A structural view on housing movements:
Strategic lessons from a field of contention approach

Ioana Florea
Agnes Gagyi
Kerstin Jacobsson
The University of Gothenburg, Department of Sociology and
Work Science

Ioana Florea is a sociologist
working on urban transformations
and manifestations of uneven
development in Eastern European
cities. **Agnes Gagyi** is a
sociologist working on Eastern
European politics and social
movements from the perspective
of the region's long-term world-
economic and geopolitical
integration. **Kerstin Jacobsson** is
professor of sociology at
University of Gothenburg,
working in the field of political
sociology and social movements.
Contact:
ioana.floreaa@gmail.com
agnes.gagyi@gu.se
kerstin.jacobsson@gu.se

Abstract

In this article, we share strategic lessons from applying a 'structural field of
contention' approach to a comparative study of housing struggles in
Hungary and Romania since 1989. The aim is not to highlight details and
specificities, but rather to show the benefits of looking beyond individual
progressive movements—the focus of most previous literature—in order to
capture the ideological and structural complexity of housing contention
across different positions on the political spectrum in an integrated way.
With this analytical approach, we can grasp the broader field of relations
where various answers to the same structural processes are generated and
interact with each other in a dynamic way. In this way, a strategically
informative view on how structural processes become politicized can be
gained for both housing struggles and engaged research.

Keywords

Structural field of contention, housing commodification, housing
privatization, duality of housing policy, social movements

    This article aims to share strategic lessons from applying what we call a 'structural field
of contention' approach to a comparative study of housing struggles in Hungary and
Romania since 1989. We developed this analytical approach in a previous monograph (Florea
et al., 2022), responding to Nick Crossley´s suggestion to understand social movements as
'fields of contention' (Crossley, 2006a, 2006b, 2013). As developed in the following, our
'structural field of contention' approach is distinct from other field approaches in social
movement studies (such as Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012; or Ancelovici, 2021). It also

differs in some important respects from Crossley's work, most notably by the emphasis placed on structural factors and contexts (socioeconomic and sociohistorical ones). As will be illustrated in this article, our 'structural field of contention' approach offers a productive way for carrying out a structural analysis of social—in our case housing—movements. Based on it, we draw out some lessons from the analysis of the unfolding of housing contention patterns in two capital cities, Budapest and Bucharest. We argue that this analytical approach enables accounting for the structural and ideological complexity of contemporary housing struggles and movements—beyond the literature's dominant focus on progressive housing movements such as in Spain or the USA—and linking the interpretation of this complexity to movements' embeddedness in different structural as well as political contexts.

Our analysis speaks to a context where paradigms of housing struggles and critical analysis built in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis meet new scales of global crises. The global pandemic and its aftermath, new militarized conflicts, increasing climate crisis effects, and a mounting global economic crisis are putting housing as a reproductive need ever more painfully into the center of a deepening cost of living crisis. The first issue of Radical Housing Journal (RHJ) proposed to approach the period of social struggles against the pro-capital management of the 2008 crisis as a field of inquiry, interconnected with complex reverberations of the financial crisis as a global event, with translocal connections of the struggles as well as the critical inquiries built in its aftermath (Vilenica et al., 2019). In encountering new forms of housing deprivation linked to pandemic policies and post-pandemic crisis effects, RHJ has emphasized continuities in the long-term dynamics of polarization and marginalization (Gibbons et al., 2020; Reyes et al., 2020).

We speak to this problematic of 'crisis localization' and its underlying long-term dynamics from a comparative case study on the formation of post-2008 housing struggles in two East European countries. Here post-socialist privatization and austerity (with its own historical roots and structural conditioning) have set the base for post-2008 crisis effects and subsequent policies, and the resulting housing tensions not necessarily voiced by anti-capitalist, socially progressive movements. Our case studies trace situations where the development of increasingly polarized and financialized housing systems have generated a complexity of politicized counter-movements, often politically contradictory or acting in parallel to each other (such as debtors' mobilizations, homeless persons' mobilizations, anti-eviction contention, etc.), while the majority of those affected by housing precarity have remained in political silence, not collectively organizing politically. Instead of characterizing these situations as specificities of Eastern European post-socialist contexts, we take them as real-world elements of the global crisis process from which we can draw lessons for the next stage of housing struggles.

The results presented in the article come from a joint research project conducted between 2017-2021, which traced housing-related mobilizations and their political and economic conditions from 1989 to 2020 in Bucharest (Romania) and Budapest (Hungary), with a particular focus on changes induced by the Great Financial Crisis of 2008 (Florea et al., 2022). We researched housing systems and housing policies from late socialism until 2020, using historical documents, statistics, and secondary literature. Based on this initial research,

we conducted social movement research which included over 30 on-site interviews in both cities with organizers and participants of most visible housing-related mobilizations, as well as NGOs, experts and politicians who dealt with housing-related tensions. We engaged in participant observation at movement meetings and public events between 2017 and 2020, and surveyed materials from movements' communication and media coverage in this period. Comparing cases and reconsidering conceptual frames based on comparative lessons was a major part of our methodology, which served as a base for identifying field-level dynamics such as those laid out in the last section of this article.

