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TIMELINE ON HOUSING

*– how did
we get here?*

This timeline offers an overview of the relevant political events (regime changes, adopted legislation, emergence of initiatives, etc.) that have directly or implicitly influenced the contemporary housing scene in Serbia.¹⁾ The timeline starts from the socialist period of post-war Yugoslavia, a time at which the political and economic systems had produced housing policies that lie at contrast with the ones we are facing today. It outlines the path of the radical transformation of the political organization of the state and therein the latter's relation to the issue of housing. Clarifying the rapid shift over the past few decades—from housing as collective responsibility and use value to housing as an individual burden and exchange value—is necessary for understanding the nature of the contemporary housing conditions, as well as the struggles that have intensified in recent years. These had started as responses to particular urgent cases and aspects of housing conditions, and recently have started joining resources and aggregating into what, in our view, promises to be a stronger housing movement.

**June
1950**

Societal Property and Self-Management as Structural Features of Social and Political Organization in Socialist Yugoslavia

During the socialist period (1945–1991), Yugoslavia developed two distinguished and intertwined political and economic concepts: “self-management” and “societal property” that materialized through the ownership of workers over means of production and surplus of societal value. In a sense, in today's concepts, societal property can be understood as “common” rather than “public” property. Both self-management and societal property were introduced after the split from the Soviet Union in 1948 and during the 1950s and were consolidated through the “Law on Handover of Enterprise Management to Workers.”²⁾ Self-management socialism, which was introduced in top-down fashion, reflected the attempt of the state to systemically decentralize and disperse power.³⁾ Yet naturally, dialectic relations between the state and the units of self-management were inevitable. In spite of the inconsistencies and contradictions in

1)
This is a concise summary and to some extent a reduced interpretation of the named milestones, although each one deserves a longer explanation of complex and sometimes contradicting aspects. The indicated references provide further elaborations if desired.

2)
In Serbian: Osnovni zakon o upravljanju državnim privrednim poduzećima i većim privrednim udruženjima od strane radnih kolektiva.

3)
Sekulić, Dubravka. 2012. Glotzt Nicht So Romantisch! On Extralegal Space in Belgrade. Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, p. 19.

operationalization, the legacy of this paradigm has been an invaluable reference for numerous contemporary commons-based initiatives and practices.

1953 • Regulation of the Management of Residential Buildings – official proclamation of the right to housing

This regulation prescribed the right to “permanently use an apartment, following the regulations of the order in residential buildings.” Together with other laws and regulations that followed, such as the 1957 “Resolution on the Basic Principles of Housing Legislation,”⁴⁾ the 1958 “Law on Housing Relations”⁵⁾ and the 1986 “Law on the Financing of Housing Construction,”⁶⁾ these set the operationalization framework for the principle that the entire society was responsible for the provision of housing for all citizens. Namely, Article 1 of the “Law on the Financing of Housing Construction” stipulated that “[b]ased on solidarity and reciprocity, organizations of Associated Labor and other self-managed organizations and communities, as well as society at large, must take action and create opportunities for every man to realize his needs for housing, as well as the fundamental requirements for social security”⁷⁾ [emphasis added]. Further, the “Law on Housing Relations” allowed for housing funds to be established, collecting portions of workers’ income as well as the collectively produced surplus value from enterprises.⁸⁾

The housing needs of the workers were defined as a priority and were addressed through various legal mechanisms: through settlement of the privately owned housing units of the pre-war period (sharing a large apartment with the owner), through partial nationalization of the existing pre-war privately owned housing stock and lands in Yugoslav cities in 1958 (which guaranteed the new tenants’ right of occupancy), and through new constructions that expanded the housing stock. The latter was possible through state credits, solidarity contributions from workers’ salaries, and through the surplus value of enterprises. This brought about the construction of new large-scale housing settlements in urban areas (e.g. the New

4)
In Serbian: Odluka o osnovnim principima stambenog zakonodavstva.

5)
In Serbian: Zakon o stambenim odnosima.

6)
In Serbian: Zakon o finansiranju stambene izgradnje (Official Gazette of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, no. 4).

7)
Ibid., p. 22–25.

8)
Marčetić, Iva. 2020. Stambene politike u službi društvenih i prostornih (ne)jednakosti [Housing Policies in Service of Social and Spatial (In) Equalities]. Zagreb: Pravo na grad, p. 24.

Belgrade, which was the biggest one in the city). While the allocated apartments remained societal property (that of the enterprises or local self-governments), tenants had a secure life-long “right of occupancy.”

The value of rents depended on a negotiated agreement between the grantor (enterprises, local self-governments, etc.) and the tenants of a residential building, and was defined in relation to the construction value of the building and its depreciation. A part of the income from collected rents was returned to the housing fund of the right holder, while another went to the maintenance of the building.⁹⁾ During that period and until the IMF interventions in the 1980s, this system served three of the major challenges that the housing sector in Serbia faces today: ensuring affordable and balanced rents, ensuring availability of capital for future investments, and ensuring that the building conditions remained dignified.

Although decisions on the allocation of housing units among workers were made within the workers’ councils and based on pre-defined sets of criteria that considered the socio-economic characteristic of potential tenants, it is evident that there were cases of corruption in the process of distribution.¹⁰⁾ In addition, the system was unable to provide a sufficient quantity of housing units for the growing numbers of Yugoslavs moving to the cities during the rapid industrialization of the country. As a result, there were newly built modernist apartment buildings in some parts of Belgrade, while in other parts, entire neighborhoods were built informally and composed of individual family houses from low-income workers who were left out of the allocation of socially owned units.

