policy, instead thematizing it as a political issue concerning all citizens and exerting pressure to legalize the right to housing (Udvarhelyi 2010). In 2009, activists who worked in Man on the Street, and inspired by participatory principles while working with “Picture the Homeless” in New York, funded the organization “The City is for All.” Their aim was to transcend the structural inequalities ingrained in society that silence the poor, and to create an organization where management and leadership roles are held by homeless people. The interclass coalition, which became the group’s working method, is the central organizational and political characteristic of its activity, for instance reflected in the group policy that only its homeless members can publicly represent the group.

Since 2009, The City is for All has become one of the best known and most influential activist organizations in the post-crisis waves of progressive activism. With a conscious policy of coalition-making and media communication, it continues to link the issue of homelessness to other forms of social oppression (e.g., participating at demonstrations linked to LGBT rights or to the Roma’s role in the 1956 revolution), or other aspects of housing inequalities (e.g., organizing the Vacant Buildings March, which links the issue of homelessness to wider issues of financial speculation and irresponsible housing policy).

Meanwhile, several new organizations, with complementary focuses, have grown out of the initial group. The City is for All engaged with the criminalization of homelessness in a large campaign, part of which was the occupation of the 8th district mayors’ office. While actions of The City is for All imply various scales and actors of local or national politics, it continues to operate according to a long-term strategy linked to the problem of housing poverty. Compared to other new left movement groups in Hungary, e.g., those that emerged from the 2010 to 2011 wave of oppositional mobilization, this strategy makes The City is for All more flexible in terms of alliance-making, and less vulnerable to changes in the political movement landscape.

The Politicization of the Forex Mortgage Crisis: National Policies and Right-Wing Contender Groups

In 2010, the conservative party Fidesz entered parliament with a supermajority. It started a program to tackle forex mortgage debts, framed within a larger program labeled as a national economic freedom fight against foreign capital (Wiedermann 2014). Building on the delegitimization of the FDI- and credit-led economic policies of the previous socialist and liberal parties, Fidesz ideologically stepped up as the representative of national interests against Western powers.

Because of the government’s forex emergency package, the problem of debt spirals due to forex currency rate changes was mitigated. Nevertheless, debt service rates of indebted households remained high in European comparison. With no subsidies for tackling household maintenance costs and debts, the situation resulted in a further growth of household debts, evictions, and homelessness (Misétics 2017). While in 2013, Fidesz made the decrease in household utility costs a central theme of its 2014 election campaign, in fact the distribution of these subsidies was hierarchical, with bigger users acquiring bigger benefits. The most important housing policy package of the post-2014 cycle followed a similar distribution scheme, allocating funds only to families who could afford down payments for new homes. Single parents on child benefit were excluded from the scheme, as were people with a 6 months gap in social insurance payments, public workers, and those with a criminal record.

As Pósfai et al. (2018) demonstrate, borrowers living in economically disfavored areas were included in the housing mortgage bubble with a higher debt service rate than borrowers in the capital, thus falling into a debt spiral. As government policies reinforce the polarizing effects of the crisis, evictions in cities and the urban–rural migration of the poor added to the transfer of poverty to rural areas. This accumulation of grievances in rural areas, and their containment within hierarchical systems of dependence from central funds and political power, implies that while central politics and urban movements target the issue of housing debt, most of the experiences of social pain remains without a political voice. This silence is part of what we consider the field of contention over housing in Hungary. On the one hand, the accumulation of poverty in rural areas serves as an absorber of urban housing tensions while on the other, it provides a foundation for political stigmatization of poverty and state dependence. The latter issue has been strongly thematized by the new right as a “Roma problem,” a thematization which serves as a background for disciplining policies in urban settings as well, such as in Budapest’s 8th district.

After 2008, a wave of debtor mobilizations reacted to the forex mortgage crisis in a neo-nationalist political framework. Various groups, comprising dozens of members, organized demonstrations of hundreds, stepped up in the name of forex mortgage victims framed debt service to banks as a fight between financial exploitation and society defined as the Hungarian nation. Debtors' actions ranged from petitions and lawsuits, to street occupations, picketing of banks as well as government institutions. The Koppány group grew famous for blocking evictions by acts of civic disobedience. While the biggest demonstrations were centered in Budapest, the groups were also based and acted in smaller cities (e.g., Koppány Csoport 2017). In many cases, the government's rescue package did not dissolve the severe debt service of indebted households, it only exchanged foreign currency debts into Hungarian forint. On the other hand, the government campaign used a symbolic narrative that closely matched that of the groups, vindicating the role of savior to the Hungarian people against foreign banks, and thus muted the symbolic critique of those still under pressure.