In the following, we present the structural field of contention approach, the main dynamics of the structural-political backgrounds, and our main findings in terms of field-level dynamics. We start from the formation and politicization of two main structural tensions we observed in our cases, namely housing poverty, and restricted housing access, illustrating the diverse dynamics of politicization of these tensions, as well as the widespread silences in the field of contention such as those related to informal housing solutions. This is followed by highlighting the role of middle-class activism in the dynamics of politicization, as well as the necessity of institutional interfaces where contention can coagulate (such as legislation, policies, state actors), from which we observe a field-level division in housing activism stemming from the two main structural tensions and the institutional interfaces they generate/condition. Finally, we draw some potential strategic lessons for housing struggles.

A structural field of contention approach to housing movements

As mentioned, our 'structural field of contention' approach (Florea et al., 2022) derives inspiration from Nick Crossley's notion of social movements as 'fields of contention', developing it in a more structural direction. Crossley coined the notion of 'field of contention' as 'a tool for thinking through the parties to any given struggle and their various relations and interactions' (2013, p. 2). Rather than viewing social movements as 'unified things', his notion stresses the numerous groups that interact within the internal space of a movement and the relationships, alliances, and conflicts between those various groups as they unfold over time, while also embedding social mobilizations within multiple differentiated contexts of struggle (Crossley, 2006a, p. 552). These groups, he argued:

 'variously compete, cooperate, agree, disagree, debate and take up positions relative to one another. Furthermore, in doing so they generate both a variety of unintended sui generis social dynamics and power balances which affect them and to which they must subsequently respond' (2006a, p. 562).

From our point of view, a benefit with Crossley's approach is that it recognizes emergent properties and field dynamics without making strong assumptions about common understandings of the rules of the game (or doxa) as the more closely Bourdieu-inspired field approaches to social movements tend to do (e.g., Ancelovici, 2021; Ibrahim, 2013). For instance, the influential approach of 'strategic action field' (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011), although criticizing rational action theories for their argument that social actors pursue fixed interests, still focused on strategic actors, constantly 'jockeying for position' (2011, p. 5)

within a given field unified by common rules of the game (for an application of the SAF approach to urban struggles, see for instance Domaradzka & Wijkström, 2016). Moreover, the SAF approach considered that the actors' 'social skills' determine their success, implying a high degree of reflexivity of actors in 'fashioning agreement' in the field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 295, 300). We do not share these assumptions of intentionality and reflexivity. Nevertheless, we do share with the SAF approach an interest in collective action and collective actors (rather than individuals, as with Bourdieu), as well as an interest in the role of the 'broader field environment' or 'context,' and 'exogeneous shocks' (2011, p. 2), such as large-scale crises, in shaping the field. The authors gave the mortgage crisis as an example of this, and even so, in SAF theory, structural factors are largely absent, or merely mentioned in passing.

Another benefit of Crossley's approach, relative to other field approaches, is that it pays as much attention to the unintended consequences of field dynamics as it does to the deliberate strategies by actors, whilst embedding the contention in a specific context. However, our approach stresses even more the structural factors that formulate the conditions of group formation and struggle. An important difference from Crossley's view is that we conceive of structural factors as elements of the field of contention, elements which produce the tensions giving rise to contention and also condition the contention and the relationship formation among actors.

While social movement scholars have more recently returned to structural questions, for urban and housing movement scholars the role of structural transformation and conflicts has constantly remained a key focus, now combined with an interest in new crisis-based transformations and social mobilizations (see for example Fields, 2017). Nevertheless, in our view, social and urban movement scholars alike have been too inclined to view structural crises from the perspective of progressive movement responses, disregarding or downplaying the ideological complexity of contemporary contention. In contrast, our 'structural field of contention approach offers a singular way of carrying out a structural analysis, allowing us to account for progressive as well as more reactionary responses to crises. The analytical endeavor key to this approach is to connect forms of contention and the respective aspects of structural transformations that they address, or which condition them. Notably, this approach enables the tracing of connections between actors even in the absence of direct relationships between them, for instance through identifying structural connections between the issues they address (e.g., the general privatization and commodification of housing taking different forms and affecting in specific ways different social classes) or through identifying the unintended (but often reciprocal) consequences on/for each other's workings (e.g., through legislative or political changes to which they contribute). Thus, we stand in contrast with Crossley's argument that 'In all cases, however, these groups and individuals take up positions relative to one another, defining their selves in terms of one another' (2006a, p. 553), as well as with other distinctly relational approaches (e.g., Fillieule & Broqua, 2020).

Moreover, in contrast to all other field approaches to social mobilization we have come across, including Crossley's, our structural field of contention approach incorporates and

seeks to explain the 'silences', that is, the lack of mobilization and politicization on behalf of affected social groups whose structural positions constrain their collective agency or incline them to silence rather than protest. We consider that identifying silences is in fact key to assessing the extent to which more visible forms of contention give voice to wider structural tensions. Consequently, besides movements that politicize structural tensions in highly visible forms, less visible forms of contention and political silences connected to existing structural tensions are also considered part of field relations and dynamics.

Just as important, our approach builds on a historically informed analysis that takes both contingent (such as shifting political constellations) and structural factors (such as long-lasting housing shortages, inequalities, and unaffordability) into account in shaping the field of contention. It involves an analysis of how long-term dynamics of global economic transformations (i.e. capitalist advancement and cycles) affect movements' local situations, as well as attention to the way local social hierarchies, institutions and politics come to condition actors' relations and forms of contention. We examined the variety of relationships among housing activist groups (alliances, conflicts, absence of interaction or parallel, and ideologically polarized mobilization), their interactions with actors of established power (such as the state or political parties), as well as their take on institutional interfaces (such as public policies), in a dynamic field. This approach enables an analysis of interdependencies of housing-related movement activity, without losing sight of the ways housing contention is embedded in broader socio-historical relations, or the ways tensions that result from the same structural process remain unpoliticized.

