

## **Conference: Commons! Creative Ways of Activism and Participation**

**Banja Luka 13-14 June 2016**

### **Day 1**

The conference started with an opening speech from Marion Kraske, director of HBS Sarajevo, who referred to the misuse of public spaces and goods and the relevance of the topic in the region (examples: Skopje 2014, Beograd na vodi, protests regarding the park in Tirana, the struggle for the National Museum - Sarajevo, Banja Luka - protests organized by the opposition). This is related to the phenomenon of captured state and the lack of checks and balances. Struggles for the commons have the potential for empowering citizens and strengthening communities. Walter Kaufmann reflected on the concept of the commons, which transcends the duality of state control & private property, with the aim of preserving public goods.

What followed was a screening of “How Skopje 2014 Ate the Urban Commons” movie, and a conversation with Ivana Dragšić (Freedom Square), moderated by Marion Kraske. Dragšić gave an overview of the background and developments around the Skopje 2014 project. She linked it to what she referred to as the phenomenon of “tender democracy”, according to which all decisions are tailored. A major issue is the lack of a participative component, given the fact that the citizens were completely excluded from the decision-making process, which she contrasted with the reconstruction of Skopje following the earthquake of 1963. What Freedom Square is attempting to do now is establish space and social dialogue which would address the handling of Skopje 2014.

Dušica Radojičić (Zelena Istra) introduced the initiative around the former military complex Rojc in Pula, as a good example of a participatory management of a public good. From its beginnings, in the early ‘90s as a squat, to what is now a success story in which an alliance consisting of 110 NGOs (from the fields of arts & culture, sports and recreation, representing various groups such as national minorities, children, veterans etc.) makes management decisions together with the City of Pula. This was a slow and painstaking process, during which the involved faced many obstacles. What she deems important, though, is patience and persistence. When it comes to claiming space (metaphorically and literally), her message is “nobody will give it to you, you have to find a way to take it somehow”.

Nataša Crnković (Centar za životnu sredinu) presented another success story – the initiative to prevent the construction of a church in Borik, one of the main green areas frequented by the citizens of Banja Luka. For her, the key to their success lies in not giving up for a really long time and involving the community in Borik, gaining the support of people from various age groups, professions etc. She sees a parallel between the Borik initiative with others in the region

in the fact they are all targeting corruption and rallying against decisions made behind closed doors.

Ksenija Radovanović talked about the “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd“ initiative against the megalomaniacal waterfront construction project planned by the government. Initially, two years ago, the concerned citizens did not intend to go out in the streets – they started their activities in a very polite and professional manner (the core group being architects), but as their constructive criticism and well-posed questions were ignored, they decided to undertake a more active approach and take to the streets. Recently, they have been able to mobilize as many as 25 000 people to protest against the project. They have been accused their ultimate goal was to topple the government, but what they in fact want is answers to important matters as to how public money is spent.

Vedran Horvat (IPE) addressed why precisely now the concept of commons is gaining so much prominence. In our region, shortcuts to market economy were taken and we have been paying the toll for this – commons initiatives challenge these developments. They provide an opportunity for a different imaginary, and challenging the realm of power and decisions made behind closed doors. He referred to the example of Varšavska, as a 5 year struggle against a deep intervention into public space and one of the first more serious manifestations of civic discontent. This was an opportunity for civil society to mature, learn how to organize and work with media in a different manner.

Jasna Kovo (Ja sam muzej) spoke of the initiative for the National Museum in Sarajevo, which had been closed for several years due to the lack of political will to solve certain issues. This had been accompanied by an aggressive media campaign against the museum’s employees who were coming to work to “guard” the museum throughout the whole period. The initiative aimed to restore their and the museum’s reputation by communicating their commitment to the media in an effective manner, together with sit-in actions. The institution also received legal aid to help solve the financial situation. Kovo finds several factors as key to their success – switching the attention to the workers and the appointment of a new minister of civil affairs, which made it possible for them to cooperate with the authorities.

