

TINA, GO HOME!

THE COMMONS ARE HERE

ARTICLE BY

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Over the last decade, the countries of South Eastern Europe have been subject to an increasingly powerful wave of commodification, privatisation, and expropriation of natural and public resources. While most of the governments in this region supported this trend, in which European integration was often instrumentalised to serve the interests of private companies, more and more citizens have gradually become aware of the vast and deep devastation to existing ecological and social systems, leading to less just and equal societies.

From the megalomaniac golf project on Dubrovnik's Srd Mountain, to the colossal and eye-wateringly expensive Belgrade waterfront; from the conflict over the communist monuments in Budapest's Freedom Square, to investments in hydro power plants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, numerous examples illustrate this destructive 'developmentalist' trajectory. Apart from the evident pressure on urban public spaces and natural resources, some of these projects are rooted in an extractivist logic of natural exploitation which can also be seen in the oil drilling in the Adriatic Sea, the Roşia Montană mining project in Romania, and plans for new coal power plants in some of these countries. Additionally, these projects are often directed against public infrastructure, as in the attempted privatisation of Croatia's highways, which failed due to mass mobilisations by an alliance of civil society organisations and trade unions.

VARŠAVSKA: A BLUEPRINT FOR RESISTANCE ACROSS BORDERS

This wave of increasing pressure on the people and nature of these

ecosystems started a decade ago. One of the most telling cases in the region was the ‘Cvjetni prolaz’ project in the centre of Zagreb, which aimed to expropriate both public funds and public space for the benefit of a private and profit-oriented real estate project. The campaign against the project (“Ne damo Varšavsku”) mobilised many Zagreb citizens, who denounced high level clientelism, corruption and pressure on public urban spaces, geared more towards car transport and luxurious housing, at the expense of public usage of space. The struggle, which lasted almost five years, was crucial in the forming of social movements and in shaping a political agenda that challenged the rules of the neoliberal agenda. When much larger-scale projects, such as the Belgrade Waterfront and Dubrovnik golf playground emerged, the experiences from Varšavska were instrumental in forming a first wave of resistance that extended across borders. The same logic of expropriation, plunder and extraction – often using the public budget and overriding local authorities’ objections – underlies these and other cases in the region.

These projects were merely manifestations of a first wave of the neoliberal expansionist agenda that has emerged in ex-Yugoslavia countries after an initial wave of wild privatisations in the 1990s, in which most of the preconditions for sustainable industry disappeared. While that decade saw sustainable industrial policy and decent work conditions

destroyed, the following years witnessed unprecedented attacks on natural resources and public infrastructure by speculative financial markets and megalomaniac investments.

These days, the political economy of South Eastern Europe (SEE) is heavily marked by the financialisation and expropriation of the ‘public’ and ‘social’ in favour of the private. Noted as residua of the past system, institutions of social ownership and investments in public ownership (primarily related to infrastructure) are undermined by a variety of non-transparent and usurping manoeuvres of privatisation, tolerated for the sake of the transition to a market economy. Since these have been deepening social inequalities and eroding living standards, which were already deteriorating due to austerity measures and the dissolution of the social welfare system inherited from Yugoslavia, it became clear that political strategies were needed to counter these developments.

DIFFERENT SHADES OF PLUNDER

Although many of the strategies behind the struggles had limited success, they were, more importantly, vital in shaping a new generation of social movements. Moreover, they proved that the arguments used by these movements expressed the views of citizens, and not those of the institutions captured by political or corporate power. Furthermore, they were openly opposed to the further suspension of

democratic instruments in certain countries that often appeared to be coupled with top down economic constitutionalism imposed by international financial institutions.

All the resistance movements and struggles across ex-Yugoslavia and beyond shared at least two common points. The first was a clear opposition to corruption, conflicts of interest, the usurpation of public functions, and, more generally, to the various types of plunder legalised or justified through a variety of arrangements, in which the public interest was not protected and the state had served private interests while undermining the prospects of a decent life for future generations. It was a rebellion against a hijacked future, malfunctioning governance, and an establishment that used a toxic mixture of austerity and public-private arrangements to generate short term profits for the political cast while leaving citizens with huge debts. In many of these cases, citizens were caught between bad governance of public property on one side and aggressive privatisation on the other.