The self-building of homes was also partially supported through favorable loans from enterprises to qualified and nonqualified workers. Yet, the planning regimes did not regulate these settlements as was the case with large state-built housing estates. Hence, although the settlements were informal according to the official planning documents and registry, they cannot be considered as entirely illegal, according to the normative use of the term. In spite of shortcomings, the officially implemented model of production and distribution of housing constitutes an attempt to operationalize the paradigm of “housing as a universal right.”

9)
Ibid., p. 27.

10)
A study by Duško Sekulić indicated that while 80% of persons in positions of political leadership were housed in socially owned flats, less than 22% of skilled and unskilled workers did (see: Archer, Rory. 2013. “Imaš kuću—vrati stan: Housing Inequalities, Socialist Morality and Discontent in 1980s Yugoslavia.” *Godisnjak za društvenu istoriju* 3: 119–139). This opinion was also confirmed by Iva Marčetić, who adds that workers with higher levels of education not only received more units in total, but they enjoyed larger ones as well (Tadić 1991 in Marčetić, Iva. 2020. *Stambene politike u službi društvenih i prostornih (ne)jednakosti* [Housing Policies in Service of Social and Spatial (In)Equalities]. Zagreb: Pravo na grad.

1980s • IMF Shock Therapy

Due to the 1974–1975 global recession, the Yugoslavian government committed several mistakes while attempting to protect its economic growth. One of these mistakes was public lending from international creditors, which opened the door for the imposition of macro-economic restructuring programs by the IMF as of the 1980s. The debt repayment programs caused the declining of living standards and “corroded the social fabric and the rights and securities that individuals and families had come to rely on.”¹¹⁾ Among other aspects, the IMF programs led to the disintegration of the industrial sector and the piecemeal dismantling of the welfare state. By the turn of the decade, more than a thousand factories had closed and hundreds of thousands of families lost their income. On one hand, this had direct impacts on the societal ownership system of housing as explained in the following points, and on the other, it lies at the core of the rise of ethnic tensions that erupted in the wars that caused the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia into six states.

December 1990 • Law on Housing Relations – trigger of the large-scale privatization of socially owned housing

Against the backdrop of the dwindling economy and sweeping neoliberalism through the economic restructuring imposed by the IMF, Yugoslavia attempted to balance socialist and market-oriented elements, yet the latter dominated. The decline of the economy was mirrored in the investments in housing and the number of newly built societal housing units, and the changes that were made in 1990 on the “Law on Housing Relations”¹²⁾ marked the shift from treating housing as collective responsibility and right to an individual burden. Namely, Article 2 of the above-named law states that “Working people and citizens will meet their personal and family housing needs with their own resources with regard to the construction, purchase or lease of their apartments”¹³⁾ [emphasis added]. The article also explains that the state is no longer responsible for providing housing for all citizens, but only for the socially vulnerable.

11)
Woodward, Susan L.
1995. *Balkan Tragedy:
Chaos and Dissolution
after the Cold War*.
Washington, D.C.:
Brookings Institution. p.
15.

12)
In Serbian: Zakon o
stambenim odnosima
(Official Gazette SRS, br.
12/90, 47/90 - ispr., i
55/90, and Official
Gazette RS, br. 3/90 - ispr.
I ((i?)) 7/90 - ispr.). ((In
note 6 “Official Gazette of
the Socialist Republic of
Serbia”))

13)
Ibid.

Additionally, Article 6 provisioned the possibility of privatization of the societal housing units by the tenants who held the occupancy rights. This allowed for many citizens to purchase their leased apartments at an affordable price (which permanently secured their tenancy under the new system), making them the winners of this distribution of housing wealth. Among them, as previously outlined, there was a bigger percentage of highly skilled workers than those with lower levels of education and income. Further, this shift in official policy and regulations left many of those who had regularly contributed to housing funds with neither secure housing nor subsidized loans to self-build, as was the case with the informal settlements in earlier periods.

Since the passing of this law, there has been a substantial transition as manifested in the massive privatization and in the disassembling of the entire system of financial support to housing provision that used to base on solidarity funds and enterprises' surplus value.¹⁴⁾

1990 – 1996

From Socialist Yugoslavia to “Democratic” Serbia – ethnic wars dissolve the federal republic

Following the classical scenario, economic hardships and the piecemeal dismantling of welfare systems in socialist Yugoslavia fed into nationalistic narratives in the republics that constituted it. The 1990s were marked by ethnic wars that killed an estimate of 150,000 people,¹⁵⁾ caused the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands, and led to massive destruction as well as to the breakup of the federation into six autonomous states.

Although Serbia was actively involved in the war, no battling took place on its territory.¹⁶⁾ Therefore, it suffered no physical destruction and its housing stock remained intact. However, most of the privatizations that took place as a result of the “Law on Housing Relations” happened during the 1990s. The immaterial destruction that this process brought about was radical and has ensued long-term consequences.

According to “The Analysis of the Conditions for the Sustainable Development of Housing in the Republic of Serbia. Starting Point for

14) Marčetić, Iva. 2020. Stambene politike u službi društvenih i prostornih (ne)jednakosti [Housing Policies in Service of Social and Spatial (In) Equalities]. Zagreb: Pravo na grad, p. 48.