With the transformation of the economy benefiting national capital in alliance with Fidesz (such as the Hungarian bank OTP), the groups' criticism against economic exploitation turned against Fidesz. The members claimed that an alliance with banks was behind the government's mortgage rescue. In 2013, debtor activist groups demonstrated in the front of Viktor Orbán's home (Pálfi 2013). In 2016, they demonstrated in front of the house of Sándor Csányi, president of OTP, to emphasize the conflict between debtors and the biggest Hungarian bank's benefits from the government's mortgage solution package (s-dh.hu 2016).

Debtors' groups are active up to the present day (e.g., vtvseged.hu 2017). Coming from a background of grievances caused by a transnational process that were raised to the forefront of national politics after 2010, these groups' politicization of housing debt is confined to a national contender role. While they represent social problems that outlived the government's rescue package, their voice is curbed by official communication using a symbolic narrative identical to theirs. This segment of the contention field is characterized by a lack of ideological difference between housing groups and state power, yet strong contradiction in material positions and interests.

Józsefváros: Multiple Scales in the Politicization of Housing Tensions

The way housing conflicts are politicized is conditioned by complex situations where socioeconomic and political processes of various scales interact. The case of Budapest's present gentrification of the 8th district (Józsefváros) is

illustrative in this respect. After a long history of inner-city slum formation, the district has been subject to three waves of rehabilitation/gentrification projects since the 1990s (Czirfusz et al. 2015). The municipality actively sought to compensate for the concentration of poverty and low-quality housing stock by attracting private investors (1990s), EU funds (2000s), and central funds (after 2010). Today, the poorest area of Józsefváros, the Orczy Quarter, is the target of a campus redevelopment project funded by the central government. The plan to transform Józsefváros into a university town, instead of a "ghetto full of criminals," as mayor Máté Kocsis commented (Czirfusz et al. 2015: 70), is voiced against a background of nationwide authoritarian measures directed against the poor. The district was the first to experiment with measures against homelessness. Mayor Kocsis was one of the main promoters of those measures and has also served as the referent of homeless issues in Fidesz' parliamentary fraction since 2011. The eighth district local government experimented with various projects against marginalized groups, such as the expulsion of NGOs helping drug addicts in the neighborhood and funding a local paramilitary group in 2011 (Czirfusz et al. 2015: 70).

While the poor are disciplined and squeezed out of the district, new middle-class groups with higher levels of education and income are moving in, pushed by the new surge of real estate prices and rent in the center of Budapest (Portfolio.hu 2016). The new middle class presence in Józsefváros also has a specific political aspect. Since 2010, the political opposition against the Orbán government was broken out of the symbolic and institutional frameworks of the previous socialist and liberal circles. While the latter's legitimacy, electoral support, and institutional power dwindled, numerous street demonstrations, initiatives, and activist groups appeared, many of them gravitating toward a stronger emphasis on social issues. Similar to other countries in the region, a new wave of leftist activism appeared, rehabilitating the labels of the political left after a long period of delegitimization after 1989. Two social centers that serve as meeting places for new left activists are situated in the 8th district, and its gentrification and social conflicts are also thematized by the group.

In the process of the new left self-definition, opposing local authoritarian policies that have already been upscaled to national levels plays an important role, together with searching for a different, progressive way of integration into the district's life. From bar management policies and inclusive street festivals to more targeted political actions, various efforts are being pursued to support those under gentrification pressure. In ideological debates, as well as in everyday adjustments of affection and aesthetics, siding with the inhabitants of Józsefváros works as daily check and display of one becoming leftist. However, political

efforts cannot do away with the structural contradiction between middle and non-middle class positions within the gentrification process (Mayer 2013). While wishing to side with the poor, new left middle-class activists are also moving into the neighborhood, contributing to the district encompassing more high-end consumers. Perceiving that contradiction, debates over the 8th district's gentrification have become political and moral struggles within the new political left (e.g., Békés and Böcskei 2016; Bernáth and Szeles 2016). In these debates, new left discussions of gentrification inscribe long-term effects of unequal development within the city into contemporary political debates. In these political debates, some of the connections between short- and long-term processes across local, national, and transnational scales that make up today's situation in the district become explicit, while others remain hidden.

