



Solidarity as a temporary social infrastructure: Anti-eviction struggles in Serbia during the pandemic

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Združena akcija Krov nad glavom / The Roof

The Roof (Združena akcija Krov nad glavom) is a self-organized intergenerational collective founded in 2017. It brings together people united in the fight for the right to home. Fighting evictions with direct action is its primary focus. The collective also provides legal assistance and other forms of direct aid to eviction victims, and puts different kinds of pressure on the state, bailiffs, local governments, courts, and banks. Along with urgent legal changes and the abolition of private bailiffs, the collective struggles to bring about a housing policy that takes into account the needs of all members of society, and opens space at the local level for all citizens to be democratically involved in the decision-making process on the arrangement of their living space as a member of the [Movement for Housing Justice](#). The Roof is a member of the [European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City](#), a convergence between social movements from different cities in European countries.

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Abstract

During the pandemic, anti-eviction and food solidarity work has continued to be an important self-organised, social, political, people-activist and radical infrastructure. Although the catastrophic effects of the so-called “funniest virus in history” in Serbia are gaining momentum, the State not only does not have mechanisms to counter them but systematically hinders and criminalizes self-organized mutual aid efforts. *The Roof*, a self-organized anti-eviction direct-action collective, has had to be more active than ever. While evictions were temporarily put on hold during the first lockdown, the collective shifted its focus to solidarity with the most socially deprived individuals, collecting and redirecting (mutual) aid, especially in the form of food, hygiene products, and pharmaceuticals. However, after the curfew and lock-down came to an end, public-private bailiffs resumed orchestrating evictions. Although solidarity played an essential role in survival through the pandemic, the criminalization of anti-eviction activities also intensified during this period. An additional burden on a socially deprived, already pandemically-devastated people is the suddenly announced transfer of almost a million old debt cases to public-private bailiffs over the course of the next two years.

Keywords

COVID-19, Serbia, anti-eviction struggle, mutual aid, solidarity

A year ago, before Serbia was ‘regional vaccination champion’ or even the continental one, at the very beginning of the pandemic in South-Eastern Europe, the country’s government and medical experts close to the regime first discarded the virus as irrelevant to public health (calling it *the funniest virus in history*), only in a matter of days to enforce what would be some of the harshest lockdown measures in Europe. It quickly became evident that the most vulnerable members of society would face the most severe medical, economic, psychological, and social consequences of the pandemic.

People living in informal settlements, the homeless, Roma families, homemakers, the chronically ill and people queuing for hospitalization for non-COVID-19-related interventions, as well as those infected by COVID-19, precarious workers, the unemployed, people partaking in the grey economy, children and adolescents, retirees, people living in asylums and nursing homes, medical and sex workers and drug addicts - were held responsible and had to literally pay back to the country for the consequences of a systemic crisis that predates our current corona crisis.

Before we knew it, everything promptly reopened by mid-May 2020, since the parliamentary, local, and provincial elections and a big football match with an audience of over 20,000 were not to be postponed. Subsequently, we had summer virus mutations, an early second wave of the pandemic, and anti-government protests in July with unforeseen police brutality. The lockdown was never reintroduced, regardless of what the curve was showing.

But returning to March 2020 and the imposition of the curfew, evictions orchestrated by public-private bailiffs were temporarily put on hold. Therefore the self-organized anti-eviction collective The Roof shifted its activist focus by directing the majority of its capacities into solidarity with the people without home, people living in dire conditions and those

Figure 1

Source: Združena
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glavom



unable to continue doing the informal work that brought food to their tables. Further, in contrast with the government’s “Emergency headquarters”, the Roof organized grassroots “Social headquarters” to render visible the failure of the State to deal with the pandemic.

Under the premise *No one hungry, no one thirsty, no one homeless*, the collective started collecting and directing aid to the most socially deprived individuals. The population of Serbia proved to be very solidary, even the more impoverished individuals. The collective received large donations, which were spent on providing food and medicines for the homeless and deprived households.