15) There is no one conclusive number of casualties of the ethnic wars, it highly varies according to sources. Thorough and conclusive investigations were never carried out

16) This is valid for the territory of Serbia, with exclusion of Kosovo. The only destruction that Serbian infrastructure and built structures suffered were during the NATO bombing in 1999. The targets of the bombing were mostly public infrastructures and not residential buildings, notwithstanding, some of the latter experienced damages due to proximity to the targets.

the National Strategy,”¹⁷⁾ which was published in 2019 and is serving as a basis for the National Housing Strategy 2020–2030 (currently being drafted), around 250,000 socially-owned housing units (over 55% of the total stock of housing units in Belgrade) were built between 1945 and the 1990s. In comparison, since the introduction of the “Law on Housing Relations” in 1990, all but 4,500 units (1,8%) have been privatized (98,2%). The 1,8% of the total units that were not privatized account today to more than 50% of the total public housing stock.

October 2000 • The Bulldozer Revolution – divorce with housing as social policy

The 5 October Overthrow, a.k.a. Bulldozer Revolution in the year 2000, marked the explicit break up with the socialist past and confirmed the direction of entrenchment of capitalist paradigms and neoliberal politics. It should be noted that the process of EU accession¹⁸⁾ significantly supported this trajectory and influenced the scale and timeline of the overall economic transformation, as well as the change in the structural logic of what constitutes the public sector and its mandated services, where one of the most important fields was housing.

In this transition, housing was almost entirely moved from the realm of social policies to economic ones. The public housing provision for all (at least that was the goal) was replaced with a new approach that placed it under the social protection framework and reduced its scope to targeted projects (e.g. refugees, internally displaced, Roma communities, public security forces). At the same time, the state pushed for developing the housing market through transforming the ownership regime over units and land and by introducing home-loans. Since then, home ownership has been heavily advertised as the ultimate lifegoal and housing related debt has ever since been rapidly growing.

17)
https://www.mgsi.gov.rs/sites/default/files/Nacionalna%20stambena%20strategija_Analitika.pdf

18)
The negotiations on the Stabilization and Association Agreement between European Communities and their Member States on the one hand, and the Republic of Serbia on the other, started in November 2005, and the agreement was signed eight years later on 1 September 2013.

2000s and up to date

Indebting the Nation – how foreign banks exacerbated the structural problem

For those that did not manage to buy the societal housing units they were leasing before the 1990s, as well as for new housing seekers, the options are limited. As public housing is scarce and occasional, they either continue living in the same apartment with their parents and grandparents or take up a housing loan. The latter became a widely used option as foreign banks entered the former Yugoslav region and advertised new financial products, making use of the state-propaganda promoting homeownership and the rising needs of the population for securing housing. Yet, the deregulation and flexibilization of working conditions that were introduced with the economic restructuring of the country had increased the precariousness of workers, which in turn increased the risk of the indebtedness and folding on credit payments.

One of the most toxic credits was the one indexed in Swiss francs, which was promoted by government officials as the most favorable. While the CHF has been growing in value against the Serbian Dinar over the years,¹⁹⁾ the average Serbian incomes did not and therefore the loan rates have more than doubled. While many have struggled and others are still struggling to pay off the debt, countless others have either been threatened with or were served eviction orders. Cross-comparing data from consumers' associations in different countries, it was concluded that there were 125,000 such credits in Croatia, 20,000 in Serbia, 11,400 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 700 in Montenegro.²⁰⁾ This large-scale indebtedness mobilized large numbers of people: "Franak" in Croatia, "CHF Srbija" in Serbia, and "Švicarac" in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While the continuous protests and public pressure managed to make the authorities in Croatia and Montenegro adopt laws that converted the CHF debts to Euros (because the exchange value has been comparatively stable since 2015), in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina the governments took no action, and the only option was for some capable citizens to individually carry their struggles through courts. Until today, in Serbia only a few court decisions ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, ordering the respective banks to convert the debts to Euros. In 2020, the consumer association "Efektiva" announced the first successful collective lawsuit in which three of the eleven

19)

According to the National Bank of Serbia, on 28 March 2007 one CHF was worth 50 Serbian Dinars, and on the same date in 2019 it stood at more than the double at a value of 105 Serbian Dinars. The highest value was recorded on 25 January 2015 when it stood at approximately 125 Serbian Dinars.

20)

<https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-47659600>

represented loan contracts were terminated by the court's first instance verdict (the others had accepted the offer of the Piraeus Bank—now Direct—to convert their loans to Euros and discontinued the lawsuit).²¹⁾

2004 ● **Housing Center (Housing Center)**

Housing Center is an organization that was established in 2004, with the objective to improve the living conditions of socially vulnerable groups and support their social integration and independence. With most of their team being trained architects, they have vast experience in building social housing in different parts of Serbia. They also have ample experience in cooperating with institutions for social protection, especially through “Social Housing In a Supportive Environment,” a program they co-created and that provides a model for provisioning housing and social support to some of the most vulnerable citizens.

With their track record, the Housing Center was able to acquire a license from the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure to be considered a “non-profit housing organization,” which means that it is authorized to “provide, i.e., acquire, manage and lease apartments intended for social housing, as well as manage the construction of apartments for social housing.” This means that they are an officially recognized actor with great potentials for strengthening the infrastructures that cater for just housing conditions.