Finally, a distinct contribution of our approach relative to other field approaches in social movement studies is the strong emphasis placed on the transformations of the field as a whole, for example in the aftermath of a crisis, which can shift actors' positions and agendas even if their internal characteristics remain the same.

In sum, the structural field of contention approach allows for an integrated analysis of a multiplicity of actors whose mutual relations and structural embeddedness are key factors in shaping field dynamics. For housing research and housing struggles, the relevance of this approach can be the integration of an analytical view on the structural conditions of housing tensions with complex socio-political processes that shape their politicization. By looking at a structural field of contention instead of the trajectories of selected movements, this approach can deliver specific strategic insights for housing struggles, as exemplified in the last section of this paper.

Structural conditions of housing politics in Budapest and Bucharest

Budapest and Bucharest are two East European capitals with similar positions in long-term global hierarchies, yet with slight historical differences and differences in political constellations that led to the manifestation of similar pressures of post-socialist and post-2008 transformations through different local dynamics. In both cities, the flows of investment that shaped their distinct housing systems have been defined by the two countries' dependent positions and catching-up efforts within world-economic hierarchies.

They have been defined as well by both cities' prominent positions in their countries' uneven internal development (in terms of their prominence vis-a-vis other regions or rural areas in both investment and redistributive policies, and in terms of being the receivers of rural-urban labor migration). Both cities' initial booms in the 19th and early 20th centuries were connected to the financialized stage of the 19th century world economy, and both countries' dependent integration was marked by agrarian exports and their late 19th century crisis (Baer & Love, 2000; Gyáni, 1992). In these contexts, pre-socialist urban booms were defined by financial speculation, property regimes favoring state-backed social categories (e.g. emerging middle-classes and bureaucracies), as well as by an influx of rural poor seeking urban work but struggling to find suitable forms of urban housing. Intra-urban pockets of housing poverty and peri-urban informal settlements where urban workers improvised their housing cost-free for their employers were another characteristic of pre-socialist housing that remained a lasting marker of urban development.

In both cities, growth under socialism was strongly tied to the program of import-substitution industrialization, similar to other postwar state-led developmentalist regimes across the globe. This had two main consequences for the structural context of socialist housing policies. The first was the extraction of agricultural resources to support industrial urbanization, resulting in the collectivization of land and agrarian products and the channeling of agrarian populations into cities as a source of industrial development. Within cities, this increased the housing needs for labor while state investments were primarily targeted toward heavy industry. The resulting housing needs were addressed by the state through nationalizing and redistributing villas and blocks-of-flats formerly owned by the richer strata, building state housing, and later by limiting immigration from the countryside. While newly built socialist housing blocks became central to socialist housing policies, urban growth continued to lag behind industrial growth (Pickvance, 2002). Commuting, bed rentals, workers' hostels, and informal self-built dwellings in industrial outskirts remained a reality for industrial workers coming from the countryside. Private and cooperative housing (aided by state loans in addition to private savings and self-building) remained part of socialist housing systems, with private self-built housing dominating rural areas. The redistribution of state assistance for housing was at times hierarchical, with high-level bureaucrats and workers in privileged industries obtaining more benefits (Szelényi, 1983).

In both countries, the pressures of import-substitution industrialization, combined with the oil crisis of the 1970s, led to state indebtedness. The resulting debt service pressure reshaped the conditions of housing investments in both states, however in different forms due to the ways their different regimes decided to meet that pressure. In Hungary, debt service was combined with gradual liberalization and increased collaboration with Western institutions. In this context, debt service was paired with decreasing state funds dedicated to housing construction, the stepping up of private and cooperative construction, delays in the maintenance of state housing, and ultimately the privatization of homes. In Romania, the same conditions were met with an effort to pay back loans through severe austerity and to maintain intensive industrialization. While in Hungary, private self-built housing in rural areas exceeded the amount of state-built housing in the 1980s, in Romania construction

continued to grow until the end of the decade. In line with the Romanian regime's urbanization agenda, while public housing grew, new private housing construction has diminished since 1960 (Vincze, 2017).

Structural tensions, national politics, and contentious actors—a multi-scalar approach

After the 1989 regime change, Romania also started the privatization of the previously state-led economy. Both countries carried out a rapid privatization of state housing, a process in which urban dwellers with better apartments, better social positions and better state connections received preferential treatment. In addition to privatization of state-built housing, Romania also implemented restitutions of apartments nationalized after 1945 (Lancione et al., 2020; Vişan et al., 2019). Its proponents and beneficiaries legitimized this as the opposite of nationalization and collectivization. The process started in 1990, but intensified and became more uniformly implemented after 2001. Restitutions reinstated some of the exclusions and unequal aspects of the pre-1945 property regime. Large villas in central areas again became the property of the wealthy, pushing up real estate prices. Precaritarized working class households, who were long-term state tenants in these buildings (many Roma and ethnically mixed households) were evicted and left homeless. In the 2000s, this formed the basis of new housing movement alliances with evicted people and Roma rights activists. In Hungary, poor people's resistance against newly growing homelessness and the fast dwindling of the social housing stock in the 1990s also became the basis of efforts to organize around housing poverty. The peripheralization of housing poverty in both cities reinforced forms of informal dwelling in peri-urban areas.

