CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Liberal Arts and Humanities

Political Squatting as Alternative Commons: The Case of Post-Socialist Cities

Anna Bezhanova

Bachelor's thesis

Supervisor: Mgr. Bohuslav Kuřík, Ph.D.

Prague 2024

Declaration

I hereby declare that I have produced the thesis by myself. Moreover, all sources and literature used have been duly cited. The work neither its substantial part was used to obtain another or the same title.

Prague, June 28, 2024. ____________________

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Mgr. Bohuslav Kuřík, Ph.D., for his academic guidance, thought-provoking comments and the space to explore my interests. Another wholehearted thank you goes to my friends and family for their continuous support and presence. Lastly, this work is inspired by and dedicated to all the empty, dilapidated buildings harbouring the potential to forge spaces for all, owned by nobody.

Abstract

This thesis aims to explore and synthesise the phenomenon of squatting in post-socialist Central Europe. The rapid political, socio-economic and cultural transitions in the region led to exacerbated contention, particularly over urban space with its higher density population and socio-political significance. Moreover, it fundamentally transformed relations to space, its occupation and ownership. As most post-socialist cities underwent re-privatisation claims, decrease of municipal housing stock and a gradual consolidation of the neoliberal urban order, political squatting emerged as a response to some of these developments. This thesis applies the term political squatting as understood by Agnes Gagyi which is less concerned with immediate access to space but rather recognises an inherent political motive. In terms of analysis, I inquire to what extent the squatted spaces are an alternative to and blur the lines between the public/private dichotomy consolidated by the binary of state and private ownership. Furthermore, I inquire whether political squatting constitutes a revival of public space and explore the potential tensions between the concepts of commons and public space. I am interested in the creative and subversive power of these spaces in generating commons. Thus, I attempt to provide a review of political squatting in Central Europe, highlighting prominent case studies from the region alongside their comparative analysis.

Keywords:

political squatting, urban commons, public space, post-socialism

Contents

1. Introduction **7**
2. Literature Review **9**
2.1 Political Squatting **9**
2.1.1 Political squatting in Central Europe 11
2.2 Then and Now: Post-socialist Transformations **13**
2.2.1 "From plan to market or from plan to clan?" Cultural Privatism 16
2.3 Public/Private **17**
2.3.1 Private or Personal Property? 18
2.3.2 Public Sphere 19
2.3.3 Counterpublic(s) 19
2.3.4 Civil Society in East-Central Europe 22
2.4 Urban Commons **22**
2.4.1 Squatting as Commons 26
2.4.2 The Flagship of Autonomy 28
3. Methodology **30**
3.1 Methodological Considerations **30**
3.1.1 Research Methods 31
3.1.2 Study Limitations 32
4. Analysis **33**
4.1 Thematic Analysis **33**
4.1.1 Czech Republic: Every city needs a Klinika 33
4.1.2 Poland: Rozbrat 37
4.1.3 Hungary: Centrum group 40
4.1.4 Slovakia: Zelený Dvor 44
4.2 Comparative Analysis **45**
4.2.1 Alliance Building 46
4.2.2 Autonomy vs. Post-Autonomy: The case of Rozbrat and Klinika 48
4.2.3 Locality and Temporality 49
5. Conclusion **51**
Bibliography **53**

1. Introduction

Next to the grounds of the Faculty of Humanities in Prague stands an abandoned building that caught my eye as a freshly enrolled student. This was my very first interaction with what I very soon learned was a former squat by the name of Villa Milada. This encounter prompted a foray into the history of squatting and a wider exploration of social movements around the globe and an interest in autonomous spaces. Having researched the topic, it became rather clear that squatting in Eastern and Central Europe is an under researched area, due to the relative novelty of squatting and the accelerating pace of neoliberalisation of post-socialist cities, which leaves less and less space for alternative projects outside of market logic. Thus, the idea of this thesis came to fruition as an attempt to compare how squats employing a certain political element in their occupations advocate for alternative visions of the city as urban commons, which refers to a type of collective self-governing of resources. This thesis concentrates on political squatting which deals with political intentions and interactions in the life cycle of the squat rather than the fact of physical occupation. It explores how politically motivated squatting negotiates the distinction of private and public, so ubiquitous in the social understanding of space. The notion of urban commons that understands the city as an active locus of shared experience, resources and infrastructure is significant here (Harvey 2012). Drawing from this notion, I inquire how political squatting contributes to the development of urban commons. To address these questions, Chapter 2 lays the theoretical groundwork of the study, defining key terms and examining their relevance in the post-socialist context of Central Europe. It explores the socio-cultural transformation of post-socialist cities, the public/private dichotomy, and the concept of urban commons. Chapter 3 tackles methodological considerations and outlines the qualitative research methods used in the study, alongside the limitations of this work. It details the selection criteria for case studies, the processes of thematic and comparative analysis, and the geographic scope of the research, focusing on the four Visegrád countries.

The empirical analysis presents detailed case studies of prominent political squats in CEE, such as Klinika in the Czech Republic, Rozbrat in Poland, Centrum in Hungary, and Zelený Dvor in Slovakia. Through thematic analysis, it examines how these squats challenge neoliberal urban policies, subvert the public/private dichotomy, and foster

communal practices. The comparative analysis synthesises the findings from the case studies to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in political squatting across CEE. It explores how the unique socio-political contexts of each country influence the nature and outcomes of squatting activities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Political Squatting

Semantically speaking, squatting refers to an act of occupying space without having the legal right or permission to do so. In many cases, squatters take up residence in or otherwise utilise abandoned or unoccupied buildings. This practice is often a contentious issue due to its legal and social implications. Squatting can be motivated by a plethora of reasons and is most commonly associated with socio-economic issues like homelessness. In distinctly politically motivated cases, it can be considered a form of civil disobedience, where individuals or groups occupy vacant or abandoned properties as a means of protesting against social and economic inequalities like housing shortages. This might also push people to squat to satisfy these needs. Furthermore, it may generally reflect the perceived failures of the existing political system. Squatting has a long-standing history of being in action repertoires of autonomous and urban social movements, for example, in the collective West as well as in the Global South, albeit in a different social context of accelerating urbanisation and displacement (Polanska and Piotrowski 2015). Alexander Vasudevan (2014) explores the complexities of squatting in the Global South and global interconnections of squatting practices, viewing them in the framework of capital driven dispossession. In these contexts, squatting often emerges from necessity, providing shelter and forming communities in the face of extreme deprivation and systemic neglect. These squatted settlements are characterised by informality, precariousness and improvisation, which, despite their challenging conditions, offer potential for alternative urban living and resilience. This perspective aims to reframe our understanding of squatting as a critical and adaptive urban practice, particularly in the Global South, where traditional urban governance often excludes the most economically disadvantaged communities (Vasudevan 2014). Thus, squatting does not only occur as a part of social movements but extends to various contexts and motivations. Hans Pruijt (2012) developed a typology of urban squatting that allows to identify primary "configurations" of squatting based on "consistent combinations of features that correspond logically to specific environmental characteristics" (21).

On a theoretical level, Pruijt operates according to contingency theory, which explains the diversity of approaches to squatting and attributes them to adjustments aimed at efficiency. Pruijt (2012) categorises squatting into five types: deprivation-based squatting, where mostly working-class individuals occupy empty low-income housing due to severe housing deprivation; squatting as an alternative housing strategy, where middle-class individuals or students create their own housing solutions in dilapidated or valuable buildings; entrepreneurial squatting, where squatters set up community services in non-housing spaces; conservational squatting, aimed at preserving cityscapes or landscapes against planned changes; and political squatting, where squatters build counter-power to the state and challenge existing political orders. Each type has unique motivations, organisational structures, and interactions with authorities and society.

The focus of this subsection and thesis as a whole is political squatting. Definition of political squatting is significant, especially considering that all types of squatting are political to an extent due to the challenge they pose to the commodified nature of landed property in capitalism (Marx 1976). In Pruijt's (2012) words, "political squatting is a field of action for those who are engaged in anti-systemic politics" (19). This definition is based on the author's extensive research on political squatting in the Netherlands, Italy, UK, and Germany and thus exhibits patterns that are relevant to a distinct regional framework. Most academic research carrying out comparative analysis of the phenomenon of political squatting falls on Western Europe and the USA since it has been most prevalent there. As Agnes Gagyi (2016) clarifies, the academic literature identifying common features of political context of squatting emphasises that it has largely been underpinned by autonomous, anarchist, and Marxist milieus alongside the New Left and the Greens. Hence, this understanding of political squatting is inherently embedded in the historical context of post-1968 social movements and generally extends to broader formal and informal politics that include "campaigns for affordable housing or minority rights, or against war, neo-Nazis, unemployment, precariousness, urban speculation and regeneration projects, gentrification, and displacement" (Gagyi 2016).

2.1.1 Political squatting in Central Europe

So far, this paper has focused on the implications of squatting in a broader global context. The following section will discuss the nuances of squatting in Central Europe alongside the historical predecessor of dissident social movements in the former Czechoslovakia. As mentioned in the previous section, political squatting is in many ways indebted to the socio-cultural upheaval of 1968, protest cycles and a deeply rooted culture of authoritarian critique. Similarly to Western European ethos, 1968 is significant in the collective memory of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, albeit in a different way. It marks the short-lived yet impactful era of Prague Spring (Ryback 2021). It represented a crucial attempt to reform and democratise the socialist regime in Czechoslovakia. Heralded by Alexander Dubček, "socialism with a human face" aimed to create a more open and liberal society by lifting censorship and promoting greater political and civil freedom. This movement sought to find a middle ground between orthodox communism and Western capitalism. However, the reforms of the Prague Spring were perceived as a threat by the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries, leading to a massive military intervention in August 1968. The invasion by Warsaw Pact troops aimed to crush the reformist movement and reassert Soviet control over Czechoslovakia. Despite the brutal suppression, the Prague Spring had long-lasting impacts on future dissident movements. The significance of the Prague Spring lies in its demonstration of the desire for political and social change within a tightly controlled communist regime and its influence on subsequent movements for freedom and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Ryback 2021).