These also have severe political implications in cases of private-public partnerships, where political elites use their privileges to expropriate resources of public value (often strengthening their social and economic status as a result) while leaving behind huge debts and risks linked to unsustainable projects. This

systemic pattern was repeated countless times in the region, with the results impoverishing citizens and diminishing their capacity for political activity.

THE EMERGENCE OF A COMMONS NARRATIVE

While discontent and anti-establishment politics were the logical consequences of such behaviour, there were other, more intellectual and constructive, implications that led to a recognition of common aspects. Most of these struggles shared, at their starting points, a very general and vague idea about care and concern for common goods, linked to ideas of safeguarding public interest, prevention of privatisation or devastation, and a demand for a different, generally more democratic governance. However, gradually a narrative on the commons began to emerge, although as a work in progress at both the theoretical and practical levels across Europe, which contained both motivating and mobilising power and which, at its core, went beyond the ideology-infused false dichotomy between the state and the market. Part of the power of the commons lay in its promise to mobilise and organise society around the principles of sustainability, equity, and collective control at all layers of governance.

More specifically, on the one hand, in some Western European countries, the commons

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usually present a model to escape the determination of either the state or market for communities and individuals that aim to create and maintain their alternative universe outside of politics. In South Eastern Europe, on the other hand, it appears that the commons are (particularly in the first phase) spaces of confrontation, since they disrupt existing divisions of power and penetrate into the political territory of the state at local or national level.

The idea of the commons shared by movements and initiatives across the region therefore resonated with those who recognised that the vacuum between the limited powers of the state and the emerging powers of the market can be filled by those forces that will demand a deep transformation of the governance regime in the direction of more egalitarian and sustainable societies. This was not about escaping political realities through the creation of alternative governance models in their neighbourhoods but, on the contrary, about applying these principles to the governance of public goods and the commons. Despite not being a political alternative at first glance, they are heralds of forthcoming political alternatives that can transcend state/market dichotomies and constitute a societal counter-power, which is challenging the “business as usual” approach. Eventually, with the commons as one of the core ingredients and drivers of social change, we might see an end to Thatcher’s famous ‘There Is No Alternative’ (TINA) which, decades after it was first coined, is now being sold across the European periphery.

PROGRESSIVE PERIPHERIES PROTECTING PEOPLE

Since the 2008 crisis unfolded and with it striking power inequalities (when private banks’ losses were socialised, compensated by public funds), the notion of a mythical journey of transition to a market economy as we knew it faded away, even in countries of South Eastern Europe. The region has remained almost in another time zone, exposed to violent acts of modernisation, mediated through debt increases, and further pauperisation. In order to grow, which remains a mainstream

imperative across the region, investments are needed which are then accepted through a fast track procedure, without public consultation. Very often, local elites play the role of middlemen for their own interests, burdening future generations, threatening their life conditions, their access to resources, and the public budgets in which there will be fewer and fewer funds for education, health or housing, due to debt and interest repayments. In reality, investments in all these cases were not meant to improve the living conditions of communities but to increase consumption or to mirror the social inequalities through the creation of luxurious zones. Under pressure, local proponents of the neoliberal agenda are pushing forward with their systemic plunder and privatising of the remaining natural resources and public infrastructure.

In such a context, the commons both as a concept and as a practice resonates not only with the limited but valuable experience of self-management during the Yugoslavian era – common to most of the countries in South Eastern Europe (SEE) – but also with the perception of a new and fresh alternative which challenges the false choice between privatisa-

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tion on one side and the usurpation of public goods on the other. Although an unfinished theory, the commons appear to be a core idea of reclaiming fundamental goods and democratic processes and spaces needed for ensuring equal access and distribution. As such they are able to stake out a political ground in which people will be protected, thus challenging state capture in this corner of Europe.

However, achieving this might not be so easy, as the struggle neither begins nor ends in the SEE region alone. Whilst the citizens of Western Europe have been exposed to TINA for at least a few decades, the South Eastern side has only witnessed these patterns in the last decade. TINA was often smuggled in through modernisation agendas which aimed to convince the authorities that they needed some sort of investments in order to liberalise the market or modernise certain sectors to “catch up with global markets”. In this sense, the neoliberal expansionist agenda has used both the “rule of law” and the “right to development” to justify their profit-seeking orientation, in opposition to sustainability, fair access, and community-led control or democratic rules. All the aforementioned

cases, along with many others, share a common neglect for the local community, the achievement of modern urbanity, and the abuse of public interest. Not surprisingly, the magnetic power of such arrangements has forced governments in the region to compete to attract strategic investments and amend their legislation to fit all demands, often legalising or even institutionalising plunder in the process (most of the countries in the region have introduced special Laws on strategic investments which were in some cases anti-constitutional, discriminatory or anti-democratic).