2009 ● **Law on Planning and Construction – opening the possibility for lands to be privatized**

Until the passing of the “Law on Planning and Construction,”²²⁾ the lands in the country were considered to be exclusively public property to which only leasing rights can be distributed to private entities to utilize or construct on them. The passing of this new law opened up the possibility for the lands to be sold and privatized as

21)
<http://efektiva.rs/aktuelnosti-efektiva/aktuelnosti-krediti/prva-grupna-presuda-zaraskid-chf/>

22)
In Serbian: Zakon o planiranju i izgradnji (Official Gazette no. 72/2009, 81/2009 - ispr.). ((See above))

well. Article 83 explicitly states that the “public land is on the market.” Article 96 further elaborates and confirms that an ownership regime over a parcel of land can happen “according to the market conditions.” The only lands excluded from this law are those occupied by existing public buildings or reserved for future ones. Other exceptional cases where market regulations and purchases can be suspended have to be approved by the government. The law therefore confirms the legislative transformation that enables easier privatization and therein the commodification of the country’s lands. This change further limited the space for pushing for housing policies in which affordable and public housing projects are not only a “last resort” (as it has become the case since the “Law on Housing Relations” of 1990). Since public lands have become assets that can be sold on the market, the parcels officially dedicated to public housing projects are insufficient, sporadic, and usually located at the margins of urban areas.

2009 ● **Establishment of Pravo na grad (Right to the City) In Croatia – inspiration for municipal struggles in Belgrade**

With some differences, almost all of the former Yugoslav states are facing similar challenges in relation to systems of urban development generally and housing particularly (privatization, speculation, corruption in planning systems, etc.), where neoliberal logics dominate the various spheres of social reproduction in our societies.

Three years after the beginning of struggles against the enclosure of Cvjetni (Flower) Square and Varšavska street, located at a central block in the city of Zagreb, in 2006 (through the construction of a shopping mall and parking garage), a group of activists created the association Pravo na grad (Right to the City). They are dedicated to promoting the right of citizens to participate in decision-making on issues related to their city, and advocate against encroachments on public spaces and the commodification of public resources. They have produced numerous campaigns and studies on spatial policies and housing, which have been feeding into the programs of

progressive political forces in Croatia (e.g. Zagreb je naš [Zagreb is Ours], a municipal platform, and Možemo [We Can] on the national level).

As Pravo na grad's struggle has echoed across the region, activists in Belgrade and Serbia (including the Ministry of Space) have come to see this association as an inspiration for their own journey pushing for just and inclusive spatial policies.

2010 ● **Ko gradi grad (Who Builds the City)**

This association was initially established as a platform in 2010, in response to the urban developments in Belgrade that were (and still are) characterized by corruption, mismanagement, and the privatization of public resources, as well as the clientelist government behavior that laid the grounds for monopolistic private sector actors. Among other activities, Who Builds the City has pioneered public discussions on current housing related issues (such as the “So-Called Housing Issue” gathering) that have fostered partnerships and initiatives.

One of their most prominent projects “Smarter Building” aims at creating the first contemporary non-speculative housing cooperative in Belgrade. They also initiated the regional network MOBA, which gathers housing cooperatives and initiatives from Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic under the goal of establishing support mechanisms and frameworks that further develop the sector of housing cooperatives in Central and South-East Europe. The network created the MOBA housing model where affordable housing is provided through executing sustainable projects that base on the following principles: (a) collective ownership—the bought or constructed real estate is owned by the cooperative; (b) credit liability—the cooperative bears the responsibility for the credit, thus managing the risks in a more robust way; (c) secure tenancy—members are guaranteed long-term use of a unit; and (d) scaled financing—values of monthly installments and initial investments are calculated and scaled to the levels of income of the members in order to ensure affordability and sustainability.

**December
2010**

Ministarstvo prostora (Ministry of Space)

The Ministry of Space (MoS, officially registered as the “Institute for Urban Politics”) was formed in 2010 with the aim to activate unused spaces through direct action and municipal negotiations. Over time its aims and mission expanded, yet from the onset, the collective has been dedicated to spatial politics that ensures the re-situation of public interest onto the agendas of city development, and therewith, a just distribution of spatial (and related monetary) resources. Today MoS’ activities target promoting communal use of public spaces, the development of urban commoning practices, participatory urban planning mechanisms, and as a fourth pillar, housing justice. The collective addresses housing mostly through critical analyses of official housing policies and advocates for alternative approaches to housing that treat it as a right rather than a commodity. In the long run, it aims to improve the regulations that govern spatial programs and steer priorities towards dignified living conditions, whether in relation to housing stock, publicly owned communal spaces, infrastructures, etc.

MoS has initiated, organized, and led multiple participatory processes and studies on topics such as urban commons, housing, and urban planning. It has played a leading role in the organization of events that aim to shift paradigms of local politics (e.g. running a public campaign against the privatization of public spaces, particularly Belgrade cinemas in 2011, or establishing the Street Gallery in 2012 at Belgrade’s central street passage, which raised the issue of possibilities of common uses of public spatial resources).

A central focus of MoS has been fostering cooperation with and between other collectives and individuals from diverse sectors and professional backgrounds to share values and goals, serving as an adhesive force in the ecosystem involved in transforming modes of urban development in Belgrade specifically and in the region generally. Members of the MoS collective are also active in other housing initiatives and organizations. This has often led to the creation of multi-actor initiatives that feed from these collaborations, and expand the base of people pushing for alternative, democratic models of spatial production and distribution (e.g. Ne da(vi)mo Beograd [Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own] in 2015, Zajedničko [Platform

for Theory and Practice of Commons] in 2017).

In addition, MoS enjoys a wide international network and has participated in and contributed to the organization of a number of international gatherings (e.g. INURA conference Between Big Ideas and Life's Realities in 2014 and New Ideas for Old Buildings in 2016).