Returning to the theorisation of political squatting, it is necessary to situate it in the regional context. Squatting emerged in Central Europe in connection to post-socialist transition of 1989, following the fall of the Iron Curtain and the transition from socialist regimes to capitalist systems. In many cases, squatting is closely linked to anarchist environments and the punk rock scene (Jacobsson 2016). However, the new left has struggled to situate itself in the broader political discourse since the general public tends to dismiss and problematise left-leaning groups due to the collective experience of state-socialism. This can explain the preference for identifying with the anarchist, anti-authoritarian currents of leftist politics. The dynamics of political squatting have been

shaped by this distinct socio-political context, diverging from the patterns observed in Western Europe that include a higher degree of leftist political formations in formal institutions (Jacobsson 2016). This requires a reimagining of political squatting that recognises the nuanced political interplay of squatting in CEE. In an article titled "The constitution of the 'political' in squatting" Agnes Gagyi (2016) investigates how the epistemology of political squatting from Western European contexts can be applied and modified to other settings, where the contextual factors defining a political squat may not exist, but the act of squatting itself shapes different dynamics of local politics. In this way, the direct application of the same conceptual tools can be problematic and require further dissection. Considering that Pruijt's political squatting is rooted in the anti-systemic political effort of leftist and anarchist groups and their connection with institutional leftist politics, the relative absence of such from the formal institutional politics of post-socialist CEE requires a more nuanced search into the region's informal politics as well as into the process of meaning making of squatters. Failing to acknowledge this distinction on its own terms, has led to a comparatively shallow Western-centric understanding of urban social movements in the region, ultimately defining them as weak (Jacobsson 2016). In a recent shift, scholarship has moved away from such a definition, as the correspondence to Western patterns disregards social movements' socio-historic background and by design, posits them as lacking or under-developed. Meanwhile, the local modes of grassroots mobilisations encompass different types of contention and levels of engagement with urban politics that might not reflect the classical modes of mobilisation such as mass protests. Kerstin Jacobsson (2016) argues that urban social movements in Central Europe often focus on local issues such as housing, public space, and environmental concerns, reflecting the everyday socio-political issues of their cities. Moreover, they tend to employ creative, non-confrontational and often small-scale tactics to achieve their goals, which can sometimes lead to their activities being perceived as less political. Jacobsson explains this phenomenon in light of the Soviet legacy of fractionalization and a preference for familial or friendship bonds over larger social movements. Thus, these grassroots manifestations of urban activism are the gateway for activism and direct political participation for the general public unwilling or unable to engage in more radical political contestation; these spaces enable localised grassroots initiatives to grow, build solidarity, and gradually scale

up their efforts (Jacobsson 2016). Squatting, on the other hand, is understood as a radical form of urban activism, adopting tactics of higher risk and contention.

To achieve an understanding of the phenomenon in post-socialist context, Gagyi (2016) abstracts it from forms of politics linked to collective Western European ethos in order to avoid fitting local movements into the trajectories of another. Instead, she proposes to grasp the dimension of the political through meaning making of squatters and thus framing political squatting as "the type of occupation in which the main aim of occupation, as conceived by squatters, is not contained in the direct consequences of the fact of occupation" (Gagyi 2016). Moving forward, it is essential to delve deeper into the dynamics of political squatting in the region and explore how the post-socialist transition has shaped the motivations and strategies of squatters in the region. Further chapters of this thesis will provide insights into the unique manifestations of political squatting and its significance in the broader socio-political narrative. In accordance with this, the next section provides an overview of post-socialist transition and the background of Central Europe as a geographic unit.

2.2 Then and Now: Post-socialist Transformations

The previous section has touched upon some of the historical developments of the last 30 years however, in order to speak about radical urban activism further, it is necessary to situate it in the broader social, cultural and institutional landscapes of post-socialist cities and define the geographic scope since it is limited to Central Europe. Krastev and Holmes (2019) highlight the geopolitical and cultural boundaries of Central Europe, framing it through the lens of post-communist countries such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. These nation states negotiate their geopolitical identity, focusing on resistance to Western liberal norms and put effort into preserving national sovereignty against perceived foreign domination by entities like the European Union (Krastev and Holmes 2019). Gagyi and Slačálek (2022), on the other hand, emphasise the region's historical legacy of socialism and the varied trajectories of post-socialist integration into global systems, implicitly positioning Central Europe within a broader Eastern European context that includes intra-regional hierarchies and specific national experiences. Central Europe is hence a region grappling with its identity amidst internal

and external pressures, striving to define itself against both its communist past and the current Western-dominated liberal order. It is necessary to outline the recent historical developments that clarify the dual position of Central Europe.

The post-socialist transition has fundamentally redefined social and institutional arenas in the last three decades and marked a shift to a market-oriented neoliberal urban order. This section highlights this defining caesura and questions it as an ongoing process. Most scholarship is focused on the political economy of the transition due to the stark contrast between the opposing systems and the crystallised visibility of socio-economic processes (Hirt 2012). However, studies of cultural transformation must be granted equal consideration since they demonstrate how pervasive the transition has been. They highlight and provide a nuanced understanding of everyday life and its practices that escape the analysis of shifting political and economic structures. As established beforehand, the level of everyday life is particularly vital for all types of urban activism since much of the contestation and negotiation of urban space happens in the relatively intimate frame of daily life.

The end of state socialism unfolded a very long, complex process that one can grasp by applying a lens of various temporalities. Luděk Sýkora and Stefan Bouzarovski (2012) identify multiple transformations that function in different timeframes. Semantically speaking, "transition" has been applied to refer to the shock therapy of adopting a capitalist economic order alongside a liberal political order, while "transformation" denotes a long-term, continuous process referring to the changes and after-effects in the cultural and urban spheres (Sýkora and Bouzarovski 2012, 46). The most immediate of the transitions was the institutional change that took place within a few months of the collapse of the communist regime. It encompassed the switch to a democratic political system and market economy as opposed to central planning. Another aspect of this transition was the opening up of national markets, marking the internationalisation of trade. The overall trend was that of reducing state intervention at large. Subsequently, the new representatives of the national and municipal governments initiated the processes of privatisation of state property, emphasising market growth and in some cases restitution of property to its former pre-socialist owners. Restitution policies were spread unevenly across Central Europe, with the Czech Republic returning property

to its former owners, while Hungary chose not to pursue restitution. This, in turn, has had an influence on the restructuring of the social and urban orders. As an outcome of different approaches to privatisation, Prague has witnessed an accelerated pace of gentrification, unlike Budapest, for example (Sýkora and Bouzarovski 2012). The social implication of such rapid privatisation turned out to be growing social stratification, in contrast to the comparatively equal socialist societies (Hirt 2012). Sprawling economic disparity began showing up on maps of post-socialist cities in the form of affluent gated communities (Sýkora and Bouzarovski 2012).

Another prominent feature of the institutional transition is decentralisation of state power in favour of local authority (Mihaylov 2020). A highly illustrative example is that of the Czech Republic in the 1990s, which shows the disparity between “a social democratic vision of social issues on the level of parliamentary politics” and the local municipal level of privatisation policies, unregulated development and commodification of public space (Moskvina 2022, 33). An example of that is the former ruling party ODS, that has authorised squat evictions, enacting the neoliberal policies on a local level (Moskvina 2022). Considering that in most trajectories, squatters are faced with their respective municipal councils rather than national governments, it is particularly critical to consider the scale of institutional politics. Nevertheless, it is precisely the privatisation process that weakened municipal governments. Considering the value of urban land as a commodity in the capitalist system, lack thereof puts city authorities at a disadvantage. In an interview conducted by the sociologist Yuliya Moskvina (2022), a Czech politician reflects on this: “Vienna has an advantage in that it owns the land, so it also has much more influence than Prague” (122)

Hence, the restructuring in the formal institutions laid the groundwork for further transformations in the socio-cultural and urban spheres. Another vivid example is the gradual adaptation of public institutions to private interests, forming a well-integrated legal and economic system of mutual support (Sýkora and Bouzarovski 2012). Considering such a massive flux of newly available property and the favour of public institutions, developers acquired a significant advantage over urban space, unlike other local actors. This has led to increasingly erratic, unrestrained development. Thus, the transformations in institutional politics and the wider practices of governance physically manifested in how post-socialist

cities are organised. The post-socialist era witnessed massive waves of commodification and gentrification of urban space, which is particularly visible in the case of the city centre. The commercialisation of the city centre worked hand in hand with the global tourist industry contributing to an accelerated population replacement, ultimately driving out many local residents due to the sky-rocketing rent and property prices. Hence, it is not surprising that suburbanisation emerged in the post 1990s period, especially considering the shrinking of the traditional working class in light of the broader deindustrialization of cities and an expansion of the service industry (Sýkora and Bouzarovski 2012; Hirt 2012).The most salient features of post-socialist transformation(s) that defined and keep redefining the cities of East-Central Europe are the decentralisation of power from central authorities to local authorities, privatisation and the concomitant "socio-spatial polarisation" (Mihaylov 2020, 3).

