

# Urban Ethics

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Conflicts Over the Good  
and Proper Life in Cities

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First published 2021

ISBN13: 978-0-367-33842-8

## Chapter 11

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**Antagonisms and solidarities in  
housing movements in Bucharest  
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# 11 Antagonisms and solidarities in housing movements in Bucharest and Budapest

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## Introduction

Economic crisis, the financialization of real estate and the neoliberal restructuring of cities have affected households and provoked citizen mobilizations in cities around the globe (Aalbers 2008; Brenner et al. 2012; Jacobsson 2016). Disparities between rich and poor are particularly salient in the housing sphere. Nevertheless, housing is also a field in which multiclass alliances have been emerging in various parts of the world (Mayer 2013; Polanska 2016). This chapter explores relationships between contextual factors and emerging solidarities as well as antagonisms in mobilizations around housing in two Central and Eastern European capital cities: Bucharest and Budapest; both Hungary and Romania are among the European Union countries most severely struck by housing deprivation and overcrowding (Vincze 2017). The main focus is on the period after the 2008 crisis, which involved new developments in national policies in both Hungary and Romania, with profound impact on social relations and power structures.

Although both countries were severely hit by the financial crisis, its impacts on the housing sphere were different. Hungary experienced a severe mortgage crisis, with a high number of failed mortgages followed by evictions (Bohle 2014). This effect of the crisis was thematized politically both by the government and by social protests. In the aftermath of the crisis, Hungary's economy, including its banking and housing sector, was transformed by a new supermajority government, the policies of which aimed at creating protected capital circuits for national capital. Since 2015, Hungary has experienced a new boom in housing prices, housing investment and mortgages, driven by newly nationalized banks, domestic savings and state subsidies for housing mortgages. Meanwhile, housing continues to constitute a main factor of social polarization.

Housing precariousness in Romania has grown ever since 1990, in the context of national policies favoring housing privatization and restitutions and/or reprivatization of formerly nationalized 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. After 2009, Romania experienced severe cuts in wages, social benefits and employment, leading to an increased burden on housing costs and overcrowding, followed by evictions. At the same time, especially after the crisis, policies, such as rehabilitation programs for privately owned apartment blocks, the continuous sale of public housing, state-backed private mortgage programs 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 – the most visible housing conflicts accompanying property restitutions in gentrifying urban central areas.

The financial crisis exacerbated previous social inequalities in both countries, affecting especially poor rural areas in Hungary, and poor areas at the edge of larger cities in Romania. The effects of the crisis were used by various configurations of power ambitions on the part of political actors and local and international capital and evoked a range of citizen mobilizations.

In this chapter, we investigate housing contention in Bucharest and Budapest after 2008, based on the authors' original research and secondary materials on housing movements, housing markets and legislation. We analyze housing struggles in the two cities in the context of post-socialist transformation and post-crisis economic development to see how such economic and political conditions shape opportunities and/or constraints for movement-building, oppositions and alliances. There are examples of emerging multi-class alliances between middle-class and poor strata (including those struck by housing debt after 2008) in both cities (Florea 2016; Udvarhelyi 2010) and antagonisms and conflicts of interest between various groups. As expected, ethical considerations regarding urban politics vary widely across this landscape, evoking not only new-leftist solidaristic mobilizations but also conservative, neo-nationalistic ones and a continuously changing landscape of alliances and divergences. Our focus of attention is on the antagonisms and solidarities produced across different positions within mobilizations around housing since 2008. We draw on Crossley's (2006, 2013) "field of contention" notion to account for this complexity of housing contention and the way in which it is structurally produced. We propose that, rather than singling out certain actors, the whole field within which these actors emerge and meet each other needs to be considered. We argue that structural aspects of housing relations are relevant in understanding the alliances, solidarities, antagonisms and conflicts in the field of housing contention, as well as the ideologies and political values emerging within the dynamics between different actors in this field.