To conclude, what we see as a field of housing contention in contemporary Hungary features active groups addressing housing poverty from the angles of homelessness and housing mortgage, at different poles of the political spectrum. New left thematizations of gentrification in Budapest in the last few years added new voices to the debate. Meanwhile, the “trickling down” of housing poverty to disadvantaged rural pockets points at a large, silent segment of the field, the indirect effects of which can be seen both in electoral results of political dependence, and in political exploitations of the topic of welfare dependence by poor Roma in rural areas.

Dynamics of Housing Contention in Bucharest: The Making and Unmaking of Solidarities

In the early 1990s, when income and housing precarity struck the less affluent, homelessness became a visible phenomenon. Although intensely discussed, homelessness did not catalyze housing rights mobilizations in Romania; nevertheless, in the early 2000s, Roma rights and anti-racism activists gradually engaged in housing rights mobilizations against evictions unequally targeting the Roma. Especially after the economic crisis, when the state's retreat from social housing provision and its favoring of the better-off became evident, housing rights mobilizations grew in intensity and clarity of claims.

The (Non)Politicization of Homelessness and Evictions

The first actions addressing housing poverty in Bucharest developed in the 1990s as charities and night shelters (NGOs and religious) offering support for the homeless and people in diverse situations of poverty. Many of these organizations were established by or relied upon the first

waves of foreign donors entering Romania (Rughiniș 2004), which conditioned their local activities, internal organization, public communications, and alliances. Parada Foundation and Samusocial Romania—the largest and most lasting organizations focusing on homeless-support in Bucharest—were no exceptions. Thus, in the years leading to the economic crisis they did not take active part in opposing evictions (such as the massive eviction of more than 4000 people from the historical quarter, operated by the municipality in 2005 for the purpose of “cleansing” the city center for tourism) or the economic and political mechanisms that generated housing poverty. Indeed, in 2002 and 2006, rising energy costs and shrinking state support for social housing blocks led to several street protests and police clashes in Zăbrăuți, a micro-neighborhood of social housing in Ferentari, Bucharest's poorest and most ethnically diverse district (Fleck and Cosima 2008). Taking place under a structural, overlapping stigma against the poor/Roma/social housing tenants, these contentious dynamics in the Bucharest housing field gained little support and few allies.

Nevertheless, in the early 2000s, the strongest Roma rights organizations at that time became actors in the field of housing contention, raising a critical voice against municipal policies affecting Roma dwellers. At the same time, the intensified evictions and protests attracted the interest of a new generation of critical urban researchers such as the Association for Urban Transition (ATU) organized in 2001, and Ofensiva Generozității (OG) founded by theater and arts students in 2005–2006.

This period corresponded to the parallel emergence of several challenging actors in the field of housing contention and their loose interactions. In mid-2006, OG initiated a community art project in Uranus-Sabinelor, a micro-neighborhood of previously nationalized houses close to the city center which was marked by restitution trials and awaiting evictions. Several self-organized groups joined by offering voluntary support. The community art project, however, was (scantily) financed by a consortium of art and publicity firms with offices recently opened in the neighborhood, and with gentrification interests. This sponsorship alliance was problematic and led to group separations. OG kept working in Uranus-Sabinelor and was formalized in 2007 as O2G Association which slowly became independent from its gentrifying financial sources. It continued to document the evictions and support the remaining dwellers who gradually organized as La Bomba group (and later a formal association). Other groups moved their focus to Ferentari, developing “right to the city” projects for youngsters in several schools there.

The Politicization of the “Right to the City”: Urban Development, Right- Versus Left-Wing Solidarities

All these groups and organizations allied in fall 2006 with other anti-hate-speech organizations to collectively organize a 250 people strong anti-racism manifestation. Another occasion for all these groups to interact was the initial formation of the Platform for Bucharest in early 2007, under the coordination of ATU, which published a declaration for a better city with claims and strategy proposals ranging from heritage protection to better housing. At that time, ATU had accessed foreign financial support to host meetings, print, and distribute materials. Different groups concerned with urban issues—including housing poverty—showed adhesion to the claims in the declaration and joined the Platform.

In the frame of the spring 2008 local elections, the Platform worked to conceive “The Pact for Bucharest”—a strategy for inclusive urban development—and collected promises from all election candidates to follow the strategy. However, although representatives of all candidate parties signed the Pact during the campaign, these promises were not kept after the elections.