In both countries, privatization created a housing system characterized by overcrowding and a super-majority of owner-occupied housing (Lux & Sunega, 2020). With social housing minimized, and the rental market remaining narrow and insufficiently regulated, this meant that new households without enough savings to buy an apartment faced hardships in accessing new housing. Together with social strata facing housing poverty, this situation also posed a problem to low-to-middle income groups without significant savings or inheritance. During the 2000s, the privatization of the banking system, and the liberalization of lending (in line with EU accession conditions) allowed financialized capital accumulated in Western markets to flow into East European mortgage markets (Raviv, 2008). In Hungary, the foreign-currency denominated (forex) mortgage boom of the 2000s penetrated deeply into low-to-middle income groups and created a significant social crisis once the mortgage bubble burst in 2008-2009. In Romania, only middle- and higher-income borrowers could access forex mortgages, while the other borrowing options for housing needs (repairs, furniture etc.) remained hidden as consumer loans. As materials we surveyed from movements' communication and media coverage have revealed, while Hungarian forex debtors demanded state help and claimed that pre-crisis lending conditions were unfair, the majority of Romanian forex debtors supported austerity programs to keep the RON-Euro exchange rate in check and maintain their asset prices (Ban, 2014).

In addition to these somewhat distinct structural dynamics of housing problems, different dynamics on the level of national politics and post-2008 protests also created different positionalities for housing struggles in the two countries. In Hungary, the 2008 crisis broke the long-term hegemony of the liberal-socialist coalitions in charge of liberalization since the late 1980s. In 2010, Viktor Orbán's conservative Fidesz party won a super-majority in parliament and started to carry out large-scale reforms to centralize administrative control and reconfigure Hungary's economic integration into the global market to the benefit of domestic state-backed capital. This turn involved symbolic recognition of post-socialist social grievances, including those of forex debtors. Meanwhile, it also involved a redevelopment of domestic finance and construction sectors, and the subsidization of a new real estate boom after 2015.

The political and economic hegemony of Fidesz after 2010 implied that anti-austerity protests, including those against housing poverty, came to be expressed as part of opposition demonstrations against the Fidesz regime. Dominated by liberal segments, these opposition protests opened up to social issues as part of generic oppositional claims, but kept them secondary to claims about democracy, media freedom, or the rule of law. By the end of the decade, housing problems became a standard element of opposition politics. However, opposition wins in local elections (including the Budapest municipality) in 2019 did not enable significant changes in housing policies, mostly due to the limitations of any space for maneuver, due to a long-term lack of funds and further cuts operated by the national government. Meanwhile, building more rental housing—what we observed to be a long-term claim by housing experts and activists—became integrated into market players' agendas (in a for-profit framework), and part of state-subsidized large-scale construction across the city's rustbelt.

In Romania, unlike in Hungary, the centralization of power in the late socialist period did not allow for the strong development of pro-liberal segments within the ruling party. The post-1989 regime became dominated by figures in the second and third tiers of the party apparatus who favored gradual privatization that could shield a development of domestic capital. The contending liberal political bloc that was formed during the regime change could only strengthen its power in the political field with the country's accession to NATO and the European Union (EU) in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The confrontation between liberals and social democrats became more intense as liberals advanced their alliances, and became a defining element of post-2008 political dynamics. Here, anti-austerity demonstrations that first reverberated social grievances, including those around housing, gradually became allied with liberal contenders against social democrats. The latter were pictured by their political opponents as a hotbed of corruption, and the major cause for the country's inability to "catch up" with Western standards of development after 1989. In this political split, social issues were pictured in mainstream media as linked with social democrats' political corruption, while liberal protests took on an increasingly anti-poor agenda. As a result, groups fighting against housing poverty split from the broader (anti-austerity turned anti-corruption/liberal) protests and continued to build their own networks of solidarity.

In both countries, the post-2008 reconfigurations of the housing market and housing policies benefited mostly high- and middle-income groups. These reconfigurations also resulted in waves of evictions; a bifurcated management of pre-2008 problematic housing debt where better-off debtors received more help; and a new boom in housing lending where low-to-middle income strata were integrated through consumer and other, more risky types of loans (Bródy & Pósfai, 2020; Florea & Dumitriu, 2022; Gagyi & Mikuš, 2022). Moreover, social policies during the COVID-19 pandemic continued to evolve in the direction of less help and more policing—Hungary's constitutionalization of anti-homeless legislation standing out globally in this respect. The post-pandemic economic crisis foreshadows the overlapping threats of a burst of the 2010s' lending bubble and inflated energy bills, producing levels of household debt that could also lead to evictions as well as contentious manifestations.