2011 ● Law on Enforcement and Security – privatizing enforcement of evictions

The “Law on Enforcement and Security,” adopted in 2011, introduced the so-called “private bailiffs”²³⁾ into the Serbian system. Using the usual “effectiveness” rationale, it transferred the jurisdiction and power for the enforcement of eviction orders from public executive bodies to private entrepreneurs. This established a systemic bias towards the interests of profit-driven private entrepreneurs while withdrawing from protecting public interests (nominally the domain of public institutions). The following years proved to be of indescribable violence where most incidents pushed those evicted into homelessness. In the context of, on the one hand, an increasing demand for land and homes alongside widespread corruption, and on the other, an increasing number of indebted citizens under precarious living conditions and employment, this law and the ensued transfer of power opened the space for various forms of misuse and unjust activities that were motivated by profits for the private bailiffs.²⁴⁾

Noteworthy, the passing of the “Law on Enforcement and Security” in 2011 and the amendments in 2015 were a result of untransparent and non-participative processes as have become typical, where the discussions on the law proposals in the parliament are pro forma rather than genuine deliberations, and where the public is not informed about the intended laws until after they are passed. In 2019, modifications to the law introduced fines for those who stand in solidarity with the evicted or try to resist forced evictions. Further, the Ministry of Justice ruled that in any case of eviction where the debt lies above EUR 5,000 (around ten times more than the average monthly net salary in 2020), the apartment in question cannot be a

23)

Private bailiffs can be employed by anyone to collect a debt. They are usually self-employed and will work on a commission basis where they receive a percentage of collected debts.

24)

In 2019, a son of the Deputy of the President of the Chamber of bailiffs purchased an auctioned apartment that was forcefully taken from the Aksentijević family (<https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/ko-kupuje-stanove-koje-oduzimaju-izvr%C5%A1iteljij>).

subject of settlement. Yet, this ceiling disregards the realities of indebted citizens where debts accumulate and often exceed EUR 5,000 due to the impossibility of meeting housing costs with their levels of income (e.g. people living on social benefits or with irregular wages). It is evident that the legislators chose to ignore the fact that the enforcement of this law leaves many in a state of homelessness, which in turn has had grave social consequences.

April 2015 ● Belgrade Waterfront Mega Project - top-down urban renewal

Serbia's capital Belgrade has experienced explicit and intense neoliberal urban development policies over the last decade. Fast-paced land developments and new constructions have been carried out in order to accumulate capital, and as a quick injection to the state's economy via temporary employment and taxations. As is typical for this type of development globally, projects are decided upon in untransparent and often corrupt procedures, while benefits are individual rather than collective.

The Belgrade Waterfront project was first presented in 2012 during an election campaign by then First Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić (from 2014 to 2017, he was Prime Minister, and since then he has been the President). After two years of relative silence, the project made headlines in 2014 with the emergence of investor Mohamed Alabbar. In April 2015, the contract was signed with his Abu Dhabi-based development firm Eagle Hills.²⁵⁾ While initially he had promised USD 4 billion in loans and investment to develop the Belgrade Waterfront project, by the time the contract was signed, this sum had shrunk to USD 160 million in investment and USD 300 million in loans, in return for 68% of the profits and a 99-year lease of the land.

The plot of land in question lies at the heart of the city, next to the central train station and along the Sava River. The project takes over the historic Savamala neighborhood in its northern section, an area that had become a vibrant and attractive center for youth, artists, and alternative culture. While the majority of this high-potential land was not developed, it was home to 88 families of railway workers

25) Mohamed Alabbar is best known for founding Emaar, the company responsible for building the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, and the Dubai Mall, the world's largest shopping mall.

and Roma squatters, who have been evicted²⁶⁾ to make room for the 2 million square meter commercial complex that consists of hotels, office buildings, luxury apartments, the largest shopping mall in the Balkans, and a Dubai-style 200 meter high tower.

The project was promoted as a ticket-out-of-crisis in a country where thousands of people's basic housing needs are not met, and where the number of people living below the poverty line is increasing by the day. In order to realize this mega project, both state and city authorities abused their power on multiple levels. They modified the Master Plan of Belgrade in order to legalize the project, bypassed regulations on design and procurement processes, evicted hundreds of families living on the site, leaving many of them without an alternative. As an interesting fact: They bypassed the legal code and ordered the clearance of the existing buildings on the designated site on the night of the 2016 elections.

The Belgrade Waterfront has since been under construction. Today it has reached a state where the traffic infrastructure and seven residential buildings have been completed, one large shopping mall has opened, and three office buildings are currently being erected (pun intended). As with any other project of the current government, information about the purchase of apartments,²⁷⁾ the prices of units or office spaces, as well as the real value of the investments put into the project by the state of Serbia are completely untransparent.

26)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/12/08/inside-abu-dhabis-bad-joke-the-belgrade-waterfront-project/?sh=2e74d7096c12>

2015 ● **Ne da(vi)mo Beograd / Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own - the bottom-up response**

27)

The catch phrases flashing from the brochures and billboards that promote Belgrade Waterfront reflect the neoliberal housing paradigm that treats right to housing as the right to purchase (Marčetić, Iva. 2020. Stambene politike u službi društvenih i prostornih (ne)jednakosti [Housing Policies in Service of Social and Spatial (In)Equalities]. Zagreb: Pravo na grad) or right to "living the high life," "living your fairy tale," living at the "perfect location."

The Belgrade Waterfront project and the corruption affairs that ushered it triggered a great number of activists (including the Ministry of Space collective) to mobilize resistance. In 2014, this brought about the Ne da(vi)mo Beograd (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own, NDM BGD) initiative, which employed various strategies and tactics depending on their projected effectiveness, risks, and resources. The initiative captured public attention through the mass protests it organized on 26 April 2015 around the iconic Belgrade Cooperative Building, where the signing of the Belgrade Waterfront contract between the government and Eagle Hills was taking place (and

which today serves as the latter's headquarters). During the protests, giant yellow inflated rubber ducks were held up, playing with the fact that the sound of the word "duck" is the same as the Serbian word for "fraud." Soon after, this became the symbol of NDM BGD.