The local elections in 2008 corresponded to the start of the crisis and the dramatic fall of real estate prices. The following years were marked by frequent episodes of contention organized around the Platform for Bucharest. Due to power structures among actors within the Platform, the prioritized claim was the protection of urban heritage against demolitions for new high-rise real estate developments.

In mid-2009, the heritage protection movement grew (with some protests gathering more than 200 people and online groups gathering thousands of supporters). Increasingly, in both internal and public communications, already precarious Roma tenants were labeled as the destroyers of buildings with heritage value, while the poor and working classes in need of affordable housing were accused of ignorance toward the cultural value of certain urban areas. Entire social groups were gradually removed from the movement’s initial cross-class alliance. The initial ideal of “the right to the city” was losing symbolic ground in front of a new vision: a competitive “city of culture” with historical identity embodied in its architectural heritage (Florea 2015). This new vision represented a frame-alignment to the dominant societal ideology, promoting urban development based on culturally valuable private property and further marginalizing housing as a social need.

Since 2010, as right-wing nationalist groups strengthened within the Platform and the heritage protection movement, discourses shifted toward nationalistic understandings of urban identity. Thus, several initial supporters of the Platform distanced themselves from it. Those ATU

members disagreeing with the heritage protection movement’s turn allied with Roma rights activists and worked on housing issues in Ferentari and other contexts (Boto-nogu 2011).

Despite exclusion from the Platform for Bucharest and the lack of involvement from the local authorities, both La Bomba and groups working in Ferentari continued to gain visibility for their intensified level of community involvement. While La Bomba continued to attract more artists and journalists, Ferentari’s social complexities continued to attract researchers (Pulay 2010; Schiop 2012). In 2011, La Bomba’s community center was evicted as the consequence of property restitution. This was an important event in the process of politicization around housing rights. Media attention sided with La Bomba—which rarely happens in eviction cases, especially those taking place in neighborhoods with Roma dwellers. Also, it received intensified support from those who previously visited La Bomba. Moreover, the locals managing La Bomba became even more involved and radical in their critique of housing policies, critique expressed in street protests sometimes gathering more than 100 people, press releases, requests for official meetings at the mayor’s office, as well as in two collaborative theater plays developed together with socially involved artists.

In the context of national policies favoring housing privatization, property restitution and accumulation since 1990, housing precariousness and the risk of eviction continued to grow for those lacking properties. This process intensified in the years after the 2008 crisis, as the state not only withdrew from social housing provision, but also limited the amount and accessibility of social benefits. At the same time, especially after the crisis, policies such as rehabilitation programs for privately owned blocks-of-flats, the continuous sale of public housing, the previously mentioned “Prima casă” program, and deregulations in urban planning benefited mainly the better-off and stimulated large real estate developments. In this process, evictions and symbolic cleansing of the poor became emblematic, translating wider processes of global market integration and geopolitical hierarchies into local processes of urban development through gentrification.

Thus, evictions also became emblematic for the making and unmaking of solidarities around housing justice—such as the eviction in spring 2012 of a Roma family informally living in the recently restituted villa of a well-known architect and senior member of the heritage protection movement. Their removal from this city-center property was legitimized through their replacement with young artists who would establish as the “Carol 53” cultural collective. Carol 53 was framed as an urban development best practice. The housing function of the building was blurred into the living-and-working approach, conferring

cultural and entrepreneurial values to domestic space (Florea and Dumitriu 2017). The eviction of the Roma family was rarely mentioned in public presentations. Despite the general silence, critical debates arose within several left-wing groups dedicated to issues of social justice. These debates intensified the gulf between the heritage protection movement, with its right-wing “city of culture” alliances, and the emerging groups mobilizing in the field of housing contention, the latter becoming more articulated about housing justice as central to “the right to the city.”

The Common Front for Housing Rights: Multiple Scales in the Politicization of Housing Tensions

Since the Carol 53 eviction, an increased level of interactions and alliance-building among tenants at risk of eviction, artists, academics, anarchist self-organized groups, Roma rights activists, and NGOs, had animated the field of housing contention. In this context, “Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul la Locuire” (The Common Front for Housing Rights, FCDL) was established in 2013. FCDL was organized as a non-hierarchical group of people at eviction risk and those working to advance housing justice (with a loose network of about 2000 supporters). Throughout 2014, its activities ranged from offering assistance with sending social housing applications to the municipality’s housing administration departments, to networking with advocacy NGOs. The previous experiences from O2G, La Bomba and Ferentari groups, and FCDL’s connection to a similar housing rights front in Cluj (the second largest Romanian city), were instrumental in the collective learning processes as well as the clarification of claims and strategies.