In this way, both people and resources in the region were exposed to unregulated markets in which they were pitted against one another, chanting the mantra of free economy, while at the same time leaving behind the abundant potential for cooperation that existed in a region that was torn apart by nationalists' agendas in '90s. This was not only down to markets; governments and societies also played their part in this race to the bottom. The commons present principles that bring back collaboration and local production to the region, and show the way to avoid the detrimental patterns of the capitalist societies of Western Europe, while restoring trust and capacities for social reproduction. They also present a claim for community and new citizenship that goes beyond national, religious, racial, gendered and cultural definitions.

In this context, the notion of European integration was widely abused to undermine the rule of law and basic human rights protection standards, whilst at the same time preparing the ground for justifying unpopular – but now legal – manoeuvres of government that will open to the door to liberalisation. Liberal constitutionalism has therefore proven to be an insufficient instrument for the protection of citizen rights, whereas the commons appears to counter the continuity of plunder that manifests itself through systemic attacks on labour and on nature, further decreasing quality of life. In this context, coming back to the idea of the commons and its collaborative principles seems to be not only subversive, but also to represent an act of non-compliance and disobedience in the face of these rules of economic behaviour.

A BOTTOM-UP PUSH AGAINST THE RACE TO THE BOTTOM

The commons holds a distinctive political significance for many progressive social forces in the region, which, through their demands for social control of resources, constitute a counter-power and mobilise citizens, thereby also transforming governance structures and social relations that sustain business as usual of privatisation and commodification. Looking at some struggles, such as in Zagreb, Pula, or Belgrade, which directly opposed the commodification of public and natural

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resources, the commons in that sense might precipitate the next wave of democratisation to fill the vacuum between state and market. In this case, the commons appears to be both formative and instrumental in establishing political powers aiming at social transformation in line with principles of sustainability and equality. The next steps would be to envision a new institutional architecture with distinctive organisational cultures, rules and customs that would ensure collective control, fair access, and deeply embedded democratic principles in governance models.

While financialisation and further neoliberal expansion in the region of SEE represent just another building block in the continuity of plunder, the current political momentum or shift to the right across the Europe indicates that capital is mobilising right wing forces to protect business as usual and even deepen the inequality gap. This slide into authoritarianism has to be challenged by a radical opposition rooted in social power that calls for radical democratisation of the state through the principle of the commons and against the suspensions of democracy and rights introduced to defend capitalistic institutions against demands for redistribution and equity. One of the strengths of the commons is that it provides private property alternatives, going beyond the public and private binary. This prevents us into falling into the ideological trap that commons go against private property, since there are more and more cases where private property can be instrumental in protecting some of the cultural or natural commons – with fair access, social control, and sustainable use as a basic criteria.

Moreover, the commons can be identified as a promising driver of change in this part of Europe due to specific circumstances and historic trajectories. The notion resonates deeply with a legacy of experimental self-management during the Yugoslavia era, and with the traditional management of natural and cultural commons that had previously maintained ecosystems and communities for centuries. Paired with

more recent notions of urban and digital commons, the story of the commons offers an almost complete and radical re-organisation of conditions for the reproduction of life and society, particularly of labour and nature. The commons are, to large extent, already rooted in societies and therefore appear as a logical narrative during struggles, but also as a foundation for building new ecosystems of governance and institutional architecture. While they are obviously final the frontier of social reproduction, new momentum lies in their political and social mobilisation and their transfer to the institutional and governance field.

For all its limits and the debates it triggers (particularly in relation to scale), the commons might still be a concept fit for the future. It challenges current unsustainable and dehumanising patterns of distribution, production, and consumption, and demands the transformation and diversification of governance regimes. After all, it appears to be an important platform to bring together the political forces that challenge the shortcomings of the investment-oriented model that is re-directing growth from local people towards financial markets. Institutions of collective work and collective action created in '70s Yugoslavia appear to be worth revisiting and upgrading in a bid to create a new institutional architecture.



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