Since then, NDM BGD has organized a series of street actions and protests, as well as institutionalized forms of resistance and intervention (e.g. submitting objections against the implementation of the General Plan of Belgrade during the process of public inquiry or sabotaging the public hearing within the process of adoption of the "Plan for the Area of Specific Use" for the Belgrade Waterfront project. This plan was meant to legalize the designs and procedures that in effect do not adhere to regulations through an action called Operation Lifebelt). NDM BGD has managed to increase public attention towards issues related to the right to the city, and its protests have been gathering between 10,000 and 30,000 people. The initiative continues with demanding accountability for the violations committed for the realization of the Belgrade Waterfront mega project as the paradigmatic example of corrupt governance. Although the government continues to ignore the public pressure stemming from the massive mobilizations, this materialization and visibility of resistance has significantly raised the level of awareness among citizens on their right to participate in the planning and construction of their immediate surroundings. Further, in the past few years NDM BGD has inspired and empowered several local initiatives that fight against neoliberal developments in their respective neighborhoods and it was a force to reckon with in the 2018 local elections.

October 2015 ● **From the "So-Called Housing Issue" Gathering to the "Welcome to Housing Hell" Campaign**

In October 2015, the two initiatives Ko gradi grad (Who Builds the City) and Učitelj neznalica i njegovi komiteti (Ignorant Schoolmaster and His Committees) organized a gathering called "Tzv. Stambeno pitanje" (So-Called Housing Issue) in the independent Cultural

Centre “Rex.” Fifteen groups and initiatives from all over Serbia discussed for the first time a wide range of problems, as well as the possibilities for alternative housing policies that respond to citizens’ needs rather than market logics.

In the same period, the Ministry of Construction convened a working group to draft a new “Law on Housing and Building Maintenance” to further set the neoliberal reform of the housing sector into legal texts and thereby further relieve the State from its responsibility to attend to citizens’ housing needs and problems. Until the adoption of the law in the following year, in 2016, participants from the “So- Called Housing Issue” gathering continued to work together to prevent its adoption in the proposed form through elaborate campaigns such as the “Welcome to Housing Hell”—holding public debates, releasing media pieces, and connecting interested groups. Although it failed to prevent the passing of the law, the “Rex” gathering and the follow-up events networked and gave shape to many activists and initiatives that are involved in the housing struggle in Serbia. In the following months and years, many articulated their specific foci and strategies (e.g. the “The Roof” was formed), and housing became a central programmatic area of the collective Ministry of Space. In addition, the ideas, principles, and proposals that were generated at and resulted from the “Rex” gathering were integrated into the program of the political initiative “Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own” in the 2017 local elections.

**May
2015**

**Udruženi pokret slobodnih stanara Niša
(Joint Movement of Free Tenants from Nis)
– housing struggles outside of Belgrade**

Against the backdrop of the large difference in population size²⁸⁾ and drastic inequalities in resource allocations between Serbia’s capital Belgrade and other cities, one of the earlier housing struggles was initiated in the southern city of Nis (third in terms of size in Serbia). Faced with untransparent regulations of housing-related costs in general and a rapid increase of heating costs in particular, many tenants in Nis gathered into the Joint Movement of Free Tenants. The central demand was participation in decision making in local

28)

The total population of Serbia is close to 7 million, Belgrade has a population of approximately 1.4 million, the second biggest city Novi Sad counts a population of approximately 350,000 within its larger administrative area, and Nis as the third biggest city counts roughly 260,000 people within its larger administrative area.

energy production enterprises (and therein exercising control over pricing) and exposing the corruption that exists in the provision of services for which the tenants were being charged.

The movement has since transformed into a local political initiative, broadened its foci, and together with other local initiatives they formed the Građanski front (Civic Front).

**December
2016**

Law on Housing and Building Maintenance – the present-day regulatory framework for housing policy

The 2016 “Law on Housing and Building Maintenance”²⁹⁾ is the present-day regulatory framework governing housing policies, which came into effect a quarter of a century after the 1990 “Law on Housing Relations” that had revoked the “Law on Handover of Enterprise Management to Workers.” The latter governed relations between the state and citizens on the issue of housing from 1950 to 1989.

The 2016 law declares the maintenance of buildings as public interest and regulates the area of management and maintenance of buildings in great detail while being exhaustive in determining penalties for various violations. It was introduced as a solution to stop the deterioration of the existing housing stock, and indeed it would be difficult to find someone who would dispute that the residential buildings were and still are in alarming conditions and in need of intervention. However, this law does not serve the purpose as it does not tackle the core of the problem but rather brings about more problems. The poor conditions of the housing stock are a result of the high living costs and low levels of income, which leave no room for citizens to invest in the maintenance of their buildings. Further, the law transfers the responsibility of maintenance to the tenants while completely relieving the state and state-owned enterprises from theirs, even though they have collected maintenance fees for years.³⁰⁾

Aside from its focus on maintenance, the law erased the concept of social housing and introduced a wider concept of “Housing Support,” which includes diverse mechanisms from providing assistance to

29)
In Serbian: Zakon o stanovanju i održavanju zgrada (Official Gazette RS no. 104/2016 i 9/2020 - dr. zakon).