2.2.1 "From plan to market or from plan to clan?" Cultural Privatism

While privatisation relates strictly to socio-economic processes, privatism is defined as "a cultural condition" (Hirt 2012, 5). I believe it fits well into the conceptual framework of multiple transformations, as the sphere of culture, beliefs, and perceptions takes the longest to shape due to their fluidity. Privatism, as a cultural norm, exposes the roots of privatisation and traces them back to state socialism, that once so vehemently denied the private sphere. To explain privatism further, one must go back in time. It is significant to acknowledge the strict line that state socialism attempted to create between the private and the public, attempting to ideologically and spatially elevate the latter and banish the former. Although the urban public good was the compass of urban development, state socialism diluted and surveyed the public to an extent of its annihilation as an "ideal" (Hirt 2012, 22). As a response to this, the intimate sphere of the private home and circle became a refuge from the ideologically charged and highly surveilled public space. Thus, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the fall of state socialism, the private was unleashed from its ideological prison and left to roam unrestrained in the centre of the European continent. In this sense, privatism goes hand in hand with global capitalism and the ethos of individualism so prominent in contemporary Western capitalist societies. Hence, privatism, as a widespread belief system, signals the departure of interest in urban public good and a greater emphasis "on the personal and the domestic, the individual, the

family, and the narrowly defined interest group" (Hirt 2012, 17). Consequently, these cultural phenomena legitimise the institutional order and vice versa. This works both on a local and global level by perpetuating the above-mentioned socio-spatial polarisation and exclusion. On a global level, this entails the solidification of the profit-oriented, neoliberal order. The social fragmentation that comes with shrinking of the public endangers the viability of civil societies and significantly reduces the amount of crucial spaces for the development of robust, collective alternatives to the current bureaucratic institutional order.

In order to view the processes of privatisation and its effects on civil society and radical activism further, I will unpack the dichotomous concepts of public and private in greater detail in the following section. I will especially discuss the various meanings attributed to it by post-socialist and Western societies, respectively, and the overarching viability of these concepts for current research.

2.3 Public/Private

The dichotomy of the public and the private is of arbitrary and ambiguous nature and the Soviet attempt at manufacturing the omnipresent public domain failed partly due to the iron border between the two. These notions have long been a subject of sociological inquiry, and there is a general consensus emphasising its socially constructed nature. According to the sociologist Joe Bailey (2002), who summarises that the notions of private and public lack any intrinsic core and there are "no obvious psychological or anthropological constants that underlie these concepts" (1). As the above mentioned examples illustrate, the concepts of private and public are highly malleable to the respective historical conditions. Notwithstanding, these categorisations are deeply entrenched in the fabric of society, albeit in different forms and with socially contingent meanings. Within this repeatedly drawn upon and relied upon categorization, the meanings of the private and the public undergo regular changes and transformations. The two terms discursively shape and influence each other (Bailey 2002). In essence, one does not exist without the other. Something/where is public by virtue of another being private. The absolute of these concepts is rarely desirable or found. For example, hardly anyone would want a totally isolated home with no windows, an aspect of the public (Hirt 2012). On a

larger scale of cities, urban life is a clearly constructed, yet complex interplay between the two.

In another example, Hirt (2012) draws upon Goffman and expounds on how public spaces serve as settings where individuals encounter each other with minimal formal obligations and an overall sense of anonymity (15). Thus, in the social and spatial worlds, private is implanted in public and public is implanted in private. The semi, liminal categories are omnipresent and essential for the functioning of the city, as they accommodate the flux of people, ideas and resources without a totality of isolation on the one hand or complete exposure and vulnerability on the other.

2.3.1 Private or Personal Property?

The concepts of public and private are highly politicised in a sense that their interplay forms a foundation of the current political system based on private property, the right to which is enshrined in most Central European state constitutions, much like former socialist states heralded public good as the base of socialist society. This top-down system of governance undoubtedly shapes the constitution of urban space and often becomes a point of contention. This subsection delves deeper into the contrast between the contemporary understanding of private and that of the state socialist era.

Unlike the current domination and expansion of private interest in relation to urban space, during state socialism, the private domain was negotiated in terms of the personal, as the private was likened to an attribute of bourgeois Western societies. Personal property was legal and justified as opposed to private property, that implied large-scale property beyond individual use, such as means of production (Hirt 2012). This is linguistically evident in post-socialist states operating in a Slavic language; the English word "privatisation" was adopted due to the lack of a better word to describe the massive process of transferring state property into private assets (Hirt 2012).

2.3.2 Public Sphere

It is the intermediary, liminal spaces between public and private that are the locus of functioning cities and societies. This challenges the dialectical dichotomy and formulates a question of what is beyond it. In contemporary capitalist Central European

states, public space is mediated through formal institutions of the state and private sector is driven by commercial interests of the private sector.

Nevertheless, the public domain has been considered not only as a space distinct from the private realm but also as a mediator between the state and broader society. This intermediary position was meant to allow democratic control of political life (Habermas 1989). This conceptualisation resonates with the notion of a vital middle category of civic communities, as proposed by classic sociologists such as Emile Durkheim and Hannah Arendt, which serves to prevent both state tyranny and extreme societal fragmentation (Hirt 2012). The critical social theorist Jürgen Habermas (1989) views the public sphere as an inherently autonomous entity, distinct from both the private realm and formal public institutions, with the main function of generating public opinion on the state's activity. In his monograph *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas surveys the emergence of the public sphere in the Early Modern Period to its development in the 18th century and necessitates it in terms of counterbalance to absolutist monarchy. In this regard, the public sphere is an assembly of individuals engaged in discussions on the common good with the intention of forming public opinion to consolidate a power relation with the state. It is a sphere of discursive relations, an arena designated for the formation of public opinion. This opinion in turn has the potential of authoritarian critique, although it primarily has a relational purpose that is meant as a bridge to inform the state of society's stance and vice versa (Habermas 1989). As illustrated above, Habermas does not develop a contemporary vision of a public sphere but rather traces its historical origins. This type of public sphere is a social contract between the state and society aiming at voicing public opinion through discourse (Habermas 1989).

2.3.3 Counterpublic(s)

However indispensable Habermas's conceptualisation of the public sphere, it is inherently rooted in the liberal bourgeois public sphere that is not universally applicable in light of its unique historic conditions. Since the publication of the English translation of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* by Jürgen Habermas in 1989, there have been many critical responses and revisions that point to the insufficient formulation of the public sphere in contemporary society. One of the most prominent voices that

contributed to the reimagining of the Habermasian public sphere in English language academia is Nancy Fraser (1990) who elaborated a more comprehensive, reconstructed understanding of the public sphere and extended it through the application of a feminist lens. Fraser's critique of Habermas's concept of the public sphere raises crucial points about the inadequacy of this model in scrutinising the functioning of democracy in late stage capitalist societies. By highlighting the limitations of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, Fraser (1990) underscores the necessity of considering social inequality and the diverse range of publics that coexist within contemporary societies.

Habermas's (1989) theory is based on the assumption that individuals in the public sphere can engage in deliberation on equal terms, disregarding differences in status by bracketing them. Fraser's (1990) argument challenges this assumption and contends that genuine equality is a prerequisite for political democracy. She supports this argument by elaborating that the supposed inclusivity of bracketing social inequalities is impossible because this practice is usually to the advantage of the dominant group and a disadvantage to society’s minority groups. The absence of formal exclusion is substituted by more subtle yet more pervasive informal ones. These exclusions are underpinned by differences in gender, class and education and inherently reproduce cis-heteropatriachal systems of oppression. Her critique calls for a reconceptualization of the public sphere and its underlying biases. She argues that contrarily, non-egalitarian societies would benefit from the unbracketing of social inequalities that bring the necessary issues to the fore and allow for a free discussion directed at solving these issues instead of disregarding them altogether.

Central to Fraser’s thesis is the idea of counterpublic(s). In essence, she advocates for a multiplicity of publics, emphasising the significance of accommodating diverse interests and issues that may have been traditionally categorised as “private” (Fraser 1990). Her standpoint underscores the need to move beyond a singular, homogeneous public sphere to acknowledge the complexities and power dynamics inherent in multiple publics within society. If there is only one comprehensive public sphere, minority groups lack spaces to discuss their needs and strategies independently of dominant group influence. This limits their ability to articulate and defend their interests effectively, while the formation of counterpublics forges independent arenas where women, working class,

people of colour and the queer community, among others mobilise, negotiate and create counter discourses on their own terms. It is important to consider that counterpublics are not exclusively constituted by the abovementioned minority groups, I include them by virtue of their commonplace exclusion from the mainstream public sphere. Counterpublics are not egalitarian in their essence, they are merely a response to the exclusions and can embrace any political orientation, including far-right direction, both in principle and in practice. In societies characterised by inequality, all counterpublics exist in opposition to dominant publics. Through this contestation, counterpublics challenge and redefine what counts as a public matter and what does not (Fraser 1990). A prominent example of such contestation is second-wave feminism's destabilisation of the public/private distinction encompassed in Carol Hanisch's slogan "The personal is political," prominent in the late 1960s (Shulman and Moore 2021, 134). Ruth Gavison (1992) discusses how feminists have critiqued the public/private distinction by emphasising the intimate connection between the personal and political aspects of women's lives. This critique underscores the idea that for women, there is no clear separation between the private and public spheres, as personal experiences are often intertwined with broader societal structures of oppression and power dynamics. Moreover, feminist thinkers and activists advocate for the visibility and recognition of traditionally marginalised or devalued aspects of life that are often relegated to the private sphere. By bringing issues such as caregiving, emotional labour and personal autonomy into public discourse, they seek to challenge the hierarchy between public and private realms, blurring the lines between the two (Gavison 1992). Thus, what "bourgeois masculinist ideology labels "private" and treats as inadmissible" embodies the radical reimagining of the public sphere (Fraser 1990, 77). By making the "personal" political, these counterpublics disrupt the hierarchical divide between the public and private realms.

Thus, Fraser's critique of Habermas's public sphere urges a reexamination of the prevailing notions of the public sphere to foster inclusivity, counterbalance social inequality and better reflect the dynamics of contemporary democratic societies. Her call for a post-bourgeois conception of the public sphere resonates as a vital step towards building more inclusive and equitable democratic frameworks.