### **A field of contention approach**

Ever since Castells' seminal work, it has been argued that urban problems are particularly conducive to cross-class alliances, as they typically affect – albeit to various degrees – all classes, such as environmental or

transportation problems (Castells 1983; Mayer 2013). However, previous research has also highlighted the difficulties in achieving mobilizations across class divides or among groups with different social backgrounds or interests (Florea 2016; Lichterman 1995; Rose 2000). Differences in the social positionality of activists, ideological differences and movement cultures, as well as competition for resources, have been identified as factors impeding the formation of coalitions (Lichterman 1995; Staggenborg 1986). Nevertheless, previous findings highlight that exceptional environmental conditions, such as an economic crisis, may cause organizations and groups to set aside ideological differences (Borland 2010; Staggenborg 1986).

Many of these studies of movement coalition 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*.

However, the activist groups we focus on herein do not necessarily form alliances based on a common agenda or joint strategy; yet, they are all part of an increasingly dense field of contentious action around housing. Thus, we need a theoretical approach that can conceptualize both the antagonisms and solidarities in urban mobilization, allowing us to capture a wider spectrum of scenarios, such as the formation of cross-group solidarities, the failure of such attempts and the parallel mobilization of different groups in the same social-structural context.

For this purpose, we draw on Crossley’s (2006, 2013) understanding of social movements as “fields of contention,” which “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” and “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).

This approach recognizes emergent properties and field dynamics without making strong assumptions about common understandings among the actors. 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 (Castells 1983). However, structural processes do not translate directly into values or ideological positions but rather form the conditions that actors face and, on the basis of which, may try to act to change their situation. Our field of contention approach is one that recognizes both structure and collective agency, complex historical constellations as well as the role of factors and events beyond the local in shaping actors’ problem thematization

and alliances. We conceive of structural factors as elements of the field of contention that both produce the conflicts around which contention arises and influence relationship-making among actors, by both enabling and constraining collective action.

In thinking about how structural processes translate into movement formation and relationships of solidarity or antagonism within the movement field, we wish to preserve the heuristic value of social movement research tools focusing on the constitutive process of a movement and combine it with an attention to actors' positions within the structural process. We conceive the constitutive process as happening not only within a movement or its strategic/intentional interactions but also through the structural conditions of the field. How do actors' positions within long-term processes converge at a certain moment of mobilization? How do long-term political cleavages, national policies or economic crises influence movement groups' opportunity structures for alliance-making? Asking such questions, we propose to investigate the constitution of movement politics and alliance structures as part of a field of contention conceived as a historical social process.

### **Structural contexts of housing contention**

Consistent with our structural approach, in this section, we discuss intertwining structural factors that create the conditions for housing needs and insecurities and for movement formation.

Socialist housing construction and distribution in both Hungary and Romania followed long-term patterns of social and geographical hierarchies along urban and/or rural, industrial and/or agrarian priorities. The distribution of different types of public housing (state-built and nationalized apartments) followed the hierarchy rank in redistributive power (Konrád and Szelényi 1979). Most of the population in rural areas was excluded from central housing policies (Misetics 2017a) or offered bank credits rather than state housing.

After 1989, under the influence of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the privatization of state housing aggravated the inequalities of previous distribution and propelled spatial segregation (Günter 2000). Meanwhile, falling incomes and surging unemployment coincided with bringing energy costs to world market prices and decreasing public expenditure for housing benefits (Misetics 2017a, 268), which induced increased household utility costs (Bohle 2014, 117). The combined effect of rising unemployment, housing pressures and the disbandment of workers' homes led to a visible growth in homelessness. Until recently, 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.

In Hungary, 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. 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 facilitated the right to buy in state-built apartments. In 1995, tenants living in nationalized dwellings were also allowed to purchase them, often coming into legal conflict with the property restitution claimants. Moreover, under European Union accession pressure, the Romanian government passed the Law 10/2001, speeding up property restitutions to former owners. These privatization mechanisms fueled the real estate market and structural dispossessions. Roma tenants were disproportionately affected following long-term histories of housing inequalities.

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 2017a, 275–6), 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 the face of the economic crisis, the socialist government took an IMF loan and implemented further cuts, including housing subsidies (Bohle 2014, 21).