In fall 2014, another violent eviction occurred in a formerly nationalized and restituted building in the center of Bucharest, Vulturilor Street, which affected more than 100 people. The previous contact between the displaced tenants and FCDL allowed the organization of a strong and visible opposition. Some of the evicted organized an on-site protest camp and—due to the authorities’ refusal/delay to solve their social housing requests and with the support of FCDL—they remained at the camp all winter long, and some even for over a year.

The level of cross-class solidarity-building around the Vulturilor case was unprecedented in the field of housing contention in Bucharest, as even some members of the heritage protection movement supported it, and researchers from abroad came to document its actions.³ As in previous emblematic eviction cases, the involved groups’ politicization increased—in this case through protests initiated by evictees, meetings with municipal, parliamentary, ministerial decision makers, reaching out to more people at

eviction risk, and activating the solidarity of hitherto unpoliticized NGOs, such as the previously mentioned Samusocial and Parada charities.

Thus, FCDL’s actions take place at the intersection of several scales of socioeconomic processes limiting/advancing/influencing their direction of housing politicization: the evictees’ situations and short-term struggles for housing security, and the long-term work-in-progress strategies of the housing activists, both reacting to localized forms of global economic processes; interactions ranging from collaboration to conflict with several levels of the local administration (from social workers to department directors); negotiations with members of sometimes opposing political parties, placed in diverse positions within the national administration; since 2015, the support of the European Action Coalition for The Right to Housing and the City, engaging with the transnational level of policies affecting housing, and the opportunity to interact with other European housing rights groups—among them The City is for All from Budapest.

In 2016, through its loose alliance with advocacy NGOs, FCDL members gained access to several sessions of the working group in the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration overseeing the formulation of the National Strategy for Housing. This process came with disappointments, as the National Strategy for Housing was drafted in 2016 without the amendments suggested by the FCDL. Further disappointments for housing activists came in 2015 and 2017, when massive urban protests against corruption failed to address social issues and excluded any association with FCDL claims (Voicu 2017). Nevertheless, several recent victories of housing contention were celebrated, as international and Roma rights movement alliances were strengthened, and housing was mentioned as a social necessity by several candidates in the 2016 local election campaign, the first time since the 1990s.

To conclude, characteristic to the field of housing contention in Bucharest is that groups working tangential to housing issues—such as the heritage protection movement and the Roma rights movement—intersect with “right to the city” and housing activism, in processes of making and unmaking solidarities, related to wider power hierarchies.

Concluding Discussion

By offering a study of the present contention over housing in Budapest and Bucharest, and by stressing the role that both structural and contingent factors play in shaping the dynamics of the “field of contention,” this article has contributed to advancing a field approach to urban mobilization. The article points out the relevance of a historically informed, structural view on the field of contention.

³ See www.michelelancione.eu/blog/tag/vulturilor/.

Following up on Crossley's (2006, 2013) proposition to think movements within a field of contention that comprises multiple levels of struggles, including unintended consequences and factors not reflected consciously, we proposed that tracing structural factors that formulate the conditions of ideological and strategic formation of activist struggles has a strong contribution potential to understanding urban movements.

Our field of contention approach allowed us to see how mobilizations may take unintentional directions (such as the split in “the right to the city” movement in Bucharest), are absorbed by wider power struggles (such as the anti-mortgage mobilization absorbed by governmental discourses in Hungary and the heritage protection movement in Bucharest absorbed by gentrification processes), form conflicting identities at the intersection of multiple scales of politicization (such as new left activists thematizing the fact that they are becoming part of gentrification mechanisms in Budapest's 8th district), mobilize around opposing logics (such as the neo-nationalistic anti-mortgage mobilization versus progressive “housing for all” groups in Budapest)—all within the boundaries of the same overarching structural factors. Our examples underline that for understanding how structural and political factors interact in a complex field of contention, attention to processes beyond short-term local movements is necessary. Beyond contemporary policies and struggles on local and national levels, the formation of housing conditions in both countries is shaped by long-term processes of localized structural integration into the dynamics of financial markets and global competition.

On a broader scale of historical processes, we pointed out that there is a long-term unequal development within national modernization trajectories, inducing a rural–urban polarization of wealth and status. In the Hungarian case, we showed that the “trickling down” effect of housing poverty toward rural pockets is a major sociological and political factor of the housing contention field that remains outside of the scope of urban housing struggles. This element of (political) silence on the rural end of housing poverty is something we consider to be a significant aspect of housing struggles, which would remain invisible if we only considered actual movement actors as part of the contention field.