Field dynamics of housing struggles

In this section, we draw out five findings from our comparative case studies, which refer to field-level dynamics of housing struggles. These findings illustrate how structural conditions and political dynamics—such as those outlined in the previous sections—combine in shaping housing struggles, and how a field-level analysis can help identify strategic challenges that are less visible from the perspective of single movements or structural-only analysis. First, on the structural level, we find that two main areas of housing tensions, conditioned by the structural development of housing systems before and after 1989, are the same in the two cases – severe housing poverty and, respectively, limited housing access for the low-to-middle classes. However, we also show that due to different dynamics of politicization, it is different aspects of these two main areas of tension that become politicized by housing struggles (housing debt, homelessness, violent evictions, housing costs, etc.), or remain politically silent despite affecting a large population (overcrowding, informal housing). In terms of the political and class dynamics of the field of housing contention, our main comparative finding is that in each type of housing mobilization, middle class activists play a key role in translating structural tensions to political claims addressing available interfaces of state politics. Our last observation laid out in this section concludes these findings in a strategic lesson: we claim that in both countries, a duality of housing struggles mirrors a duality of housing policy, obstructing the formation of common strategies against housing commodification.

Two areas of structural tension

One main finding from comparing housing mobilizations since 1989 in Budapest and Bucharest has been that the various forms of successive mobilizations addressed two main, relatively constant areas of structural tensions. These were housing poverty accumulating at the bottom of the housing hierarchy, and the problem of housing access for low-to-middle income groups. These two areas of tension were similar in the cases of Budapest/Hungary and Bucharest/Romania, owing to historical similarities and those of postsocialist housing

systems. Despite relative changes that had relieved or intensified some aspects of these systems in certain periods, they constitute lasting structural characteristics following from an unbroken tendency of commodification of housing and public serviced across the two different postsocialist regimes.

In line with social movement studies' postulate that structural tensions by themselves do not generate movements, we found that despite their relatively constant character, these two underlying structural areas of tensions were addressed by different modes of politicization, that is, when they were addressed at all. This was true not only across the two cases, but also within the same context, with different groups/mobilizations addressing the same problematic differently across time, or even in parallel ways at the same time, while certain aspects of structural tensions remained unpoliticized for a long time. In addition, when structural tensions did become politicized, they often mobilized smaller groups of people relative to the categories affected by the respective tensions.

Different dynamics of politicization

In terms of housing poverty, in the early 1990s, Budapest saw several mobilizations by the homeless, supported by liberal expert activism (of pre-1989 political dissidents), which later developed into an institutionalized system of professional social assistance. By the late 2000s, this system came to be questioned by a new wave of housing poverty activism, represented by The Right to the City group. Consisting of middle-class activists organizing together with homeless activists, this group—which we interviewed and observed consistently—criticized institutionalized homeless assistance and proposed a more horizontal and politically active way of organizing. Throughout the next decade, The Right to the City group developed into the main model of housing poverty activism. The group joined the 2010s oppositional demonstrations against the Fidesz governments' conservative reforms, as a strong voice against anti-homeless legislation, and for affordable housing. Although Roma families were overrepresented among those struck by housing poverty after 1990, the politicization of housing poverty in Budapest did not specifically thematize ethnic discrimination, and rather tended to frame housing poverty as a universal social problem.

In contrast, in Bucharest homelessness was addressed after 1990 by charity organizations and did not become politicized until well into the 2000s when inner-city evictions from restituted buildings were politicized by left-leaning activists in alliance with those affected. These evictions had a strong element of ethnic discrimination, and activist groups often addressed this aspect in both internal organizing, and external communication, as our participant observations and survey of group's public materials revealed. This anti-eviction mobilization coincided in the late 2000s with a break between different segments of the local movement concerned with the right to the city: with segments interested in heritage protection proceeding to ally with pro-liberal street demonstrations, while leftist groups allied with evicted people speaking up against liberal demonstrations' anti-poor stances. Thus, by the early 2010s, leftist housing groups in Budapest and Bucharest took significantly different

positions vis-a-vis their countries' liberal protest coalitions. Moreover, their thematization of ethnic discrimination within housing poverty was different.

We could further observe and follow different dynamics of politicization in debtors' mobilizations after the financial crisis. While debtors' groups contesting their situation after 2008 prioritized homeownership in both countries, their advocacy was tied to different dynamics of local political coalitions. In Hungary, debtors with loans designated in foreign currencies (forex debtors) started to express their problems in the vocabulary of right-wing anti-neoliberal movements that have been brewing in Hungary since the mid-2000s. This critique opposed foreign finance capital for mishandling hard-working Hungarian households. These expressions were first embraced by Fidesz' 2010 election campaign–reinforcing their national/nationalistic framing. Then, they were slowly marginalized in a process of debt management that prioritized financial stabilization and a reconfiguration of the domestic lending market under the control of domestic finance institutions (Gagyi, 2022). After 2014, when forex debt was converted to Forint, the government considered the problem of forex debt to be solved. Banks cleared their portfolios from remaining problematic debt by outsourcing it to debt collection companies. Low-to-middle income debtors in arrears whose problem was not solved by government measures continued to organize after 2014, this time in open conflict with the government, which in turn successfully stifled their voice.

In Romania, where forex lending did not penetrate deep into the low-to-middle income strata, credit (including mortgage) holders without arrears constituted the majority of debtors, even during the financial crisis. These middle-to-higher income groups actually supported some of the austerity measures to maintain their asset prices and a stable exchange rate for their forex loans. Consequently, the austerity measures hit the debtors on lower or less stable incomes harder. For a short time, some middle-income groups hit by the first wave of austerity joined the wide anti-austerity protests in 2011-2012. This fragile coalition soon bifurcated along structural and political lines, with better-off debtors supporting liberal politics, and the government offering better conditions for middle classes for more secure loans and subsidized housing programs.