In 2010, Fidesz, the conservative party, 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 foreign direct investment- and credit-led economic policies of the previous socialist and liberal parties, Fidesz stepped up ideologically into the symbolic role of the representative of national interests against Western powers.

The problem of debt spirals due to forex currency rate changes was mitigated due to the government's forex emergency package. Nevertheless, debt service rates of indebted households remained high in comparison to the rest of Europe. With no subsidies for tackling household maintenance costs and debts, the situation resulted in a further growth of household debts, evictions and homelessness (Misetics 2017a). While Fidesz made the decrease of household utility costs a central theme of its 2014 election campaign, the distribution of these subsidies was, in fact, hierarchical, with larger 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. Since 2015, a new housing investment boom has been driven by re-nationalized banks, domestic mortgages and mortgage subsidies, favoring

national capital (in construction and finance) and the better-off layers of society. While the Fidesz government criminalized homelessness through the Constitution, 4,000 households were expected to be evicted in 2018 due to failed mortgages.

The launch of the first private mortgage program in Romania after 2002 corresponded with the advancement of the real estate boom. At the same time, local authorities refused to allocate budgets for social housing, while engaging in selling their properties on the market. This was especially the case for Bucharest. The real estate market peaked in March 2008. During the first crisis year, prices fell by 41%. In response, the Democratic Party government launched the state-backed mortgage program called “Prima Casă” (First Home) in 2009, in collaboration with several major banks. The main beneficiary group was the young and aspiring middle class. Although this category generally benefited from the socialist housing distribution (through housing support passed on by the previous generation), it aspired to higher benefits from privatization, expecting jobs generated by foreign direct investment and access to Western-like urban development. The program’s immediate effect was the stabilization of the real estate market, limiting the dramatic drop in prices. That same year, the government took a loan of 20 billion euros from the IMF, the European Commission, the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, conditioned by austerity measures and structural readjustments, involving administrative decentralization, the flexibilization of labour contracts, the expansion of the health system privatization, tax cuts for companies. In the last few years, the transnational creditors have been pushing for a diminishment of home-ownership policies to enhance the corporate rental market and to make way for large rental developments. In this context, housing precarity affects 25% of the population; impoverished tenants are not sufficiently protected by law, thus being evicted from restituted properties, private rentals and public housing units. They are pushed into informal housing at urban peripheries, “tolerated” until real estate interests appear in the area and push them even further out (Vincze 2017).

### **Antagonisms and solidarities around housing mobilizations in Budapest**

The most politicized aspect of housing privatization in Budapest was the appearance of urban homelessness. Coalitions between mobilizations by homeless people and experts and/or activists had a significant role in the establishment of an official system of homeless shelters and in shifting the issue of homelessness from policing to the sphere of social policy (Csongor 2010). In the 2000s, social worker activists funded the organization “Man on the Street,” with the aim of breaking the issue of housing poverty out of the existing frames of charity, homeless shelter infrastructure and social policy, thematizing it instead as a political issue concerning all citizens and exerting

pressure to legalize the right to housing (Udvarhelyi 2010). In terms of cross-class coalitions, an important step was taken in 2009 when homeless activists and activists of Man on the Street founded 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 (Udvarhelyi 2010).

The interclass coalition between “affected” and “ally” members became the group’s central organizational and political characteristic. One illustrative group policy is that only homeless members can represent the group publicly. While people living in housing poverty can become members after attending three meetings, middle-class “allies” can become members only by invitation. Similar measures are applied to compensate for material aspects of volunteer work by homeless members. The group cultivates a sense of consciousness regarding the potential dominance of middle-class activists within the group (Misetics 2017b, 406–7). The City is for All proposes its own model of advocacy as an alternative to paternalistic and non-participatory models of social policy.

Since 2009, The City is for All has become one of the most influential activist organizations in the post-crisis waves of progressive activism. Utilizing a conscious policy of coalition-making and media communication, it continues to link the issue of homelessness to other forms of social oppression (participating at demonstrations linked to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights and to those linked to the Roma minority’s role in the 1956 revolution) or aspects of housing inequalities (organizing the “Vacant Buildings March,” which links the issue of homelessness to wider issues of financial speculation and irresponsible housing policy). Actions of The City is for All address various scales and actors of local or national politics, from nationwide issues, such as the criminalization of homelessness, to issues on local governmental level, such as evictions.