The first day was concluded with a discussion among the audience. The overriding idea was that the current socio-political moment, in which there is an overwhelming disillusionment with the process of privatization and, generally, the neo-liberal paradigm, provided a fertile ground for commons initiatives. According to Vedran Horvat, the ultimate goal is not to escape the state with commons, but to communize power relations, to question “business as usual”. Change is gradual and demands patience or, in Ksenija Radovanović’s words, “every new person in your protest is a victory...if you want a change, it has to come from the people”.

## Day 2

The second day began with a theoretical lecture on the commons, by Tomislav Tomašević (IPE), who addressed the relevance of the concept and provided a historical overview. What is specific (and new) today is that it has become a uniting factor for various struggles, beyond the left and green political spectrum, which has traditionally been its realm. He pointed out the importance of understanding that commons do not refer merely to resources, but also a social process (communing). Commons exist only in practice and in a certain moment. He also stressed the difference between users and commoners (a community which manages the commons, and without whom commons as such do not exist). IPE approaches commons from a normative angle, as a concept with a potential for extending political democracy to the socio-economic sphere of resources. The difference between common and public goods is that the former are managed by a community of users and the latter by the public sectors. The difference is, however, not so clearly-cut, since many phenomena are somewhere on the spectrum between the two. In our regional context, the concept can help us rediscover collectivist practices that go beyond the dichotomy of public v. private ownership. There are some limits to the concept, especially in terms of the scale (particularly regarding material commons) and the danger of cooptation.

Alma Midžić (CRVENA) analyzed concrete examples of commons initiatives (Varšavska, Srđ je naš, Za Muzil), using indicators of success based on Italian models. She deems media and awareness raising campaigns, devised in a manner that cannot be ignored, as particularly important. It is necessary that rebellion engenders an actual strategy. The following methods have been proven effective in expressing civic discontent (planting trees in areas in which construction is planned, joint tenants' actions for expanding apartments, graffiti, posting placards, boycotting utility payments until demands are met). Midžić also addressed certain potential traps – the fact that commons do not constitute a universal remedy. Hence, it is important to take into account the respective historical-political contexts.

The two introductory lessons were followed by a Q&A with the audience. The difference between cultural and social common goods and natural ones was addressed, as well as the influence of the EU on the goings-on around the case of Varšavska (in pre-accession Croatia, EU had more leverage). The political stalemate in Mostar was also addressed, together with the role of the international community in creating it and their utter passivity in providing a solution.

Following a brief break, representatives of several initiatives were given the floor to present their causes. Alida Karakushi (Citizens for the Park) addressed the citizens' struggle against construction plans in a park in Tirana. For her, this was a protest against apathy itself. The Initiative managed to organize a 87-day 24/7 sit-in. She pointed out the importance of grassroots movements, as opposed to professionalized NGOs, which often operate in favor of certain interests and according to party lines. Digital media and social networks are especially important for actions like these to succeed (in their case, the online Citizens 2.0 TV provided a platform for

transparency and a possibility to monitor what is going on in the park. She appealed for more synergies within the region, building networks, maximizing the potential of social networks, perhaps even producing a regional podcast in which civil society actors could present their struggles.

Jelena Brkić (Centar za životnu sredinu) presented the internet platform Naš prostor, which enables the participation of citizens in the process of development of zoning plans. They also provide expert aid to citizens to enable them to formulate their comments & complaints regarding zoning plans in an adequate and constructive manner. She provided a brief overview of various initiatives in the city of Banja Luka they were involved in (Picin park, Borik, recreational zone, use of a neighborhood building, Radio Banja Luka, challenging zoning plans which would destroy the last wildlife area etc).