In both countries, our fieldwork showed that leftist housing activism remained practically separated from debtors' activism, despite leftist activists' recognition that debtors' problems followed from the same financialization process that fueled rising home prices and evictions in gentrifying districts. This division involved the collisions with debtors' political frames–right-wing framing of social rights in Hungary, and neoliberal framing of better-off debtors' interests in Romania. But it also involved the unsolved challenge of bridging between interests bound to homeownership as the main available route to housing for low-to-middle income groups, and, on the other hand, leftist housing groups' focus on state redistribution towards non-homeownership-based housing solutions.

There is an additional difference in the way low-to-middle income strata's housing access problem was politicized after 2008 in the two countries: in Hungary, debtors' mobilizations (and supporting government communication until 2014) remained the main expression of this structural tension. At the same time, in Romania, the broader problem of

housing access for low-to-middle income strata came to be voiced instead by unions' organizing around a general cost of living crisis (while debtors' dominant position remained tied to better-off debtors' pro-austerity and pro-homeownership stance). In Hungary, by the end of the 2010s, the coalition between leftist housing activist groups and progressive political opposition campaigns started to address the problem of low-to-middle income groups' housing access. However, this political line focused on state redistribution and affordable rent, and did not target housing access through homeownership, the aspect through which the majority of low-to-middle income households experienced the problem of housing affordability.

Silences in the structural field of contention

Informal dwelling in peri-urban areas has been the coping mechanism for tens of thousands of households facing unaffordable housing in both our contexts. This process of peripheralization of housing poverty involved both households at the bottom of the housing hierarchy/system and low but stable income groups. It represented a significant buffer that absorbed successive housing crisis waves since 1989 (and historically), thus being noted by local governments and experts. Nevertheless, for decades it did not develop into a political issue in either of the two cities. It remained an underlying form of politically silent (i.e., not politically voiced collectively) but active way of coping by addressing the structural tensions of housing poverty—what we call a silent aspect in the structural field of contention. Such silences are important in understanding the links between contention and structural tensions as they reflect the wider scope of structural tensions beyond what is visibly contested, and as they can explain how certain tensions suddenly become voiced.

In 2019, this was the case of informal housing in Romania, which we witnessed in our fieldwork as it became politicized and voiced by leftist housing activists. It happened when, at the peak of a new economic growth cycle after the post-2008 austerity, the World Bank, supported by locally active foreign-funded social aid NGOs, initiated an advocacy-consultancy process to change the legislation on informal housing. Such legislation was fast-tracked in the parliament, allowing for formalization that benefited few informal settlements with more resources, but ignored aspects of segregation and the lack of access to resources for most informal settlements. Opposing and trying to boycott these legislative changes, which were brought up due to relaxing structural tensions in the post-2008 context, the leftist housing groups voiced a hitherto silent aspect of the field.

Middle-class activism and institutional interfaces for housing politics

One constant finding in our research has been that none of the instances of housing politicization we saw happened without the involvement of educated middle-income activists who helped translate grievances following from structural tensions into politicized vocabularies targeting institutional interfaces. Illustrative examples are the birth of a new participative model of homeless advocacy in Hungary in the 2000s or art projects in gentrifying neighborhoods that formed the basis for later anti-eviction campaigns in

Bucharest. The formation of alliances connecting affected people with middle-class activists followed from changing conditions of activist mobilization: through the early 2000s' formation of a new generation of educated but often precaritarized middle-class leftist activists who sought new forms of participative politics beyond existing structures such as social assistance, volunteering, or institutionalized art spaces.

In other cases, politicization of tensions through such alliances occurred at points where structural tensions were intensified, and those affected started to protest. Such examples involve evictions, the spike in homelessness in the 1990s, or the mortgage debt crash following 2008. Even in these cases though, resistance by those directly affected seldom led to forms of contention that could express structural problems as a political issue, formulated in such a way as to address institutionalized levels of political debates. Instead, we observed that educated middle-class activists' capacity to translate instances of conflict into broader institutional-political frameworks was key to the formation of politicized forms of housing contention. Debtors' groups provide the closest example of movement frameworks produced by the affected groups themselves. Yet, here too, the help of professional allies was key to interpreting debtors' situations and translating their problems into institutionalized vocabularies (predominantly: litigation). Conversely, the lack of expert allies impeded the expression of more precarious debtors' demands.

Reviewing the development of housing contention in the two countries, we found that all instances where structural areas of tension became politicized were linked to connections between three main factors: some form of housing deprivation, middle-class political activism and expertise, and existing institutional interfaces (where structural tensions could be addressed in terms of demands, tailored to definitions of public interests and their institutionalized management). In each of the cases we reviewed, middle-class expert activists played a key role in translating housing tensions to demands that fit existing institutional frameworks—such as public social housing services for housing poverty, litigation for forex debtors, or new legislation for formalizing informal housing. The availability of institutional interfaces with which housing activists could engage in relation to their problem appears to have been a crucial condition for politicized expressions of housing problems.

This condition is even more strident when we look at local movements' capacity to politicize multi-scalar, transnational aspects of the processes they address. The case of Hungarian debtors' framing of a transnational process of dependent financialization as a national issue provides an example where local movements' translation capacity did not meet institutional interfaces that would correspond to the multi-scalar nature of the process they addressed. Leftist housing activists' involvement in debates around the World Bank's informal housing formalization project provides another case where it was the appearance of an institutional interface that enabled housing activists to link grievances on the ground to institutional claims. However, while translating grievances to fit such institutional interfaces enabled politicization addressed at some institutional level, it also restricted contention to forms that fit the respective institutional logics. Housing activist groups often criticized such effects in their internal debates where we participated, from debtors' groups complaining that they needed to express major injustice done to households by finance

capital in terms of legalistic litigation claims, to leftist housing groups' dissatisfaction with the institutions of state redistribution they addressed in their campaigns.