After 2008, a wave of debtors’ mobilizations reacted to the forex mortgage crisis in a neo-nationalist political framework and produced a stream of housing activism different from that practiced by The City is for All. Organized typically in the form of small core groups with a strong personal leadership and hundreds to thousands of followers through social media, debtors’ initiatives 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 and picketing of banks or government institutions. While the biggest demonstrations were centered in Budapest, the groups were also based and acted in smaller cities.

Members of these groups can be characterized as excluded from the favors of all mainstream housing policies. Szabó (2018) notes that forex debtors’ families acquired homes relying on state loans and self-building during socialism. This implies that they did not receive any of the benefits of housing privatization. For them, the 2000s mortgage boom appeared as a new chance to acquire housing. However, members of debtors’ movements were



not among the people who could benefit from this chance in the long-term. They became endangered by mortgage failure and evictions after debt service skyrocketed in the aftermath of 2008. As the Fidesz government's rescue packages were targeted to better-off families, these families remained outside the scope of government help. At the same time, the government campaigns' symbolic narrative that vindicated the role of savior to the Hungarian people against foreign banks effectively muted the voices of those still under pressure.

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

In terms of their protest repertoires and symbolic discourse, debtors' movements carried forward the tradition of right-wing protests from 2006. Barricades, square occupations, slogans combined with national symbols, cars or small lorries covered with those symbols, and daily protest news were also features of protests in 2006 that were ridiculed by the (then dominant) liberal media. The protesters' discourse featured an eclectic mix of legal and financial technical critique of the forex lending practice, political arguments referring to justice and civic rights, and historical and mythical images about the Hungarian nation taking back control over its history. Ignored by studies focusing on protest culture and civil society similar to Western progressive models, these repertoires were a result of previous decades of right-wing counterculture, spread throughout the lower levels of the cultural industry (like pocketbooks sold on train stations, summer festivals or the rise of "national rock").

Despite the mainstreaming of many of this subculture's claims and symbols by the electoral success of the extreme right party Jobbik and by the politics of the Fidesz government, the complex subcultures of the New Right have seen a relatively autonomous development from these bodies, even after 2010. In the case of debtors' movements, these repertoires have been turned against Fidesz. From the position of parliamentary opposition, the right-wing party Jobbik made gestures in support of debtors' groups. Its criticism of Fidesz' measures to save debtors fit into the party's strategy to build its political campaign on a radical right framing of the social tensions aggravating since 2010. From the part of debtors' movements, however, Jobbik received criticism for "vote extortion," referring to the idea that the party seems to deliver electoral promises rather than standing up directly for the interests of debtors.

Debtors' groups formed an alliance called the "Debtors' Chamber" for the 2018 parliamentary elections. They formulated 12 points/demands for

solving the situation of mortgage debt and invited opposition parties to sign them. Despite getting support from multiple opposition parties, this strategy remained unsuccessful due to another one of Fidesz' supermajority mandates.

If The City is for All's political goal is to conceptualize and put into practice the political equality between homeless and unaffected members, debtors' groups organize to protect themselves from the threat of becoming homeless. For the latter, this means not only the loss of the home but also the loss of all other characteristics of what they see as basic conditions of a "normal" life: a family, access to a regular income, integration into social systems, such as healthcare and education. This difference in structural position was added to political differences when members of The City is for All considered alliances with debtors' groups. Despite both streams of activism being oriented against the same structural processes of housing deprivation, The City is for All soon decided not to collaborate with debtors' groups. On the one hand, this was due to ideological differences, as The City is for All considered debtors' groups' views on hierarchy, gender or antisemitism unacceptable to them. Another cause was that homeless members of The City is for All experienced an explicit exclusion of their persona and their problems when debtor groups maintained that they represent homeless people.