2.3.4 Civil Society in East-Central Europe

However, it is important to acknowledge that these formulations of public sphere(s) are embedded in the context of the late capitalist Global North that does not take into consideration the distinct path of public sphere(s) in Eastern Central Europe. Local socio-historical background complicates and problematizes the notion of civil society and a plethora of ethnic, religious and class based counterpublics. Wiktor Marzec (2020) examines these historical developments and current challenges faced by civil society in Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria. He highlights how the political and social history of these countries, from the late 19th century to the present, has shaped their public spheres and influenced contemporary populist discourses against liberal civil society. In Poland, the public sphere has been dominated by the intelligentsia, with historical tensions between intellectuals and the popular classes. Hungary has experienced a "dual stratification," with Europeanized urban elites and traditional rural gentry, leading to a persistent populist versus urbanist cleavage exploited by current political parties (Marzec 2020, 14). Furthermore, Marzec argues that the long-term social and political divisions and antagonism in these countries have hindered the development of a Western-style civic sphere and that contemporary attacks on civil society are deeply rooted in these historical grievances and power struggles. The broader civil society in CEE is often marginalised and used as a scapegoat for contested Westernisation, while local democracy advocates are not necessarily guided by democratic principles, exacerbating public resentment (Marzec 2020).

2.4 Urban Commons

Commons refers to a mode of collective ownership and management of landed property and other assets. In his book *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution,* David Harvey (2012) formulates a genealogy of the concept of commons and Marxist analysis of its urban counterpart. Commons originate from the practices of English peasantry in the late mediaeval period, before the rise of land enclosures significantly shrank and eventually eliminated commons, laying the groundwork for "primitive accumulation of capital" (Debelle dos Santos 2020, 1340). Maja Grabkowska (2022) traces the development of commons in Europe, comparing the historical paths towards commons

between Eastern and Western regions, extending back to pre-capitalist societies. In Western Europe, collective management and use of natural resources became formalised in the late Middle Ages, while similar processes occurred much later in Eastern Europe due to slower urbanisation and market development. The persistence of archaic socio-political institutions, such as kinship, noble privileges and serfdom, undermined the necessary conditions for the evolution of commons in the East. Despite 20th century communist ideology framing all resources as common property, they practically remained under strict state control, obliterating bottom-up collective action. The concept of pseudo-commons, introduced by Insa Theesfeld, describes this top-down management approach, which led to appropriation and unclear responsibilities over supposedly shared resources, eroding social trust and cooperation. This cycle of pseudo-collective action and the culture of distrust it brought about, significantly hampered the development of common-property regimes post-1989. Although post-socialist cities and their sprawling grassroots associations seem to be in line with a recent global shift towards reimagining property regimes, their pathway is certainly more challenging, being rooted in a socio-historical discourse that is highly critical of collective action and resource management (Grabkowska 2022).Thus, the global attempts at commons have been mostly reduced to these historic instances, leaving the dominant contemporary forms of governance a dichotomy between state and market (Novák 2020). Elinor Ostrom challenges this dichotomy and the reductive use of commons, emphasising its relevance (Harvey 2012).

The role of squatting relating to commons is that it not only directly challenges private property but also public property owned and managed by the state. Harvey draws a distinction between universal commons open to everyone, such as air and their opposite, such as streets, for example, which are theoretically commons but are often highly surveilled spaces that sanction and accept certain types of behaviours. Hence, some commons require a degree of enclosure in order to maintain equal access for the members of the commons.

Furthermore, for Hardt and Negri, commons extend beyond shared physical resources to include elements such as language, social practices and the dynamics of social relationships (Harvey 2012). These commons develop gradually over time and are fundamentally accessible to everyone, although language can also be used for exclusionary

practices. Additionally, they suggest that the unique characteristics of urban environments emerge from human activities within the diverse spaces of the city, despite these spaces being subject to enclosure, social regulation and appropriation by private and public interests. Here, Harvey (2012) makes a distinction between public space, public good and the commons. Public space is generated through some form of state authority and although it has the potential of contributing to commons, it does not automatically generate them. What transforms public space into commons is the direct, political action of residents/citizens. In this line of thought, commons are produced through appropriation and redefinition of meaning. Harvey (2012) brings up a historical example of streets becoming a terrain of protest, commons as site of revolution or revolution itself. On the other hand, there is the potential for reappropriation and even oppression by hegemonic powers. Thus, the production of public space is contentious by virtue of how and by whom it is regulated and whose interests it entails. As discussed above, in the neoliberal urban order, the private interests of developers and the technocratic authorities are holding sway over the production of urban space. Much like with late mediaeval enclosures of land, the neo-capitalist unregulated accumulation of individual capital poses a constant threat to the basic denomination of production: "the laborer and the land" and therefore a type of commons they constitute (Harvey 2012, 80). Meanwhile, the process of urbanisation continually shapes communal spaces within urban environments—whether these are genuine commons or state funded public zones— these spaces are consistently vulnerable to efforts of appropriation and destruction by private interests.

To sustain the common good, it is essential to maintain the availability of public goods that support the qualities of the common. With neoliberal policies cutting social security funds, the resources available to communities diminish, prompting them to seek alternative ways to obtain these resources. Commons should not be seen as a specific type of asset, but rather as a flexible social relationship between a defined community and crucial aspects of their existing social and physical environment. This establishes a collective, non-commercialised relation with shared resources that may be exclusive or accessible to all. Central to this practice is ensuring that this relationship operates outside of market exchange and valuations and avoiding co-optation (Harvey 2012).

One of the commons' most definitive features is their autonomy and decentralisation from the powers of the state. In his work, Harvey (2012) is critical of these concepts on the basis of their inviability on a larger scale. While a relatively small group might be able to effectively manage its common resources, regional and global issues become ungovernable with decentralised points of reference. This presents a fundamental problem of scale. To explain further, he argues that decentralisation and atomisation of communities feeds into the neoliberal reproduction of inequality and failure to redistribute wealth.

The key takeaway from the Marxist analysis of urban commons is the challenge that commons pose to the dichotomy of public and private alongside alternative approaches that they entail. The revival of the concept of the commons gains significance as the state withdraws from providing public goods or uses them for private accumulation. Within this framework, communities find themselves compelled to autonomously organise and establish their own commons as a means of counteracting capitalist hegemony and conceptualising a transition away from capitalist structures. Harvey (2012) envisions commons that are enacted by social groups exerting pressure on the state to expand its provision of public goods for communal use, while simultaneously engaging in the appropriation and extension of such goods through collective action, breaching the encroaching totality of neoliberalism and creating alternatives to capitalism.

This claim is also valid in relation to Central and Eastern Europe as urbanites, disillusioned with state control during the socialist era, turn to market forces for city development, only to find the extreme commodification of urban spaces equally unsatisfactory. This led urban movements to advocate for the “right to the city” and envision it as a commons, marking a return communal infrastructure but with a prevailing element of citizen participation (Grabkowska 2022).

2.4.1 Squatting as Commons

The parallel between squatting and commons is not far-fetched considering the challenge they pose to the strict dichotomy between private and public Nevertheless their difference lies in the extralegal nature of squatting. The following pages examine to what extent squatting constitutes commons. This connection is not novel in academic research

since squatting has been previously analysed through the commons framework, acknowledging how squatters' movements provide various material and immaterial resources for communities (Debelle dos Santos 2020). In another sense, squatting embodies commons in both cultural and spatial terms as they reproduce an alternative way of life. This is particularly significant in light of prefigurative politics that have been outlined as a constitutive part of many squats. Politics of act and prefiguration relate to the activists' lifestyle as if the envisioned future is present. It can be conceptualised as a "real utopia" where the means becomes the ends (Martínez 2019, 160). Rather than seeking to replace one hegemonic system with another, political squatters attempt to proliferate a multiplicity of autonomous, self-governing spaces and communities that can coexist and interlink in a decentralised, non-hierarchical manner (Novák and Kuřík 2020). The emphasis is on building resilient networks of mutual support and solidarity, not on capturing state power or constructing a new totalizing ideology. Novák and Kuřík (2020) conceptualise the aim of these practices in disruption of hegemonic logic "with its own logic of affinity" (206). In this way, political squatting embodies prefigurative politics in the practice of enacting desired social and political transformations in the present, rather than deferring them to some future revolutionary moment (Moskvina 2022). It is a way of directly challenging and undermining the existing order, while simultaneously creating the seeds of an alternative.

This becomes clear and necessary when the short-lived nature of many squats is considered. In spatial terms, squatters justify their appropriation of spaces based on use-value rather than on exchange value, which underpins the hegemonic view of housing as a commodity. Squatting fundamentally challenges private property and disrupts its right to exclude, which is the basis of private property (Bottero 2005). This transforms squatting into an antagonistic political act, making the confrontation between squatters and state authorities almost inevitable. Galvão Debelle dos Santos (2020) centres conflict in his discussion on squatting and the commons. Due to their extralegal nature, squatting movements' strategies are defined by external confrontation and considering the concomitant risks of squatting, a high potential of internal conflict. He further states that the lack of a fixed governance structure within squatting movements contradicts the neo-institutionalist view that emphasises the ability of commons to enforce rules and

establish mechanisms for conflict resolution and authority (Debelle dos Santos 2020). Additionally, the pragmatic and affinity-based collective organising approach adopted by squatters differs from the Marxist perspective of "governing the commons" (Harvey 2012, 68). However, squatters also organise through consensus decision-making, which involves internal conflict management. To summarise the argument, "framing squatting as a commons" may overlook the tensions arising from both external and internal conflicts inherent in the social reproduction of antagonism" (Debelle dos Santos 2020, 1350). However, this understanding also has a number of drawbacks. Although the highly organised and (in)formally institutional idea of commons persists, I propose, at least, in the framework of this thesis, the use of this term that emphasises the form of collective organisation while recognising its potential for antagonism. This thesis considers squatting as a type of commons. It is squatted spaces' existence outside of the public and private distinction that allows for the creative commoning of space, something that Elinor Ostrom refers to as the "rich mix of instrumentalities" of commons encompassing the "collective and associational, nested, hierarchical and horizontal, exclusionary and open" (Harvey 2012, 88).