Another broader connection we pointed out was between financialization of the global economy and national policies governing investment in CEE built infrastructures. In our two cases, the political outcomes of housing financialization are different. In Hungary, the issue of forex housing loans has been brought to the center of national politics by the governing conservative party Fidesz, associated with an ideology of freedom fight against Western capital, while debtors' right-wing activist groups struggling against remaining debts are hindered by

an ideological overlap with the government's discourse. In Romania, until the end of 2016, mortgage pressure and debt accumulated after the crisis (often due to abusive, though nationally unregulated, loan contracts operated by the main foreign banks) remained un-politicized, the struggle taking place on the level of individual court trials against banks. Meanwhile, in Bucharest and other large Romanian cities, urban gentrification processes took verve in response to (mostly foreign) financialized real estate investments and national and local policies targeted at urban renewal, leading to waves of evictions and contention. Along a later and slower development of the mortgage market in Romania in comparison to Hungary, the difference in the two cases is also due to different contexts of national political polarization: in Hungary, after 2010, the problem of forex mortgages became a main topic of political campaigns for the new conservative government, blaming previous Socialist-Liberal governments for irresponsible credits serving the interest of Western capital instead of Hungary.

Long-term marginalization, such as in the case of Roma, is present in both our cases, however, in a different role. In Bucharest, evictions of Roma families as a result of waves of commodification of inner-city plots is at the center of housing activism, which also thematizes housing poverty as an issue of racism and catalyzes the continuous building of alliances with the Roma rights movement. In Hungary, while Roma are highly represented among the poor displaced by inner-city gentrification processes, the issue of the “Roma problem” is not raised by activist groups working within urban environments, but is central to dominant political discourses of the right and extreme right, associated to the problem of rural unemployment and state-dependency. This discourse serves to legitimize policies of disciplining the poor, the national scale of which is also localized in housing conflicts like that in the case of Józsefváros, whose mayor plays a leading role in introducing policies disciplining the poor, including the homeless.

In terms of the role of the post-socialist transition, we pointed out that the inequality of socialist housing distribution worked as a basis for the inequality of housing privatization, determining the shape and loci of housing struggles today. In both cities/countries, the main housing policies have been mortgage programs backed by the state and directed toward the upper and middle strata, primarily producing gains for real estate agencies and banks, while social housing programs were hardly budgeted. In the two capitals, the most politicized urban spots of housing tensions appear in inner-city districts that bear the mark of both unequal socialist policies of housing distribution and development, and of post-socialist housing commodification. In parallel, especially after the 2008 crisis, due to the urban growth policies targeting the upper middle class, and

the even further retreat of the state from housing provision, there is a parallel process of stigmatization of those in need for affordable housing—which in the Bucharest case has broken up the “right to the city” alliance.

A structural view is enlightening for understanding the social relationships as well as the ideological conflicts within the present field of housing contention. Our analysis showed that relations between actors in various social positions vary widely. One of our foci was on the relationship between middle-class political mobilization and those threatened by housing poverty. While the Hungarian group The City is for All and the Romanian Common Front for Housing Rights are explicitly built around cross-class alliances between those positions, contradictions between the interests, and political stances of actors in different positions appear in other cases, such as the internal contradiction between the political and structural position of middle-class left activists moving into a gentrifying area in Budapest, or in the case of lack of support for those suffering evictions during a massive wave of middle-class demonstrations in Bucharest. One case that very illustratively points out the relevance of a field of contention approach is the parallel activity of right-wing and left-wing housing activists in Hungary. Caught in different ends of the political spectrum, strongly set by the ideological dynamics of national politics, right-wing debtors’ groups and left-wing activists against housing poverty find it impossible to work together; instead, they build out parallel structures of political conceptualization and organizational alliances.

To conclude, tracing how long-term global structural processes, activists’ efforts, and sociopolitical constellations on national and local levels combine into contemporary geographies of politics around housing can help us situate present examples of housing contention into broader contexts. It can also help reveal continuities as well as gaps and silences between structural and political processes. In the article, we have pointed out several layers of interaction where structural processes and political actions intersect, demonstrating the potential of this approach for further research.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

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treatment of interviewees etc.). The analysis for this article moreover is at a general level (focusing field of contention), and no individual interviewees appear in the text.

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