

BALTIC WORLDS

Theme Squatting in the East



Introduction.

Exploring overlooked contexts

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Squatting refers to the act of unauthorized occupation of property. There are many motivations and needs behind the practice of squatting.¹ Those cases in which the need for shelter is the primary (and often the only) motivation often tend to remain invisible. However, this necessity-based squatting may adopt some political forms of self-organization and self-management, along with a consciousness of the housing question and intentions to protest about it. On the other hand, mass media are often more prone to report isolated cases of squatting, especially those that intentionally strive for visibility or are due to the cultural and political environment in which they become “news”. In general, by taking over dwellings or buildings, and by creating “free”, “alternative”, or “self-managed” spaces, squatters contest property rights and the fundamental logic of capitalism. Squatters’ activism is usually motivated by ideologi-

cal reasons, which may entail the broad, although controversial, characterization of squatting as a goal in itself.

SQUATTERS’ PREFERENCES of direct methods of action, including civil disobedience and lawbreaking, have led some scholars to either neglect squatters’ activism or place it in the field of “uncivil” forms of collective action, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Russia, where there are strong norms of nonviolence and “civility”, which is a generalization

that deserves to be critically challenged. Squatting in this part of Europe is still characterized by conventional and outdated understandings. Studies on social movements and civil society mobilizations in this geographical setting tend to use tools and metrics developed in Western contexts that result in somewhat misleading and outdated interpretations when applied to the “post-socialist societies”. These interpretations have resulted in a conventional view of civil society and social movement activity in CEE and Russian contexts as “weak”, “uncivil”, or suffering from “civilizational incompetence”.²

SOME RECENT attempts have been made to nuance the field of research on these civil societies and social movements by demonstrating the bluntness of past theoretical and methodological tools.³ However, the focus on the specific features and contextual conditions of radical, noninstitutionalized, and nonformalized collective actors is still lacking in these studies.



This lack in no way implies the absence of such collective action in the area. Squatting is or has been (due to its temporary character) present in several countries in CEE and Russia since 1989, and in some cases even earlier.⁴

THE DEVELOPMENT of squatting in this part of the world is underresearched and few attempts have been made to explore and compare its evolution and outcomes. This is obviously related to the phenomenon's *late* emergence in CEE and Russia. According to the few existing studies on the topic, squatting attempts as an expression of counterculture were observed in some of these countries in the early 1990s.⁵ Nonetheless, there are many aspects missing in the picture of squatting in CEE and Russia as this part of Europe has not been studied to the same extent as the Western part.⁶

In May 2015 we organized an international workshop on the topic at Södertörn University with participants from Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Russia.⁷ As far as we know, the initiative to gather researchers on squatting in this part of Europe is pioneering. The overall aim of the workshop was to discuss this topic and to encourage systematic analyses. Questions that were posed at the workshop, and that guide the work of the contributors to this special issue, include the following:

- How are the strategies developed by squatters in CEE and Russia similar to and different from those observed in Western Europe?
- Which specific structures (political, economic, cultural, or other) affect the emergence and development of squatting in the area?

“SQUATTING IN THIS PART OF EUROPE IS STILL CHARACTERIZED BY CONVENTIONAL AND OUTDATED UNDERSTANDINGS.”

- How are squatters contesting the specific urban and political processes in the area?
- What differences and similarities are there between countries or cities?
- What causes these differences and similarities?
- How can squatting be conceptualized in this part of Europe?

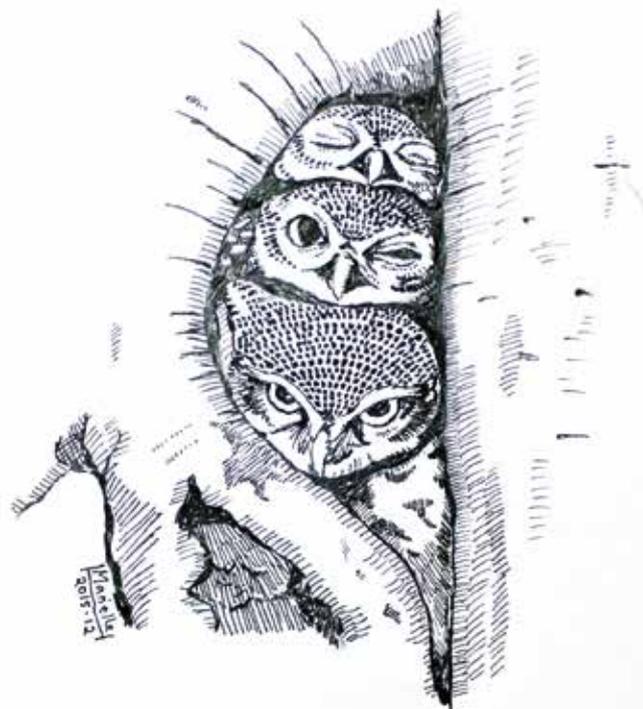
THE ARTICLES PUBLISHED in this issue of *Baltic Worlds* offer various responses to the above questions. We, the editors, have not forced the authors to adopt any common or specific theoretical framework. On the contrary, we respect their own choices in this regard and we have worked with them to clarify particular