We see a field of contention in the situation described above where, on the one hand, there is little ideological difference between debtors' activist groups and state power, but there is a strong contradiction in their material positions and interests. On the other hand, despite the fact that both debtors' groups and The City is for All address housing problems caused by the same structural processes and policies, there is no collaboration between these groups due to the way housing problems become politicized along different social positions, alliances and political traditions. Finally, beneath the politicized movement groups, there are individual stories of conflicts, most of which do not become visible in public debates. Activists of the left-wing housing rights group The City is For All observed that the way such stories come into contact with movement actors – whether individual families threatened by debt and eviction reach out to progressive or right-wing movement groups – is largely a matter of chance, as both The City is for All and debtors' groups are very small compared to the volume of housing problems across the country.

### **(Un)making solidarities around housing mobilizations in Bucharest**

Characteristics of the field of housing contention in Bucharest are the lack of politicization of homelessness, the politicization of evictions in the frame of antiracist and Roma rights mobilizations, and fluctuating solidarities and antagonisms with other "discontented" mobilizations, such as the right to the city, the heritage protection movement and, specific to the post-crisis

period, the anti-corruption movement. Since 1989, the most politicized aspect of housing transformations has been the massive and persisting eviction process associated with housing restitutions of buildings nationalized in the 1950s. This process intensified in the early 2000s after changes in the national legislation facilitated restitutions to prewar owners, their heirs or buyers of their legal rights. As most of the formerly nationalized buildings were located in central areas, with rising land value, and as most of their dwellers were impoverished former state tenants, including many of Roma ethnicity, the restitution process generated (violent) evictions without relocations, gentrification and increasing inequalities between the new class of owners and former state tenants.

At that time, the strongest Roma rights organizations raised a critical voice against evictions that affected Roma dwellers disproportionately (Fleck and Rughiniş 2008). The involvement of Roma advocacy organizations as actors in the field of housing contention was framed within the wider antiracist struggle beyond the local context. Moreover, the intensified evictions attracted the interest of a new generation of critical urban researchers, such as those around the Association for Urban Transition (organized in 2001), and *Ofensiva Generozităţii* (founded by theatre and arts students in 2005–2006). These young educated groups, with a marginal position in the Romanian intellectual world, initially pushed for a progressive social change in urban policies and more visibility for themselves in the public discourse.

The early 2000s saw the parallel emergence of several actors in the field of housing contention. In mid-2006, *Ofensiva Generozităţii* initiated a community art project in Uranus-Sabinelor, a micro-neighborhood close to the city center, stigmatized as a Roma neighborhood, marked by numerous restitutions of previously nationalized houses and by imminent evictions. Several self-organized new-leftist groups came into alliance with *Ofensiva Generozităţii*, giving support to the area's remaining dwellers who gradually self-organized as the *La Bomba* group (later a formal association). All these groups and organizations allied in 2006 with other anti-hate-speech organizations to collectively organize a 250-people-strong antiracism manifestation – which illustrates the centrality of antiracist solidarity for urban contender groups in the early 2000s.

In early 2007, many of these groups formed the Platform for Bucharest, under the coordination of the Association for Urban Transition, which published a declaration for a better city with claims ranging from heritage protection to better housing conditions. Different groups concerned with urban issues showed adhesion to the claims in the declaration and joined the Platform. The alliance-building process developed around a loose ideal of a better city and was fueled by the desires for social change coming from diverse small “discontented” groups mostly not directly affected by deepening (re)privatization policies.

Before the local elections of spring 2008, the Platform worked to promote a policy document to guide Bucharest's booming urban development

ethically. 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. In mid-2009, certain protests were gathering more than 200 people and online groups had thousands of supporters. At that time, hierarchies among movement groups within the Platform became increasingly unequal, limiting access to resources and discursive legitimization. Positions of different movement groups varied according to professional status, level of education, age, class and access to more powerful social networks, with housing rights activists being less powerful. Under the pressure of the more powerful groups, the Platform's prioritized claim became the protection of architectural heritage against demolitions for new high-rise real estate developments. Most of these buildings with heritage value were also formerly nationalized buildings, now restituted or in the process of restitution.