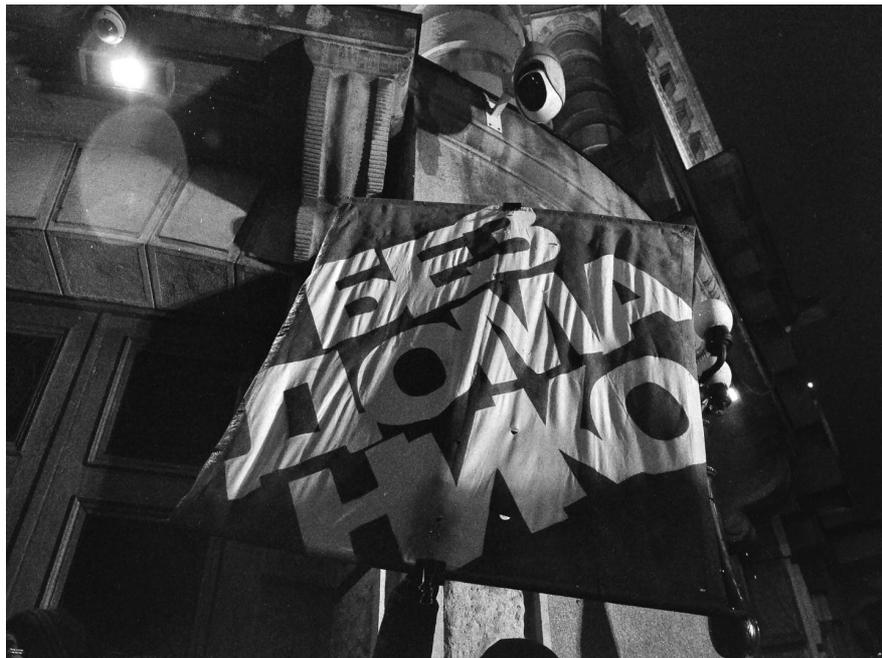
As the effects of the pandemic began to take off, elections were also approaching. Allegedly to help citizens through the pandemic-caused economic crisis, though in fact for the purpose of low-cost vote-buying, all adult citizens of Serbia were allocated 100 euros of public money. This did not apply to the undocumented population, so it was clear that the regime was not interested in supporting the most socially deprived - those without voting rights.

The Roof called on the citizens for whom this amount did not make a difference to raise money and redirect it to those in need, or to donate it to the collective with an identical goal. Citizens donated considerable additional funds to the collective. In cooperation with several other organizations, additional efforts were made over the winter to cook and distribute hot meals to the homeless, as well as purchase warm clothes, sleeping bags, and wood stoves. The collective also aided undocumented individuals' to obtain personal documents.

After the temporary suspension of evictions during the lockdown in 2020—based not on a moratorium on evictions but on the written recommendation to bailiffs from the Ministry of Justice—evictions continued, despite the ongoing ban of public gatherings. Police, social services, fire department, and ambulance workers and representatives of

Figure 2

Source: Združena
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glavom



creditors gathered in groups of more than 30 to evict tenants into the cold during the winter months. During the pandemic, evictions were a constant health hazard for all the parties involved. To make matters worse, at the attempted eviction of the Tatari family in Novi Sad, one person present from the creditor side admitted that they were infected with COVID-19. Looking at these examples, one cannot help but ask to what extent the continued evictions contributed to the pandemic's intensification in Serbia. Especially given that December and January saw Serbia register by far the highest numbers of newly infected people and, unfortunately, their deaths.

In spite of The Roof's public demands to the state and the bailiffs to introduce a moratorium on evictions, people continued losing their homes due to bank debts, loan shark debts, household debts, restitution, and land grabs putting housing profit before housing rights. In November, the Stanković family lost their home to restitution when the nationalised property was returned to pre-WWII owners. After 60 years of building a home at Zabrađanska street in Belgrade, these people were left homeless in a process instituting 'justice' blind to the right to a home. In February this year, solidary citizens prevented the auction of Lidija Molnar's home in Novi Sad.