To conclude this section, I will draw on Galvão Debelle dos Santos conceptualisation of commoning:

> Resources become a common by virtue of a collective organisation: communities create commons, not the other way around. Commons only come to exist as such if and when decision-making structures and spaces are socially reproduced by its (or part of its) users. The centrality of the labour of social reproduction makes the verb "commoning" preferable, as it puts the emphasis on the process through which resources are kept in common (Debelle dos Santos 2020, 1340).

Squatting is thus not about merely occupying pre-existing common spaces, but about the active, processual work of creating new commons through collective organisation and decision-making. It is this dynamic, participatory aspect of squatting that makes it a profoundly political act of reclaiming and reproducing urban space and bending it to the logic of affinity. This conceptualization of squatting as an active process of commoning that challenges hegemonic notions of property and creates alternative,

self-governed spaces is the particular lens through which this thesis explores the subversive potential of political squats in the further sections.

2.4.2 The Flagship of Autonomy

There is a parallel between the counterpublic(s) and physical spaces in terms of their support of autonomous movements (Moskvina 2020; Kuřík 2015). The subaltern counterpublics must be rooted in the physical configuration of the city, otherwise, their ability to form identity, community and counter discourse diminishes. The autonomy that a physical space allows may as well get diffused in the private sphere of the home or is at risk of being co-opted by the state institutions. According to Kuřík (2015) the autonomous struggle centres on rejecting and redefining normative structures of cis-heterosexuality, patriarchal family models, class principles etc. It emphasises the importance of embedding these redefinitions into one's environment and personal life. Autonomy advocates for self-transformation as a means to societal change, rejecting traditional political systems like voting that rely on external conditions. Instead, it calls for personal responsibility, detachment from the system, and the creation of a liberated self within autonomous zones. This ethos is closely linked with the DIY ethics prevalent in youth countercultures, particularly anarchist hardcore and punk scenes (Kuřík 2015) . This further aligns with Richard J.F. Day's "logic of affinity" which highlights the importance of close relationships among activists within autonomous spaces, collective efforts to overcome hegemonic self-production and solidarity with distant struggles (Moskvina 2020). In her research on the former Prague-based autonomous social centre, Yuliya Moskvina (2020) states the need for space to contain autonomous movements in order for them to act out their politics, exchange ideas and resources. In other words, this interim space serves as a node of mobilisation,"as a "flagship" heralding the presence of the movement on the urban map" (Moskvina 2020, 100). However, in the hegemonic context of global capitalism where urban space becomes an increasingly inaccessible and highly coveted commodity, subaltern civil sphere(s) shrink alongside access to and affordability of urban land. Leftist autonomous movements include radical urban action such as squatting to make up for this need in space, however temporarily. In this thesis, I would like to argue that in many cases, squatting revives public space understood through the practice of commoning both as an ideal and as reality that is not mediated by the state or its property.

Squatted social centres as "flagships" exemplify how physical spaces are instrumental in fostering and sustaining autonomous movements. They challenge the public/private dichotomy and offer alternative forms of communal living and political engagement, contributing to the creation of urban commons and the revitalization of diverse public life that is not totally dominated by the logic of neoliberalism.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodological Considerations

I hereby present and establish the methodological framework for the analysis of political squatting in Central Europe. This thesis is primarily concerned with the spatial, creative and relational aspects of squatting. To explore these aspects, I emphasise the processes of meaning-making in relation to squatted spaces. In order to do that, I will first reiterate the main research questions, which define the methodology:

1. To what extent does politically motivated squatting constitute an alternative to institutionally mediated public space and revive the ideal of public space as opposed to the ethic of individualism and privatism?
2. How do squatters subvert the public/private dichotomy and how do they negotiate and establish commoning practices?

This thesis aims to answer these questions in the context of Central Europe, taking into consideration its unique socio-historical conditions outlined in the literature review. The context of post-socialism problematises the idea of public space, as the collapse of the communist regime provided a blank slate for the neoliberal imperative to take over. Thus, neoliberal imperative permeates social, political and cultural arenas to a larger extent than elsewhere in Europe. That is one of the reasons why the focus of the first research question is on the revival of public space.

Furthermore, it is essential to outline the boundaries of Central Europe. Depending on perspective, these bounds can stretch out from Austria to Belarus, however, for the purposes of this thesis, the definition of the region is rather strict and is limited to Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. Although the scope of the original research design extended to the entirety of Central and Eastern Europe by virtue of its socialist past, I have made a decision to reduce the scope to these countries only. This decision is not only underpinned by the scope of this work as a bachelor's thesis but also by insufficient literature on squatting in many CEE countries. Furthermore, as a researcher, I would not be able to collect this data myself due to the vast geographic range, financial and linguistic constraints.

Returning to the topic of geographic scope and its definition, I am relying on Ivan Kalmar's (2022) work *White but Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt,* which simplifies it to constitute the 4 Visegrád counties. As an anthropologist, he makes note of employing the terms that the citizens of these countries would use to describe themselves. Moreover, although the horizon of Central Europe is called into question, much like with any arbitrary geographic category, the inclusion of these countries is uncontested (Kalmar 2022).

3.1.1 Research Methods

This thesis is primarily supported by qualitative research. It does not aim to synthesise all occurrences of squatting and measure its political element, but rather to highlight prominent case studies across Central Europe. In terms of selection criteria, cases must be well-documented in existing literature and represent a significant instance of political squatting in the region. This is necessary since the main data collection methods are literature review of academic articles, books and journals on one hand and non-academic secondary research on the other (Cheong et al. 2023). Thus, the analytical inquiry of this thesis is based on secondary literature and is conceptualised as a literature review of the selected case studies (Punch 2014).

The data analysis will proceed in two phases: thematic analysis and comparative analysis. Thematic analysis involves identifying and coding key themes related to the research questions, such as the revival of public space, subversion and destabilisation of public/private dichotomies and commoning practices (Naeem et al. 2023). These codes will then be grouped into broader themes that reflect the political, social and spatial aspects of the squatting cases. In the comparative analysis, these themes will be compared across different case studies to identify patterns, similarities and differences, while also analysing how the unique historical and socio-political contexts of each country influence the nature and outcomes of squatting activities.

By structuring the methodology in this way, the thesis ensures a thorough and systematic approach to the comparative analysis of political squatting in post-socialist Central Europe, contributing to a deeper understanding of how these movements ignite the ideal of commons within the socio-political context of the region.

3.1.2 Study Limitations

This study acknowledges limitations, such as its geographic scope being limited to four countries in Central Europe, which may not fully capture the diversity of squatting movements in the broader post-socialist context as well. Several challenges arose when collecting and accessing comprehensive data for some squatting cases due to legal and logistical constraints. In particular, the analysis of Zelený Dvor was problematic due to a significant research gap of squatting in Slovakia. Furthermore, potential drawbacks of this thesis are in the secondary use of interview materials collected and conducted by other researchers. The risks of this approach lie in potential miscontextualisation of the sources and the absence of a holistic insight into the perceptions of activists in relation to the research questions.

4. Analysis

4.1 Thematic Analysis

The following pages provide an account of analytical findings concerning the selected case studies of prominent instances of political squatting in Central Europe. Thematic analysis centres around identifying prominent themes and ideas in spatial meaning-making of squatters and is based on collected academic and secondary data. It involves a close reading of the sources in regards to the themes of public/private, commons, autonomy and identifies how squatters define and perceive these terms or any other socio-spatial relations that they might bring up in the interviews included in the secondary literature. Thematic analysis is separately conducted in relation to each of the four case studies, each corresponding to the four Visegrád countries.

4.1.1 Czech Republic: Every city needs a Klinika

This section serves as a review of the case study of Autonomous Social Center Klinika (contracted as ASC Klinika) and its thematic analysis. Prior to that, I shall briefly elaborate on the selection of Klinika. This case presented a fruitful area for research as there is a relative abundance of academic literature both in Czech and English. Moreover, Klinika is the only squat that has had positive media coverage due to innovative and strategically open relations with various media alongside extensive use of social media. The greater amount and variety of data put forward the social centre among other documented instances of squatting in the Czech Republic. Considering that this thesis is based on secondary literature, the accessibility and saturation of data are of crucial importance.

The ASC Klinika, situated in the Žižkov district of Prague, serves as a prominent example of political squatting and the creation of urban commons in post-socialist Central Europe. Initiated in November 2014, Klinika was established when a group of activists occupied an abandoned state-owned building that had been vacant for five years (Novák 2020). Their aim was to create a self-managed social centre that operated independently of state funding, grants or corporate sponsorship. Klinika quickly became a vibrant hub of social and cultural activities, including lectures, workshops, concerts and language courses,

provided free of charge or for voluntary contributions. Klinika's mission extended beyond merely offering services; it sought to challenge the neoliberal urban order by promoting values of solidarity, mutual aid and participatory democracy. The centre operated on principles of horizontality and collective decision-making, embodying the concept of prefigurative politics, where the means of organising reflect the desired societal outcomes. This approach not only provided a space for community engagement but also served as a direct critique of the market-driven logic that dominates urban development.

Despite its successes and strong public support, Klinika faced significant legal challenges and repeated eviction attempts by the authorities. The centre's struggle highlighted the tensions between grassroots movements and institutional power, showcasing the potential for re-politicising urban spaces through direct action and community solidarity (Novák 2020). The cumulative experience of Klinika spanning the years from 2014 to 2019 has a potent afterlife in the local community, as it continues to be a significant node of knowledge sharing.