The already precarious tenants of such buildings (mostly Roma) were increasingly labeled in the movement's internal and public communications as the destroyers of heritage value, while the impoverished in need of affordable housing were accused of ignorance regarding the cultural value of certain urban areas. The movement's initial cross-class alliance was breaking apart. 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 2016).

Right-wing nationalist groups have strengthened within the Platform and within the growing heritage protection movement since 2010. Consequently, several initial supporters of the Platform have distanced themselves from it. Using the movement's frame, base and discursive legitimization, a new political platform was building up, later growing into Save Romania Union (*Uniunea Salvați România*) – the second most powerful political party in Bucharest.

In parallel, La Bomba's community center was evicted in 2011 following property restitution. This was an important event in the process of politicization around housing rights. Media attention sided with the evictees – which rarely happens. They also received support from those who previously participated in La Bomba community actions. Moreover, the locals managing La Bomba became even more involved and radical in their critique of housing policies, expressed in street protests sometimes gathering more than 100 people, press releases, requests for official meetings at the mayor's office, and in two collaborative theatre plays developed together with socially involved artists.

After the crisis, evictions from formerly nationalized buildings became emblematic for the making of solidarities and antagonisms in the field of housing contention. In the spring of 2012, a Roma family informally living in a recently restituted villa, administrated by a well-known member of the heritage protection movement, was evicted. The family's removal from this property in the city center was legitimized through their replacement with

young artists who would establish as a cultural collective (Florea and Dumitriu 2017). Critical debates arose within several left-wing groups dedicated to issues of social justice. These debates intensified the antagonism between the heritage protection movement and the emerging alliances mobilizing in the field of housing, the latter becoming more articulated in their housing justice claims.

Since then, 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 have 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. The FCDL was organized as a non-hierarchical group of people at risk of eviction and those working to advance housing justice – a cross-class coalition viewing housing precariousness in capitalism as a concern of the many. They have a loose network of about 2,000 supporters and its activities address various scales, ranging from the local (offering assistance with filing social housing applications at the municipality's housing administration departments) to the national (pushing for changes in the housing legislation) and international (actions of international solidarity and exchange).

Another violent eviction occurred in a restituted complex of buildings in Vulturilor Street, in the center of Bucharest, in the fall of 2014, which affected more than 100 people. The previous contact between the displaced tenants and the FCDL allowed the organization of a strong and visible opposition. The level of cross-class and multiethnic solidarity and alliance-building around the Vulturilor eviction case was unprecedented in the field of housing contention in Bucharest, involving actors ranging from wider Roma rights organizations to even members of the heritage protection movement. As in previous emblematic eviction cases, the politicization of the groups involved increased, in this case through protests initiated by evictees, meetings with municipal, parliamentary and ministerial decision-makers, reaching out to more people at risk of eviction, and activating the solidarity of some hitherto unpoliticized NGOs, such as those offering direct harm reduction and medical assistance to people affected by homelessness.

However, cross-class alliances and solidarity building in the field of housing contention reached a limit in 2015, when massive urban protests against corruption failed to address social issues and excluded any association with FCDL claims (Voicu 2017). Massive protests in late 2015 were sparked off in the aftermath of a deadly fire in a Bucharest music club. Mass media accounts and public debate arose around the corrupt authorities' guilt when it comes to, for example, the (lack of) appropriate spaces for cultural events and ensuring building safety in the city. Public rage was enhanced by the meritocratic presentation of some of the fire victims as young middle-class professionals. In this frame, the FCDL supported the protests, with an emphasis on the precarious lives of club workers (also among the victims) and the need for safe buildings in the city, especially housing. However, its

messages of cross-class solidarity were not adopted by the protests, whereas Save Romania Union, with its urban professional image and its focus on protecting buildings, gained visibility and stronger influence.

Anti-corruption protests sparked off against the recently installed PSD (Social Democratic Party) government in January 2017. These were the widest and most publicized protests in the last two decades, gathering more than 200,000 protestors in Romanian cities for several months and challenging and affecting national political dynamics. At the same time, an illegal eviction of about ten Roma and non-Roma families was facilitated by the municipality in the city center in February 2017, while massive anti-corruption protests for justice system reform were taking place not far away. The call for solidarity initiated by the FCDL and its Roma rights alliances – highlighting evictions, housing injustice and economic inequality as important anti-corruption claims – was ignored by the movement groups.