The connections between the construction mafia, the judiciary, the police, and the bailiffs are evident in the case of the Brajić family from Belgrade, whose eviction was prevented twice in the middle of the pandemic. Another halt to residential eviction happened at the doorstep of the Mićanović family, former workers of *Trudbenik gradnja*, a Yugoslav construction company pushed into bankruptcy and subsequently privatized during the so-called transition. They invested part of their income in an obligatory housing fund during socialist experiments, but never gained permanent rights to their housing. Moreover, the new owner who wants this family

Figure 3

Source: Združena
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out of the company's property still also owes them unpaid wages. During this time the Kocić family also faced eviction for the sixth time for debt that they have already paid off. Their flat, worth 125,000 EUR, was sold on the auction for just 25,000, and they have been pressured by electricity cuts and private thugs to move out. However, they have nowhere to go. There is no emergency accommodation in Serbia, and the state is not obliged to offer alternative accommodation to those left homeless. The Roof activists were there to support the families, but their support was not always enough to prevent the eviction's violent act.

Although solidarity played a fundamental role in survival during the pandemic, its criminalization also intensified during this period. In March, Saša Perić, a member of The Roof, attended the first hearing against him on charges related to his anti-eviction activities. The recent amendments to the Law on Enforcement and Security Interest that took hold in January 2021 have already formed the basis for legal actions against The Roof's members. According to the new stipulations, anyone obstructing the evictions faces a penalty between 10,000 and 200,000 RSD (ca. 85 to 1,700 EUR). Needless to say, if someone is unable to pay out the penalty they face jail time. In a country where the average salary is, depending on sources, between 300 and 500 EUR, this definitely intensifies the pressure and foregrounds a pattern of intensifying state oppression as the movement gains strength.

The larger number of legal actions is still informed by the fictional practice of accusing members of not having their ID cards with them during the evictions. This is a legacy of previous informal ways of pressuring activists. With no legal provision to punish activists, the police developed this accusation as a provisional measure to pressure them. In the light of the legalization of oppression of the activists, we can only wonder what new spaces for informal and para-legal forms of pressure will open to the police during evictions.

Anti-eviction activists are not the only targets of the intensified wave of legal actions. A member of the Lalović family, who have defended their home from more than ten attempts at eviction, is facing charges related to his threats and attempts of suicide to defend his home. This is, unfortunately, just one among the many examples of legal actions faced by the victims of bailiffs. The large number of options bailiffs have to make a living hell for their victims shows their well-established web of connections in the spheres of the judiciary, legislative branch, police, and political and political decision making arenas. However, if we can find anything remotely positive in this development, there are indications that the bailiffs are causing a PR headache to the government with their continued reliance on police assistance and dubious charges.

In November 2020, local media reported that almost a million old debt cases would be transferred to public-private bailiffs during the next two years, some of them over 15 or even 20 years old. The majority consist of unpaid utility bills, where interest rates have accumulated over the years. In the past decades, people accumulated debt due to the collapse of social infrastructure, criminalised privatisation, austerity measures, unlawful deduction of pensions, “enterprenurialisation” of health care, unemployment, low wages, environmental pollution, residualisation of social housing, high utility prices, toxic bank loans, etc. Debt has transformed people's flesh and blood into money, and the violence of debt has made all those in debt feel guilty for making the wrong financial moves. Debt has become the destiny of the post-socialist subject in the project of the re-peripheralisation of the global East. In Serbia, even a small debt can lead to losing a home; it is widely believed that the debt must be paid at the cost of life itself. This March, The Roof will take in hand the constitutional review initiative for the Act on Bailiffs, and with this, the group will start a new campaign to cancel illegitimate 'historical debt'. We all hope that this will serve as an accountability process that will show for posterity who is the real debtor in this story and who is its creditor.

During the pandemic, anti-eviction and food solidarity work continued to be an important self-organised social and political people-activist radical infrastructure growing in the ruins of Yugoslav social reproduction. This work has been a great lesson for all of us in many ways, including learning about the difficulties of ‘administering’ mutual aid in Serbia, affective and relational aspects of mutual care, and the limits of our own caring capacities. Some questions that remain are: How to go beyond a mere crisis-response mode? How to create more stable, solid, shared and sustainable infrastructures beyond activist, family and friends circles to include those that don’t belong to these worlds? How to create networks of mutual aid and support that become part of our everyday lives? How not to give up this important work when we are pushed to “return to normal”?