aspects of their arguments before and after sending the articles out for peer review. What we would like to emphasize is that almost all the works are based on a firsthand contact with the experiences of squatting, and some authors were even engaged in the politics of squatting themselves. Both insiders' accounts of the main events, and grounded interpretations of the meaning of squatting in each national or urban context, may be considered as some of the most valuable insights of these works. In addition, these articles reveal significant findings regarding movements' organizations, networks, influence, and relationships with institutional actors. They challenge our previous assumptions and point out both similarities with and some significant differences from the cases we are familiar with from other contexts. The particular housing regime before 1989 in all of the presented cases (despite some variations) and the dramatic shift to a market economy and neoliberal policies during the 1990s are some of the common features affecting

the development of squatting in these countries.

Finally, the growth of right-wing mobilization is another development considerably influencing squatting and other left-wing movements that are worth exploring in future studies. This is the first attempt to produce sociological contributions that may enrich the knowledge of squatting in CEE and Russia, and we hope they can pave the way for further developments. ✕

Illustrations: Marielle Hasselblad, activist involved in squatting in Stockholm, Sweden. The illustrations depict her interpretation of squatting.



references

- 1 Miguel Martínez, “The Squatters’ Movement in Europe: A Durable Struggle for Social Autonomy in Urban Politics”, *Antipode* 45, no. 4 (2013): 866–887; Squatting Europe Kollektive (eds.), *The Squatters’ Movement in Europe: Commons and Autonomy as Alternatives to Capitalism*. (London: Pluto, 2014).
- 2 Marc M. Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Piotr Sztompka, “The Trauma of Social Change: A Case of Postcommunist Societies”, in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- 3 See Grzegorz Ekiert and Roberto Foa, *The Weakness of Post-Communist Civil Society Reassessed* (Cambridge, MA: CES Open Forum Series, 2012); Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, “Myths and Realities of Civil Society”, *Journal of Democracy*, 25, no. 1 (2014): 46–58.; Kerstin Jacobsson and Steven Saxonberg, *Beyond NGO-ization: The Development of Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Kerstin Jacobsson (ed.), *Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).
- 4 See Golova’s contribution to this issue or Andrej Holm and Armin Kuhn, “Squatting and Urban Renewal: The Interaction of Squatter Movements and Strategies of Urban Restructuring in Berlin”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, no. 5 (2011): 644–658.
- 5 Grzegorz Piotrowski, “Squatted Social Centers in Central and Eastern Europe” (International Center for Research and Analysis, Working Paper, 2011); Dominika V. Polanska, “Cognitive Dimension in Cross-movement Alliances: The Case of Squatting and Tenants’ Movements in Warsaw”, *Interface*, 6, no. 2 (2014): 32–356; Dominika v. Polanska and Grzegorz Piotrowski, “The Transformative Power of Cooperation Between Social Movements: The Case of Squatting and Tenants’ Movements in Poland”, *City* 19, no. 2–3 (2015): 274–296; Piotr Żuk, *Spoleczeństwo w działaniu: Ekolodzy, Feministki, Skłotersi*, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo naukowe scholar, 2001); or indirectly in studies on the alter-globalization movement or alternative cultures, e.g. Agnes Gagyi, “The Shifting Meaning of ‘Autonomy’ in the East European Diffusion of the Alterglobalization Movement”, in *Understanding European Movements: New*

Social Movements, Global Justice Struggles, Anti-austerity Protest, ed. Cristina Flescher Fominaya and Laurence Cox (New York: Routledge, 2013); Grzegorz Piotrowski, *Alterglobalism in Postsocialism: A Study of Central and Eastern European Activists* (Florence: European University Institute, 2011).

- 6 Anders Corr, *No Trespassing: Squatting, Rent Strikes and Land Struggles Worldwide* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999); Squatting Europe Kollektive (ed.), *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles*. (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013); Squatting Europe Kollektive, *The Squatters’ Movement in Europe*.
- 7 We would like to thank the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies at Södertörn University for financing the workshop.



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Creating meaningful spaces in Vilnius

“We lived in the squatted buildings like birds, having a bird’s rights. If the owner would have come and told us, fly away, we would have flown away.”

Squatter from the Užupis squat