Since the collapse of state socialism, the discourse in the Czech Republic has been dominated by a dichotomy between public and private, with the state often perceived as ineffective and the private sector as efficient (Novák 2020). Sociologist Arnošt Novák (2020) expounds that this dichotomy is a part of post-political governance, which limits both political imagination and practical action. There is no place for the commons in this binary framework, as evidenced by the lack of a commonly used word for "commons" in the Czech language. Klinika's struggle is significant because it sheds light on the ideas and practices of commoning, providing alternatives to this rigid dichotomy and offering new spaces for political engagement. On the level of external communications, Klinika's activists reframed their occupation of the building as a civic initiative rather than squatting. This rhetorical shift helped to garner positive media coverage and public support. They argued that Prague needed spaces free from market logic, where people could engage as citizens rather than consumers. Such spaces are deemed essential for developing participative direct democracy, where social relationships extend beyond narrow individual interests and focus on communal values. Klinika operated based on principles that rejected profit motives, focusing instead on the needs of the community. This approach fostered social relationships based on sharing, cooperation and mutual aid, contrasting sharply with

the competitive, market-driven logic that dominates urban discourse. By creating a space where individuals could see themselves and others according to different social logics of affinity and autonomy, Klinika was able to deconstruct the dichotomy and embark on negotiating alternatives (Novák 2020).

In terms of external tensions and legalisation of the social centre, the negotiation of the meaning of the centre relying on the conventionally accepted categories of public and private is employed strategically. The activists' critique of the state was a strategy to legitimise their actions and challenge the notion that state property should be managed purely for public interest without citizen intervention (Moskvina 2022). They argued that state-owned buildings should serve the public and be subject to citizen input, especially when the state fails to utilise them effectively. Tereza Virtová (2019), a member of the Klinika collective, reiterates how her personal experience of negotiating with the authorities throughout the four years of Klinika's history created the impression that the representatives of the state act upon "a combination of personal ambitions and fear of taking responsibility for their decisions" as opposed to public interest.

Moskvina (2022) notes that the activists' public critique served as a means of legitimation, highlighting the inadequacies of state management and advocating for citizen-led initiatives. This critique of the state was a strategy to gain public support and navigate the legal and political landscape. However, this approach also revealed tensions between the public image of Klinika and its actual practices, leading to discrepancies between how the centre was perceived externally and its internal dynamics. In this way, Klinika becomes a multifunctional node of resistance, that challenges the efficiency of the state and its property management simultaneously legitimising itself in the eyes of state institutions as well as the general public. Meanwhile, on an internal level, it is a necessary communal space for the production and reproduction of the social movement(s). A moment of internal tension that was described by one of the respondents in Yulia Moskvina's (2022) study of the social centre constitutes an internal negotiation of the publicity of Klinika. In the process of the centre's functioning a certain distinction arose based on whether the members of the collective lived in Klinika or not. According to the respondent, those who were housed in Klinika gained social and cultural capital from "this authentic way of living," while those who were at the centre more rarely potentially missed

out on some of the decision making processes (Moskvina 2020, 100). Considering that Klinika simultaneously served as a social centre and a living space created contradictions in terms of the extent of its openness to the public and the internal management. Moreover, on a theoretical level there is a clear parallel between the feminist imperative of "the personal is the political" and "the authentic way of life" that the respondent mentions. Although it allows the activists to politicise their life and prefigure alternative social structures, there is, in principle and in practice, a possibility of alienating those who are not able to fully commit to the politics of act. This can create "hierarchies based on authenticity" (Moskvina 2022, 100). This is reminiscent of Debelle dos Santos'(2020) argument presented in theoretical review, that designating squatting as common disregards the potential internal antagonism that the illegal setting of squatting entails.

Returning to the research questions posed in the methodological chapter, the ASC Klinika constitutes an alternative to institutionally mediated public space in the same way as it constitutes an alternative to capitalism. It is an alternative in a sense that it is not governed by the logic of the market and it is something that activists of the social centre clearly verbalise and emphasise.

In terms of the revival of public space as an ideal, the social centre is nowhere near the all-encompassing expression of public space as it may have been understood in the state socialist era, which contributed to the erosion of public space as an ideal. I contend that Klinika revitalises collectivity and the ethos of solidarity and mutual aid, giving participants a physical space to enact these values. Klinika shaped a new ideal of a public common by virtue of opening their doors to those for whom they are usually closed in the Czech Republic and beyond. It is precisely due to this basis of mutual aid, solidarity and direct democratic principles that Klinika establishes and perpetuates urban commons. As established earlier, this does not negate the possibility of conflict and instability, but rather sets the framework for the operation and aspiration of the autonomous social centre. Another theme that was salient is the subversion of the public/private categories by virtue of combining living space with that of a social centre. Klinika's external communication with the media and authorities stressed the need for an intermediary space free of market logic and directly challenged the legitimacy of state property use, opening up a wider discussion on the "public nature of the state" (Moskvina 2022, 113).

4.1.2 Poland: Rozbrat

Rozbrat, established in the autumn of 1994, is the oldest and most prominent squatted social centre in Central and Eastern Europe. Located in an abandoned paint factory near the centre of Poznań, Poland, Rozbrat has become a hub for alternative culture and political activism. The name “Rozbrat,” which translates to “separation” or “breakup,” symbolises the squatters’ intention to create a space detached from mainstream societal norms and conflicts (Piotrowski 2014, 233-234). The founders, inspired by their travels across Europe, aimed to establish a collective living space in their hometown. Since its inception, Rozbrat has evolved from a simple living arrangement into a community centre (Piotrowski 2014).

Despite the inherent illegality of squatting in Poland, Rozbrat managed to survive due to the unclear ownership status of the property. Initially, the lack of a clear owner allowed the squatters to remain relatively undisturbed by legal challenges. Over the years, Rozbrat expanded its functions beyond housing to include hosting concerts, public lectures, film screenings, theatre performances, exhibitions and a wide range of political activities. The centre now houses a bike shop, an anarchist library, an infoshop and groups like Food Not Bombs and the Polish Anarchist Federation. It also became the base for the Workers’ Initiative, a radical syndicalist trade union. It is thus a node of mobilisation for various leftist groups and their activities (Rozbrat 2017; Piotrowski 2014, 234).

Rozbrat's political activism has been extensive, involving environmental protests, anti-war demonstrations and campaigns against privatisation and gentrification. For example, in 1998, Rozbrat activists protested the construction of a highway through a nature reserve at St. Anne’s Mountain, leading to significant clashes with the police. This marked one of the early major environmental protests involving Rozbrat. The centre was also deeply involved in the alter-globalisation movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s, participating in counter-summits and anti-war protests, which attracted substantial public support and media attention (Piotrowski 2014, 236-237; Polanska and Piotrowski 2016).

In 2009, Rozbrat faced a significant threat of eviction, prompting large-scale demonstrations. These protests, which mobilised a broad coalition of supporters, highlighted Rozbrat's role as a counterpoint to neoliberal urban policies and underscored

its importance in Polish social movements. Despite ongoing legal battles and internal challenges, Rozbrat has maintained its position as a crucial site for political and cultural engagement in Poland (Piotrowski 2014, 239; Rozbrat 2017).

Alongside other squatting initiatives, Rozbrat has formed a significant alliance with the tenants' movements in Poland, enhancing their collective efforts against privatisation, gentrification, housing insecurity and injustice. This is a rather unique occurrence in Central and Eastern Europe considering that squatters have not received much support from wider social movements. This is due to their varying trajectories in the post-1989 era, since a significant number of activists from the social movement milieu gradually transitioned into an NGO-based approach (Piotrowski 2014). This collaboration has been particularly effective in resisting the re-privatisation of communal housing and the aggressive eviction tactics employed by real estate companies. Activists from Rozbrat have joined forces with tenants to organise public protests, initiate media campaigns, and provide legal support to those facing eviction. A kind of diffusion of skills, practices, and knowledge happened between the tenants' movement and that of squatters who were well-versed in self-organising, direct action and in some cases, had connections with the media (Polanska and Piotrowski 2016). To apply the concept of diffusion from social movement studies, the squatters are the so-called innovators, extending their repertoire of action and tactics to tenants who are, in this case, later adopters (Soule 2013, 1). A particular example of that is the logistical help that the squatting activists provided in some cases of eviction, such as barricading buildings and sealing off entrances and, in general, introducing direct action to tenants activism (Polanska and Piotrowski 2016). Another notable aspect is the demographic differences between these two movements; most of the tenants were middle-aged, while most squatters were relatively young people from anarchist circles and/or other leftist groups. Thus, tenants were able to mobilise the immaterial resources stemming from the inter-movement cooperation and solidarity. For squatters, tenants were a way to root their highly non-resonant ideology in a social movement embedded in the civil sector and transform it from within. Squatters radicalised many tenants to view the antagonistic other beyond the individual "Other" and were able to politicise their struggle, simultaneously aligning it with their radical politics against state and municipal government, alongside the overarching neoliberal order they uphold. This

alliance has not only amplified the impact of the tenants' movement but also bolstered Rozbrat's broader social and political objectives, showcasing the transformative power of cooperation between different social movements (Polanska and Piotrowski 2016; Rozbrat 2017).

As a response to a threat of eviction in 2022, Rozbrat has posted a piece in the English language positioning themselves on the map of Poznań and urging everyone to support the centre:

> The liquidation of Rozbrat means loss of a strong weapon in the fight for the city without eviction, exploitation and poverty, which puts welfare of its inhabitants above the interests of developers. It is an attempt to silence the society in its dispute with arrogant officials in the face of progressive commercialization and privatization of public space. THERE IS NO POZNAŃ WITHOUT ROZBRAT (Rozbrat n.d.)!