A field-level division in housing activism

Comparing forms of politicizing housing tensions in the two cases across the postsocialist period, with their roots in a longer history of housing shortages, we noticed a major division among mobilizations that corresponded to the two major areas of housing tensions. On one side of this division, we identified a strain of politicization whereby coalitions between affected groups and progressive (educated but often precarious) middle-class activists addressed severe forms of housing poverty. On the other side of the division, we found forms of politicization of housing access by low- to middle-income groups. The divide between the two strains of housing struggles was most often covered by silence or was manifested as parallel action (i.e., without intersection or direct relations). At certain times, it involved more or less explicit conflict (for example, over state budgets redistributed towards diverging housing programs). On the level of activist group politics, this division can be traced back to differences in movement alliances, in activists' own socio-economic position, education and political culture, or to their relations to homeownership. However, looking at the overall field of housing tensions, the consistency of this division follows not only from differences in the characteristics and politics of movement groups, but also from the overall characteristics of the structural and political environment created by the post-socialist process of housing commodification.

In both countries, the parallel processes of housing commodification and the waning of state funding for housing created systems that constantly produce housing poverty at the bottom of the housing hierarchy and, at the same time, made it difficult for low- to middle-income groups (without large amounts of savings) to access housing. At the level of national policies, the division between these two main areas of tensions is reflected in what Pósfai & Jelinek (2019) described as the duality of postsocialist housing policies. The dominant branch of this duality involves using state intervention to promote market-based housing solutions, for instance, through state support for mortgages. For the housing access of low- to middle-income groups, this area of policy provides state help that allows these groups' housing needs to be channeled to the market. In terms of politicization, it creates specific tensions tied to economic boom-bust cycles and related political unrest when such augmentation of housing marketization strikes back in the form of a debt crisis. The other branch of the dual policy structure addresses severe forms of housing poverty produced at the bottom of the system. This type of policy falls close to classic redistributive models targeted at social needs, but it is increasingly limited by the scarcity of dedicated funds. A consequence of reducing funding is the proliferation of restrictive conditions of access to social housing or rent support, and of politicized tensions around those conditions.

This diagnosis of postsocialist housing policies by Pósfai & Jelinek (2019) resembles what Wahl (2011) identified as a false political dichotomy generated by the neoliberalization of Scandinavian welfare systems. Wahl (2011) argued that the social power of organized labor

to impose decommodification of various segments of social life after World War II, including housing, was defeated during the 1970s. As a consequence, state policies were divided into policies of marketization and a waning branch of welfare policies that were expected to take care of those who fell through the gaps of market-based opportunities. This double policy frontline generated the division between market-oriented and redistributive policies. The corresponding social debates over which branch should be accorded more attention, Wahl argued, helped to obscure the main underlying conflict: that the commodification of key areas of reproductive conditions increased market control over social functions, contributed to misery at the bottom of the social hierarchies, and simultaneously narrowed the capacity of the remaining redistributive welfare policies.

The division we identified between housing struggles addressing severe forms of housing poverty, and those addressing housing access by low- to middle-income populations corresponds not only to the main areas of structural tensions created by commodification, but also to the dual political interfaces of marketization versus social redistribution that developed from the same process. In the practice of housing struggles, this correspondence manifested in groups' direct engagement with the institutional interfaces defined by the dual policy structure. When addressing housing poverty, activist groups could politicize their grievances by connecting specific instances of housing needs to broader political narratives of housing rights formulated at the level of state redistribution. For debtors, the policy interface to which their situation was tied was the market-oriented branch of the dual housing policy structure. When housing problems of the low-to-middle income groups were voiced by alliances focusing on housing poverty, this dominantly happened through broadening the scope of state intervention to create non-homeownership-based solutions (mainly: accessible rent). On the field level, differences between the political frameworks invoked by the two branches of housing activism—envisaging the solution to housing needs through state-based redistribution models versus by guaranteeing housing access through homeownership—in essence replicated the dual policy system. We can see this split as a field-level manifestation of structural tensions that condition and divide the forms of housing politicization but are not addressed as such in the respective movements' political claims, public discourses, and framing.

Identifying this division as a long-term characteristic of housing contention fields in both Budapest and Bucharest, we do not mean to suggest that activist groups would never recognize the connection between different levels of housing problems or try to connect these issues through a broader critique of commodification. As our interviews and observations revealed, in both Romanian and Hungarian leftist housing groups, the idea of housing as a basic right and the criticism of commodified housing as a means of capitalist extraction and an engine of social inequality have always been present as a broader framework. Even in liberal activism, as with Hungarian experts assisting the homeless, the contradiction between sweeping housing marketization and the dwindling state capacity to resolve housing poverty has sometimes been explicitly recognized. What we aim to emphasize is that despite such reflections, the structural and political division of the field

made it extremely difficult for housing activists to politicize housing issues in ways other than those already designated by this division (and its corresponding institutional interfaces).