30)
For example, in Belgrade most residential buildings had contracts by which tenants paid maintenance fees into the fund of the City Housing Company. The question then arises as to how the citizens themselves are responsible for the poor state of their buildings and the lack of maintenance, as well as to what happened to the monies that were accumulated on the account of that public company over the years.

improve existing homes to the provision of shelters for the homeless. Yet, the law is not supported by sufficient funds to implement these mechanisms.

This law defines public interest as “sustainable housing development, fulfilment of the housing needs of present and future generations, and improvement of their quality of life.” Yet, it neither substantially engages with what “sustainable” implies (whether it is environmental and quality assurance standards or other possible interpretations), nor does it acknowledge the need to structurally intervene in the (for many citizens non-sustainable) market logic dominating the housing sector (e.g. regulate and sink pricing which is detrimental to fulfilling needs and improving quality of life, create a looped system whereby funds are generated to carry out maintenance works, or create investment possibilities into future housing).³¹⁾ Thereupon, as the definition of public interest here does not explicitly include all citizens, the operationalization of the law in reality is also selective and exclusive of those who are already overburdened with housing related costs or debts.

In early 2021, the Ministry of Construction, Transportation and Infrastructure established a Working Group that is tasked with formulating necessary amendments to this law. According to a Ministry representative, the planned amendments will “enable more efficient maintenance and governance of residential buildings”³²⁾ and will include matters relating to inspection and lease of apartments that are owned by endowments and foundations. From our perspective, the focus on maintenance once again demonstrates the state’s disregard of the substantial issues and urgencies, such as operationalizing programs of housing support, securing resources for such programs, the provision of sustainable housing solutions for those living in inadequate, insecure, and unaffordable housing, and tackling homelessness.

31)

See how this issue was resolved in earlier times, in the former entry in this timeline “1953: Regulation of the Management of Residential Buildings—Official Proclamation of the Right to Housing.”

32)

<https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/ekonomija/942637/jasnija-pravila-upravnike-pripremaju-izmene-zakona-stanovanju-ocekuje-efikasnije-odrzavanje-zgrada>

**May
2017**

33)

La PAH—Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform of People Affected by Mortgages) and is one of the partners of the CMMM Barcelona team.

34)

Trudbenik was one of the largest social enterprises involved in the construction and building of significant parts of the public infrastructure in Yugoslavia. After the murky privatization process in 2008, the new owner company Monterra laid off a number of workers. For the remaining ones, the working conditions worsened and the payments of the salaries were postponed for several months. From 2009, the workers' union fought in court and through institutional pressure to save Trudbenik and break up the privatization agreement with the harmful owner. Through a long and complicated legal fight, in 2014, the court did not rule in favor of the workers, while the bankruptcy process meant that they are to be evicted from the apartments they have used for housing as Trudbenik workers. Ever since, the tenants have been living in continuous fear of the enforcement of the eviction ruling, and on several occasions their eviction has been resisted with support from housing activists.

Združena akcija Krov nad glavom (The Roof) – mainstreaming the right to housing

Following the “So-Called Housing Question” gathering in 2015, through various meetings and continuous communication, inspired by a number of international housing movements (such as [La PAH](#)³³⁾) and pushed by the current situation in Serbia, the wide front of housing activists converged on a particular dimension of the housing question that would soon become an urgency—the issue of evictions. In a country where the official policy toward housing is depoliticization and one where housing is regarded as a matter of investment and market-led economic development rather than a matter of public interest or a basic right, housing activists and civic initiatives decided to focus on evictions as a vigorous field to catch public attention and attract the media. The strategy was to mobilize a larger base around housing urgencies, and therewith to re-politicize the housing question. In spring 2017, as the evictions escalated, the “Združena akcija Krov nad glavom” ([The Roof](#)) was formally established as an organization seeking housing justice. Some of its members already had experience in defending the workers of the Trudbenik enterprise³⁴⁾ since 2012 (which was a victim of one of the notorious privatization processes after 2000), among other cases, and this know-how has been a valuable asset. Over the past few years, The Roof has gained significant media attention and public support. Through protests, campaigns, and direct actions of preventing forced evictions, it has successfully contributed to the re-politicization of the housing question. It also addresses the inadequate conditions of housing for increasing numbers of people without sufficient income.

2018

A11—Inicijativa za ekonomska i socijalna prava (A11—Initiative for Economic and Social Rights)

A11 was established in 2018 as a non-governmental organization that promotes and protects the rights of individuals from vulnerable, marginalized, and discriminated groups, with a particular focus on

economic and social rights. Lately they have also worked on housing, namely on the conditions in Roma settlements and social housing estates.

The legal expertise of its members has directed the work of A11 towards the international framework of human rights. Their approach to housing as a right has on numerous occasions complemented other efforts in drawing attention to the miserable housing conditions of vulnerable citizens. They have legally represented many social housing tenants or shelter users in legal struggles for decent housing solutions, both in domestic courts and in front of international justice institutions.

**March
2018**

Local Elections and the Participation of the Municipalist Initiative “Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own”

After a few years of leading civic initiatives in their resistance to the Belgrade Waterfront urban renewal project, “Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own” (NDM BGD) grew into a political platform that ran for the 2018 local elections. Its aim was to build a new form of politics that bases on principles of wide participation, inclusiveness, openness, transparency, and accountability. Following the examples of other recent municipalist movements in Europe (e.g. Barcelona en Comú, Cambiamo Messina dal Basso, Zagreb je naš, a.o.), NDM BGD’s electoral agenda included promoting participatory democracy and returning decision-making powers to citizens; democratizing public institutions; safeguarding quality public services and stopping the privatization of public utilities, resources, and infrastructures; and the feminization of politics.