Hence, the activists at Rozbrat are active agents in the political landscape of Poznań, consistently voicing critical opinions on the city's development. Their activities and publications frequently criticise municipal policies, advocating for a more livable city. They have an extensive support network including academics, artists and other community members. Their primary concerns are rooted in Poznań with a special focus on social housing, urban planning, public transportation and cultural policies. Additionally, they have launched a campaign against gentrification, further highlighting their commitment to addressing urban issues and promoting equitable development (Polanska and Piotrowski 2016; Piotrowski 2014). Based on Rozbrat's self-positionality, I contend that Rozbrat is a centre of subaltern counterpublic(s), where community members collectively form and radicalise the counter discourse. It is also a "flagship" for various organisations that often form a united front in the radical critique and the broader anti-authoritarian struggle. Thus, Rozbrat configures an alternative urban common that allows for the expression of this radical critique. There is also a question of co-optation as the city authorities have flaunted the social centre's cultural activities to the global tourist gaze without acknowledging their original context. In the last year, which marks the third decade of its existence, Rozbrat has acquired a share of its property as a way of security and protection from constant threat of

evictions, trials. Moreover, this acquisition supports their ability to maintain their activities. Financially speaking, Rozbrat has funded the purchase of the property through loans from other initiatives and has now set up a direct fundraiser (Rozbrat n.d.). Thus, after almost thirty years there has been a change in the centre's legal status which may, in principle, affect the socio-spatial relations within the centre. Nevertheless, Rozbrat revives the ideals of public good and commons and that is particularly visible in the commoning of immaterial resources such as protest and direct action tactics with other movements, notably tenants. In terms of the subversion of the public and private distinction, it performs in a similar regard to Klinika and combines the function of a residential space as well as a community centre. Moreover, it subverts these distinctions by continuing to be an active agent in matters that would be otherwise regarded as private, such as evictions of tenants by private companies. Rozbrat has been successful in organising actions aiming at preventing numerous evictions in Poznań. Although the original squatting of the paint factory was not politically motivated, Poznań gradually grew into a highly political counterpublic that effectively challenges and transforms traditional urban dynamics by subverting the public/private dichotomy and fostering communal practices. Through their sustained activism and community engagement, Rozbrat not only creates an alternative to institutionally mediated public spaces but also maintains the cause for a more equitable and livable city.

4.1.3 Hungary: Centrum group

In the very few academic works covering squatting and particularly political squatting in Hungary, there seems to be a consensus on the less vibrant radical activist milieu in comparison to the rest of Central Europe. In his comparative study on squatted social centres in Central Europe, Piotrowski (2011) claims that this can be explained in terms of the specifications of the Hungarian legal system, which penalises property occupation harsher than other countries. Moreover, Agnes Gagyi (2016) emphasises another level of formal politics, shedding light on historically embedded constraints to political squatting since "the coalition of Socialists and Liberals after 1994 explicitly became the locus of neoliberalism, leaving no space for support for alternative leftist projects from above," unlike in the Western counterparts, that often enjoyed external

institutional support (82). Another aspect is of a demographic nature since the movement lacks human resources to occupy buildings and physically resist eviction.

The following pages deal with one of the two most prominent cases of political squatting in post-1989 Hungary, which is the activity of the autonomous group Centrum. From 2004 to 2006, the new anarchist squatter group Centrum occupied several buildings in Budapest's city centre, notably in the historically valuable, yet run-down and neglected seventh district. This group was deeply embedded within the broader alter-globalisation movement (alternative globalisation) that does not reject and negate the significance of global exchange and connections but rather opposes the socio-economic inequalities and violations of human rights rooted in global capital accumulation (Florea, Gagyi, and Jacobsson 2022). Thus operating within the global justice movement (GJM), Centrum critiqued economic globalisation. Critics of the GJM argued that civil society groups, including Centrum, were shaped by the neoliberal context and lacked the tools to produce significant change. The classical left critiqued the movement's horizontal, networked organisation as ineffective in challenging global capitalism's forces. This can be connected to the broader critique of the concept of the public sphere articulated by Nancy Fraser (see section 2.3.3 for an in-depth review). I have already argued that the public sphere is constituted by the status-quo and hence has a low potential of antagonism and change. Despite these criticisms, the values and practices of the movement reemerged in the 2010s, emphasising economic justice and horizontal participative democracy (Gagyi 2016).

According to Gagyi, who has produced an analytical overview of the group's activity, Centrum activists aimed to create autonomous spaces that stood in opposition to the logic of the capitalist market. During their occupations, Centrum transformed buildings into synergetic hubs of anticapitalist sentiment and focusing on a variety of social and cultural activities. These activities were not merely about providing services but were framed as efforts to open autonomous spaces within a highly commercialised urban environment (Gagyi 2016; Squat!Net 2004).

The Pioneer Mall was among the buildings the collective has managed to occupy and this success was articulated in the wider GJM "as the tipping point of the movement ideal" (Gagyi 2016, 84). An anonymous blog entry on Squat!net briefly narrates the

emergence of the squat, providing a glimpse into the swift development of the squat in Budapest. According to the entry, the squat was part of a broader campaign for housing rights, addressing the severe homelessness issue in Budapest, where many buildings remain abandoned. The squatters aimed to create a social and cultural hub, organising events and projects like Food Not Bombs, providing free meals. The public opening on November 7, 2004 and included performances, film screenings, and exhibitions, receiving positive media coverage and community support. Despite initial favourable negotiations with the building's owner, who claimed the building was unsafe, the squatters faced an eviction deadline. They sought legal assistance to challenge the safety claims but anticipated eviction due to the council's delayed response. Nevertheless, the squat's significant media attention helped introduce the concept of squatting to Hungary and although eviction seemed imminent, the experience empowered the squatters. They gained valuable skills in transforming spaces and organising autonomously, laying the groundwork for future occupations (Squat!Net 2004). The Centrum group's activities recognised the importance of collective action and knowledge-sharing within the movement as means of resistance against capitalist power. A member from 2005, interviewed by Gagyi (2016) expressed a similar sentiment that experiences and skills gained from squatting were invaluable for broader activist efforts. In Hungary, where radical activism was minimal, squatting served as an essential educational and experiential platform, a sort of training ground equipping activists with practical knowledge to challenge systemic structures. This synergy and collective learning were deemed crucial for the survival and effectiveness of the movement, beyond this singular occupation. Gagyi (2016) generates a contextual ontology of "the constitution of the political" in this case of squatting is linked to its articulation of political alternatives in the wider scope of GJM. However, the structure of this network has not proved useful in sustaining the squatters' group for extended periods of time. The Centrum collective served as a radical activist node in the network, prefiguring alternative ways of life and once the structural shift no longer provided this role for Centrum to fill, it disintegrated, consumed by internal conflict and unable to orient itself without an overarching framework (Gagyi 2016).

Although Centrum's attempts to establish a lasting culture of political squatting in Budapest were not sustained, their influence persisted culturally, albeit in a sense

appropriation and co-optation. Entrepreneurs from the cultural scene adopted the squatter aesthetic for local pubs and cultural centres, reflecting the lasting impact of Centrum's activities on Budapest's urban landscape. These spaces became popular nightlife spots, indicating a broader integration of Centrum's aesthetic, yet virtually depoliticized markers into the fabric of Budapest (Florea, Gagyi, and Jacobsson 2022).

Let us turn to the research question of how politically motivated squatting constitutes an alternative to state sanctioned public space and revives its ideal as opposed to the ethic of individualism and privatism. Centrum group's occupations attempted to tear the fabric of hyperregulated, neoliberal Budapest open and create an autonomous zone (Kuřík 2015). Centrum's short-lived yet impactful presence in Budapest showcased the potential for politically motivated squatting to challenge traditional urban dynamics, subvert the public/private dichotomy, and foster communal practices. At the very outset of the occupation of the Pioneer Mall, activists opened it to the public, briefly functioning as a social centre and acting outside of capitalist imperative. On an internal level, as the Centrum activist shares, "it is very important to have these synergies, this is the most important thing," meaning that the squats provided a breathing space for members and activists, a place where one could enact their radical politics (Gagyi 2016, 83). Hence, apart from being sites of constant struggle, Centrum squats were also a place of respite, solidarity and learning from the contention they created. Next, I will inquire into the ways the Centrum collective subverts the public/private dichotomy and how they negotiate and establish commoning practices. Centrum's activities turned the occupied buildings into commons where resources and responsibilities were shared collectively. This included not only practical aspects like food distribution and event organisation but also the ideological commitment to horizontal governance and mutual aid. Such practices emphasised collaboration, shared ownership, and the rejection of individual profit motives, providing a practical model for community-driven urban development. In this way, they combined the anti-capitalist sentiment present in the GJM and employed it on a local level to a radical extent to prefigure the alternative they envision. On a level of formal politics, Centrum critiqued the housing crisis and municipal authorities' real estate speculation. However, it would be incorrect to say that they applied commoning practices beyond the fact of the short-lived occupation since no significant alliances were made with those experiencing

housing insecurity. In this way, the Centrum group's critique stayed in the confines of critique and did not spur collective action.