Therefore, our conclusion from identifying this field-level division has been the importance for movements to create their own infrastructures that make it possible for them to address the overall question of commodification, and produce agendas for action relative to that, instead of succumbing to the preexisting duality of market-oriented vs. redistribution-oriented policy. In this respect, we observed in both Hungary and Romania that leftist housing groups are increasingly attempting to connect growing housing tensions with initiatives for infrastructure-building that target decommodification as a political horizon. Examples include incipient models for building rental cooperatives and collaborations with unions that take up claims for housing costs, and even target creating union-controlled forms of decommodified housing. For policy, the same finding suggests that policies that target the decommodification of housing—e.g., through expanding public ownership, or supporting community ownership models that take housing out of the speculative market—are preferable to policies that reinforce the expanding divide between market-oriented and socially redistributive policies. The necessity to build social coalitions that can politically support such policies, beyond electoral and market support for existing (dual) policy branches, are another potential strategic conclusion. Unions' involvement in housing policy and in building concrete community-controlled housing solutions (e.g., Barenstein et al. 2022) can be a good example for such coalitions.

Conclusion: strategic lessons for housing struggles

Our research reinforced the long-term insights of social movement studies that structural pressures do not in themselves lead to mobilization, and that mobilizations addressing the same structural pressure can vary considerably in their political/ideological form. These insights are well accepted in social movement studies. Yet progressive critical literature and political debates following 2008 have put a main emphasis on links between housing problems following from neoliberalization and financialization, and progressive housing movements—movements, we can add, which addressed those problems according to frames corresponding to those of critical analysis (Fields, 2017; Harvey, 2012; Lima, 2021; Mayer et al., 2016; Wijburg, 2020). We acknowledge the need to visibilize such movements in order to forward the co-constitutive potential of critical analysis and progressive political action. But we also find that understanding the multiple, including non-progressive, forms of movements reacting to housing pressures, as well as acknowledging the lack of politicization in the face of the same crisis effects (what we call political silences), are essential to cognitive and political orientation in a crisis environment. We propose the structural field of contention approach as one that enables us to trace the links between structural processes, actors' socio-economic positions, and the complex processes of politicization that breed various answers to crisis-induced tensions.

We do not intend to forward the structural field of contention approach as a means to highlight details, to the point of disorienting the direction of political questioning. On the

contrary: we propose it as a tool to connect the real multiplicity of political mobilizations to the common structural process of which they are all a part. This requires us to look beyond individual progressive movements and their connection to critical analysis explanation of their structural base, to the broader field of relations where various answers (and silences) to the same structural processes are born and interact with each other. This approach can help us link issues politicized by distinct mobilizations (such as those targeting ownership versus those targeting rental housing claims). It also helps to address differences of political vocabularies not by contrasting their principles, but through understanding their conjunctural development within the same structural background (like in the case of different foci in Hungarian and Romanian leftist housing groups). In short, instead of searching for a straight line from structural tensions to progressive politics, a structural field of contention approach can grasp complex conjunctural processes of politicization in relation to their concrete structural contexts with long histories, and thereby provide orientation for practical and theoretical work in connecting movements and research towards progressive aims.

In this article, we shared five comparative insights of field-level dynamics in two empirical cases: housing movements in Bucharest and Budapest. We showed that while structural conditions of post-socialist housing systems developed the same two main areas of housing tensions in the two countries (housing deprivation for the poor/impoverished and limited housing access for the low-to-middle income groups), different political dynamics of housing struggles emphasized different aspects of those tensions, while leaving other aspects silent. Due to the interplay between local versions of privatization and local traditions of progressive expertise and activism, Hungarian housing activists tended to focus on homelessness and leave the issue of ethnic discrimination in the background, while Romanian leftist housing groups addressed the discrimination of Roma as a core issue and focused on evictions rather than homelessness as such. Similarly, debtors' problems after 2008 could be politicized in very different ways in the two countries, with Hungarian groups bidding for state help to protect them from market pressures, while (better-off) Romanian debtors allied with pro-market neoliberal politics to maintain their assets. We also saw lower-to-middle income groups' housing access problems being politicized in different areas in the two countries after 2008, with debtors' movements addressing this issue in Hungary, and the same issue surfacing as unions' thematization of living costs in Romania. In terms of class aspects of housing struggles, an overarching quality across each mobilization we saw in the two cities since 1989 was the role of educated middle-class activists to translate structurally induced grievances into political claims addressed at available institutional (state, policy) interfaces.

Our main strategically relevant finding regards the fact that in both countries the duality of structural areas of housing tensions—housing poverty at the bottom of the housing hierarchy, and limits to housing access for low-to-middle income groups—is mirrored by a duality of housing policies. On the one side, the latter facilitate the marketization of housing through loans and, on the other, provide very limited redistributive help for those in housing poverty. We found that this structural and policy duality corresponds to a field-level division in housing struggles, with one branch targeting problems of ownership-based housing access

by low-to-middle income groups, and the other targeting limitations of state redistribution for severe forms of housing poverty. We showed that while this duality is produced by the overall process of housing commodification, this underlying cause remains invisibilized in political thematizations that happen at the interface of the dual institutional politics. Therefore, we suggest that for housing struggles, building movement infrastructures able to propose and maintain agendas beyond already-available political/institutional interfaces is essential in order to address and act upon processes of housing commodification. On the policy side, the same conclusion points towards the necessity to target housing decommodification and build social alliances that can promote and sustain such policies.

Acknowledgements

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