This failed alliance illustrates an ideological difference. Despite challenging the same public authorities, anti-corruption protestors (some identifying with Save Romania Union) are advancing their own claims for more Western-modeled development, while ignoring social justice and housing justice claims. Similar to the previous heritage protection protestors, they claim to represent the entire just society, thus silencing the critical voices of the housing movement. This failed alliance, as well as the previously broken “right to the city” alliance, also indicates a field of contention where members of different contender groups occupy different structural positions. Interestingly, the anti-corruption protestors organize against a government actually favorable toward the middle- and upper-classes. Despite benefiting from the last few decades of urban development, privatization and housing policies and being less vulnerable to post-crisis transformations, this recently organized “discontented” urban middle-class advances its interests even further, while rejecting alliances with the “deprived.” On the other hand, cross-class solidarities around the FCDL and alliance-building with other movements and groups (feminist Roma, new-leftist, harm reduction) continue to develop at the intersection of ideological affinities, unintended outcomes of participation in community and movement events, personal contacts and differently vulnerable structural positions.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter addressed what we conceptualize as the field of contention over the issue of housing in Bucharest and Budapest, focusing specifically on how structural processes shape actors’ positions and mutual relations in social struggles over housing and how their ideologies and actions intervene into this field. 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 movement formation and mutual relations together with 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’s critique being absorbed by governmental discourses in Hungary and the heritage protection movement in Bucharest being absorbed by gentrification processes) and mobilize around similar issues with opposing political logics (such as the right-wing anti-mortgage mobilization versus “housing for all” approaches in Budapest), all within the boundaries of the same overarching structural factors.

The cases discussed illustrate that attention to processes beyond short-term local movements is necessary for understanding how structural and political factors interact in a complex field of contention. In addition to contemporary policies and struggles on local and national levels, housing conditions in both countries are shaped by long-term processes of localized structural integration into the dynamics of financial markets and global competition.

Therefore, to properly understand how mobilizations (don’t) shape around the issue of homelessness in our cases requires attention to such long-term processes, involving the downgrading of social housing and welfare services, the marketization of housing after 1989, the mortgage crisis in Hungary as an effect of housing financialization, respectively urban policies aiming to attract investment at the price of evictions in Bucharest.

We suggest that a field of contention perspective is useful for understanding actors’ positions, politics and alliances, solidarities or conflicts within the present field of housing contention. Our analysis showed that relationships between actors in various social positions vary widely. We focused particularly 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 built explicitly around cross-class alliances between those positions, contradictions between the positions, interests and political stances of actors in different positions become salient in other cases. Such was the case of the lack of support for those suffering evictions during a massive wave of middle-class demonstrations in Bucharest, or the case of the parallel activity of right-wing and left-wing housing activists in Hungary, who work on structurally similar issues but find it impossible to work together. In parallel, the heritage protection movement and the housing movement in Bucharest, although initially allied against real estate investors’ power over urban development, split into antagonistic political positions, both trying to widen their niche in the dominant discourse and to penetrate the level of national politics.

A field of contention approach, informed by an investigation of historical structural processes within which movement actors operate, can provide a more complete understanding of movement formation and intra-movement alliances, solidarities and antagonisms, as it considers movements’ own

ideas, strategies and alliance-making together with parallel or “silent” elements of the field and relates the characteristics of field relationships to the positions of movement actors within structural processes. Our case studies of Bucharest and Budapest housing struggles showed that similar local problems induced by global processes provide a foundation for a process of movement formation that results in a landscape of groups with various political views, organized in complex patterns of alliances, solidarities and antagonisms. Rather than seeking a linear connection between broad structural process and movement response, we take the investigation of the complex relationships between localized forms of structural process, social positions of actors and the historical making of movement ideologies and alliance structures to be a key task in understanding the relationship between housing problems and housing movements today.

## Note

- 1 The authors’ names are in alphabetical order. This research is funded by the Swedish Research Council FORMAS (contract 2016-00258\_3).

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