As the initiative gathered many of the housing activists at the time (including members of Who Builds the City, Ministry of Space, Joint Action Roof Over Head, a.o.), the right to housing was integral to its Electoral Program. The objectives that were laid out in that program capture the main principles that these housing activists and civic initiatives had been centering around: adequate housing for all, transparent and inclusive management of Belgrade’s housing stock, inclusion of public housing in the commercial housing stock in order

to counter the growing housing segregation, adoption of tax for the unused housing units, and assistance for the maintenance of residential buildings.

NDM BGD's bid for the elections was supported by several local movements in municipalities across Serbia, as well as by Barcelona's Mayor Ada Colau from Barcelona en Comú, by Yanis Varoufakis with his movement DiEM25, and by the Croatian movement Zagreb je naš (Zagreb is Ours). In spite of the scarce resources and structural constraints, in Belgrade NDM BGD received 28,017 votes amounting to about 3.5% of the total, which was below the threshold of 5% for entering the city's assembly. However, it achieved better results in other localities, such as in Stari Grad (8%), Vračar (7.5%), and Savski venac (6.5%).

**April-
November
2019**

The (missing) Housing Strategy for Belgrade until 2030

The current "Law on Housing and Building Maintenance," which regulates the housing sector, envisions the creation of a strategic document on housing (Article 112), both on the national and local levels. The National Housing Strategy for all of Serbia and the one specifically for Belgrade should have been completed in 2019 and to span a period of ten years.

There is no lack of legislation or strategic documents in relation to housing in Serbia. The problem is rather a matter of which segments of the society are favored and who's interests are being protected and served through existing and suggested regulatory frameworks. In addition, even though laws and regulations often recognize the problems that need to be addressed and name principal directions for policies that could contribute to solutions, they rarely transform into concrete activities due to a lack of political determination. This is reflected in the absence of complementary regulations that ensure the institutional infrastructures for the operationalization of such policies are available, as well as in the lack of allocation of (sufficient) resources for their execution.

That said, the Secretariat for Property and Legal Affairs at the City of Belgrade was given the responsibility to draft a ten-year Housing

Strategy for the city in 2019. In the process, the Secretariat invited representatives of civil society organizations and initiatives that are focused on the issue of housing to a round-table discussion in order to present their views on what the main directions of the future strategy should be.

On the issue of non-profit and affordable housing, five organizations were invited to contribute: Who Builds the City, Joint Action Roof Over Head, Housing Center, A11—Initiative for Economic and Social Rights, and the Ministry of Space. Even though one meeting was naturally insufficient for a substantial involvement of the civil sector, it was a positive change to have city officials invite activists to the table. The five organizations decided to take the opportunity to make a greater impact on the drafting of the strategy and articulated a set of goals and measures they believed should be at the core of the strategy. These addressed a range of urgent questions: from the lack of relevant statistics and targeted studies that should inform future housing policies to the increase in homelessness, forced evictions, and unaffordable housing and the need for legislative and institutional changes towards a more just housing policy, among other issues.

The proposal was positively received by the Secretariat and other experts involved in drafting the Belgrade Housing Strategy, yet it has not been communicated to what extent our propositions will be integrated in the official text, if at all. There has been no information on its final content nor on whether it is already completed or is still being drafted.

As for the National Housing Strategy, it has only been published as a draft³⁵⁾ in the second half of 2019 and has not been mentioned by any of the state officials since.

Interestingly, the National Housing Strategy draft recognizes the downfalls and threats of the current housing policies and paradigms (e.g. insufficient institutional capacities, lack of political interest in the sustainable development of housing and recognition of its significance, continuous loss of the already insufficient public housing stock, trend of transferring the regulation of housing almost entirely to the market, etc.). It thus proposes some measures that could contribute to solutions. However, even if these remain in the final version of the strategy and are transferred to that of the city of

35)
https://www.mgsi.gov.rs/sites/default/files/Nacionalna%20stambena%20strategija_NACRT_1.pdf






Belgrade, the threat remains that these documents will only continue the pattern of officially proclaimed objectives that do not materialize due to structural hurdles.

**March
2020**

Pokret za stambenu jednakost (Housing Equality Movement)

Stemming from the experience with the Belgrade Housing Strategy, the five organizations that were invited to contribute with views and ideas (Who Builds the City, Joint Action Roof Over Head, Housing Center, A11—Initiative for Economic and Social Rights, and the Ministry of Space) agreed that the housing conditions in Belgrade and Serbia require joint actions that take place in parallel to the activities that each organization conducts independently, and that the latter should be better coordinated.

In summer 2020, these organizations drafted a manifesto and defined their central demands, objectives, and directions of the joint path of struggle, based on the policy proposal they articulated in 2019. The new movement set the following five primary political guidelines (targets) for activities and campaigns in the coming years:

-  Adequate, safe, and affordable housing for all.
-  Various housing support programs should be installed to cater for different needs.
-  The shape of the housing sector should be a reflection of the needs of people, and not the needs of the market.
-  Public policies and public budgets should orient by the housing needs of the beneficiaries, and not according to the interests of investors in residential spaces.
-  Strong institutions and infrastructures should be created to ensure the implementation of housing policies.

In accordance with these goals, the movement has agreed to: work towards expanding the base and reach to include all interested and relevant actors in the housing struggle; monitor and share collected information related to harmful or good practices of institutions, changes in housing regulations, and housing problems faced by citizens; share know-how on implemented solutions and mechanisms in other countries that have the potential to be applied

in our context; and advocate for systemic measures that contribute to the exercise of the right to adequate, safe, and affordable housing for all.