Dušica Radojičić (Zelena Istra) expanded her discussion of the previous day regarding the Rojc barracks, as a new hybrid management model which can easily be copied and recreated in other contexts. She also addressed the less successful initiative for the military complex on the Muzil peninsula in Pula and introduced the follow-up campaign Muzil starter. According to opinion polls, 90% citizens of Pula are in favor of this space being used by local entrepreneurs and civil society. The aim of the initiative is to integrate the complex into the urban tissue, providing a sustainable management model.

Zoran Bukvić (Ulice za bicikliste) presented the initiative of cyclists in Belgrade to claim and preserve their routes in the face of construction projects which completely disregarded their needs and make the city more bike-friendly. He stressed the importance of the support they were given by the Ne da(vi)mo Beograd activists.

Anes Podić (Eko akcija) opened his presentation with some concerning facts – Tuzla is the second most polluted city in Europe, and Sarajevo the most polluted European capital. Citizens are unfortunately unaware of the extent of the crisis we are facing, which is being downplayed by relevant agencies. The pollution levels largely exceed those for which in other countries/cities emergency would have long ago been proclaimed. Doctors here have been gagged (only Bakir Nakaš has publically addressed the gravity of the situation). Podić: “They are painting our grey air pink”, which amounts to criminal avoidance of acknowledging responsibility for citizens’ health. Other issues: fecal traces detected in water. He addressed possible ways of ameliorating the situation: providing hourly info on pollution, hourly air quality index, providing info online, posters...

Xhabir Deralla (Civil) addressed the struggle for commons and (re)claiming space – public and digital, in light of the complex situation in today’s Macedonia. Citizens have been fighting for the right of expression and to re-conquer their space through the subversive actions of the “Colorful Revolution”, directed at the structures erected as part of Skopje 2014, a symbol of the ruling party’s corruption. The organization Civil, which is fighting for bringing impartial and

accurate information to all, has been facing constant pressures and attacks of hackers. There is a clear imbalance of power, but they are determined to prevail. His main message is: “you’ll have as much space as you take”.

Albiona Mucoimaj (Ecovolis) presented briefly the work of her organization which has organized successful actions for cyclists in Tirana.

The participants then divided into 4 working groups according to their preferences and later reconvened to present the findings of their discussions.

1. Temporary use of abandoned spaces (moderated by Dušica Radojčić): this WG discussed the example of Zelena Istra – the main conclusion was that this was a long-term process, which seems to constitute the only way to achieve substantial results.
2. Mechanisms of opposition and activism (moderated by Andrija Stojanović): this WG discussed the example of Ne da(vi)mo Beograd as a success story of how to build up a support base. The identified pitfalls lie in the fact that media are controlled by the authorities, hence a lot of spinning of info was involved
3. Re-commoning democracy – the role of commons in democracy (moderated by Tomislav Tomašević): It is important to introduce legislation supporting the commons, which would provide legal instruments to defend them. It appears that a lot of people / initiatives are doing commons without even realizing it; it is important to translate the concept into a language that is understandable. Different initiatives should connect and citizens should realize that political participation goes beyond voting. There are substantial differences in approaches regarding natural and urban commons, though both are important.
4. Public participation in spatial planning (moderated by Miodrag Dakić) – this WG came to the following conclusions: citizens need to know their rights and be able to read plans (it is important to get involved at an early stage). Access to relevant information and proactive approaches to spatial planning is the key. Citizens need to learn how to participate and people should be motivated to engage. Campaigning – it is crucial to develop a set of tools and be ready to use it. Biggest issue – how to make people understand these matters concern them? Where does the ex-Yu concept of self-management fit?

The two-day conference was concluded by a discussion on future perspectives of commons initiatives. The following issues were identified: overwhelming apathy; we don’t have autonomous spaces; we don’t know enough about laws – in B&H legal aid is dearly needed (proposed solutions: Aarhus centers; ETNAR legal toolkit). There is a need to build a network and share knowledge. We should think of organizing the next meeting in Skopje or Tirana.