4.1.4 Slovakia: Zelený Dvor

Having discussed instances of political squatting in the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, the final subsection of the secondary research will address squatting in post-socialist Slovakia. By far, Slovak squats have not been covered by academic literature, at least in English. I contend that this is due to the absence of relatively long-lasting squats in the last 20 years, which could serve as a basis for substantial research. Thus, the case of Slovakia presents a methodological problem at hand. Although there have been squatting attempts since 1989, one of the most prominent ones being the Squat Lodná in Bratislava, fulfilling the role of a housing project alongside a cultural centre. However, Lodná disappeared from the autonomous maps of Bratislava after the owner sanctioned the eviction (Amnesty Slovakia 2023). The longest lasting squat was Zelený Dvor in the eastern part of Slovakia in Košice. The data search for this case study did not render fruitful results and culminated in a singular blog entry on the website praha.squat.net that used to provide regular updates regarding squatting activities worldwide up until 2014 in Czech language. The above mentioned blog entry posted in 2008 narrates the chronology and short history of squats in Czech Republic and Slovakia including Zelený Dvor, which was established in July 1994 by six activists from Košice ("Obsaď a Žij!" 2008). They occupied the former Zelený Dvor motel near Košice, aiming to establish an ecological-cultural centre. Despite significant police pressure, the squatters organised concerts and events, and the centre included a bar and an anarcho-autonomous and ecological library. However, the squat became a frequent target of fascist attacks. In April 1995, the building was disconnected from electricity, which could not be restored. The squatters faced another wave of attacks in late 1995, and in January 1996, the building was set on fire by fascists while the squatters were absent, necessitating intervention by firefighters ("Obsaď a Žij!" 2008).

Zelený Dvor was Slovakia's most prominent and active squat, maintaining connections with the anarcho-autonomous scenes in Prague, Brno, and internationally. After the fire, some squatters relocated to the ecological-alternative village of Zaježová

near Pliešovce, where they established a new infoshop. Zaježová has since hosted numerous cultural events, partially fulfilling the original vision of an Autonomous Cultural Center. However, internal disagreements led to the closure of the building housing the infoshop in autumn 2000, with the residents moving out. Beyond Zelený Dvor, Slovakia saw other squat attempts in Trenčín, Čadca, and Žilina, though detailed records are scarce ("Obsaď a Žij!" 2008).

In regards to the meaning-making of squatters, the answers can only be tentative as there are no available statements or interviews made by squatters themselves. Although, the fact of establishing a squat that serves a housing as well as a cultural role blends the boundaries of public and private, whether or not the squatters have intended it so. Moreover, it certainly seems that the squatters came from a milieu of automists, as the blog post refers to them. Thus, it is fair to assume that they attempted to create an alternative space based on the principles of autonomy and self-management that could, in principle, constitute alternative commons. On the other hand, the violent attacks from the far-right allow us to reconstruct the radical politics of Zelený Dvor that challenged the far-right rhetoric through the enactment of leftist prefigurative politics.

Due to the above mentioned limitations and the impossibility of reaching data saturation in the case study of Zelený Dvor, the articulation of research findings is rather incomplete and tentative. Nevertheless, this presents opportunities for further research and a research gap that could, in principle, be covered by social science researchers focused on local autonomous groups, activists, as well as their histories and trajectories.

4.2 Comparative Analysis

This part of the analysis compares the squatting movements in Central Europe, focusing on the Rozbrat squat in Poland, the Autonomous Social Centre Klinika in the Czech Republic, Zelený Dvor in Slovakia and the Centrum squat in Hungary. Despite these nation states' shared socialist past and its echo in the socio-cultural fabric of society, the post-socialist transition is constituted differently across the region, especially in terms of urban politics and spatial disputes. It is conditioned by an amalgamation of factors, including but not limited to local political culture, legal systems and the collective memory of state socialism. These in turn influence the current strategies and tactics of activists in

their negotiation with the state and the general public. As Tim Weldon (2016) illustrates in his comparison between Swedish squatters collective and Klinika collective in Prague, the latter "used a still palpable communist era mistrust of the state to vilify its "deficiencies" in taking care of the building, and gain support for — and eventually a legitimization of — their occupation" (90). This is contrasted with the Swedish squatters, who argue that the processes of privatisation erode the welfare state and its public nature. In this sense, the Swedish activists are proponents of state mediated public space, granted that it is motivated by ideals of community, equal access and commitment to non-commodification of space. While in the Czech case, the disillusionment with the state among the ranks of activists, coupled with the anti-authoritarian sentiment of the new anarchist movement (accounting for the political backbone of many activists), creates a clearly defined need for an alternative space. Whether this space is publicly accessible and constitutes an alternative urban common is a different question that will be analysed in due course in the following pages.

The varying levels of political squatting across Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic can be attributed to different privatisation policies and employing the term from social movement studies political opportunity structures. In terms of privatisation, section 2.2 broadly illustrates the differences in these processes and to summarise, the former countries of Czechoslovakia and Poland restituted the previously nationalised, state-owned real estate to its pre-socialist owners or their descendants. In Poland, this resulted in a broad and rather successful tenants' movement, considering that many tenants were able to retain their place of residence. Meanwhile, in Hungary, restitution was not the case and the privatisation of state housing assets reflected in the increased social and financial value of private property (Gagyi 2016). The next subsection compares the squats Rozbrat and Centrum (in Poland and Hungary, respectively), centering on the possibilities of alliance building.

4.2.1 Alliance Building

Throughout their existence, the Centrum collective's squat and Rozbrat addressed and decried the issues of the housing crisis. In Poland, this took the form of engagement with formal politics. The Wielkopolska Tenants' Association (WSL) founded in 2011, is

not exclusive to tenants, having various activists, including squatters and anarchists, at its core. The association leveraged its legal status to request public information, gather resources and influence media and public opinion. WSL aimed to build alliances and position squatters within civil society rather than as a countercultural opposition. This strategy involved engaging in existing social conflicts, such as housing issues, exacerbating them and framing them within anti-capitalist and anti-gentrification narratives familiar to squatters and anarchists (Polanska and Piotrowski 2016).

While symbolically siding with tenants, Centrum primarily allied with intellectual groups, alter-globalist activists, NGOs, and cultural workers. This coalition reflected a strategic engagement with a diverse set of actors who supported the idea of squats due to their experiences in Western capitals and their opposition to neoliberal urban policies (Gagyi 2016). However, their attempts to establish a culture of political squatting in Budapest were not sustained and were rather short-lived (Gagyi, Florea, Jacobson 2022).

Rozbrat's alliance with the tenants' is a significant illustration of commoning since squatters put in place the mechanisms of knowledge-sharing and equipping tenants with basic skills in direct action. Centrum's activities, on the other hand, were limited to material resource sharing within the framework of internationally established events such as Food Not Bombs. These events were purposely aimed at supporting homeless people and others in need. Similarly to Centrum squat, Rozbrat has forged ties with academics who aim to counterbalance and resist the conservative academic club in Poznań. Overall, unusually for Poland, Rozbrat is "a voice of dissent in the public discourse" in the overwhelmingly conservative public sphere and has had long-lasting alliances with the media (Polanska and Piotrowski 2016, 53).

While Centrum's activities were steeped in what Agnes Gagyi refers to as "total politics," which can be compared to the prefigurative politics enacted by Klinika members, the total politics dissolved without the external framework of GJM. In contrast, Rozbrat is embedded in the critique of municipal politics and maintains a more stable position within the city, directly opposing local policies and engaging with broader social movements.

Much like Rozbrat, Klinika has also made use of the available political opportunities, making its way onto agendas of municipalities in Prague. From the very

start, the collective has strategically made use of the alliance with the representative of the Green Party, who sympathised with the squatters. While Polish tenants and squatters formed the Wielkopolska Tenants' Association - their distinctive body of legal representation centred on their needs and claims, Klinika collective utilised alliances with the political representatives to account for and lobby for their interests on a formal institutional level where the squatters' repertoire of action is inapplicable.

Similarly, the squatters of Zelený Dvor near Košice, Slovakia, demonstrated the ability to build alliances despite numerous attacks from the far-right groups. Their efforts were not isolated; they maintained strong connections with the Prague and Brno anarcho-autonomous scenes and international networks. After the destruction of Zelený Dvor by fascist arsonists, squatters maintained their connections with ecological activists, alongside continuing their activities. Although they sustained their movement despite severe opposition, this alliance did not prove to be long-lasting with the internal tensions marking the end of the collective living and collaboration of squatters with eco-activists.

4.2.2 Autonomy vs. Post-Autonomy: The case of Rozbrat and Klinika

The concept of post-autonomy, as described by Tadzio Müller, reflects a broad shift from self-marginalising autonomous politics to more inclusive and interventionist approaches (Böhmová 2018). Post-autonomous politics focus on engaging with existing social conflicts and building alliances with non-leftist groups, aiming for broader societal impact and less exclusivity. This transition is most evident in Klinika's evolution since the centre asserted itself as a central, publicly engaged entity. Notwithstanding, his shift involves risks, such as the potential dilution of ideological purity and sustainability challenges in an oppressive, hostile system (Böhmová 2018).

Rozbrat has emerged according to the classic autonomist standard of embeddedness in mostly exclusive, peripheral subcultures. Although it has consistently maintained a critical stance toward municipal politics and created diverse alliances, providing a stable node for political activism and community building, Rozbrat retains its subcultural character and predominant composition of its members. Furthermore, in light of the risk of police raids and assaults by right-wing groups, Rozbrat remains more spatially enclosed since the buildings have been reinforced with boarded-up windows and restricted door

access, which are only opened briefly for public events (Polanska and Piotrowski 2016). Thus, Rozbrat entails mostly autonomous characteristics with a notable shift in terms of engagement with tenants, which acts as a gateway into the critique of neoliberal capitalism. This thesis interprets this shift as an attempt of incorporating anti-systemic critique into a systemically characterised public sphere. Through claim-making and critique voiced in various platforms like media and WSL, squatters consolidate their place in public discourse as a distinct counterpublic. According to a previous discussion on counterpublic(s) in section 2.3.3, the co-optation of the counterpublic into the mainstream discourse of the overarching public sphere poses a risk of a power imbalance that in turn hinders equal discourse and subsequent action. However, due to the long-standing cohesion of squatters and anarchists in Poznań, Rozbrat has managed to retain its space and with it the ability to critique albeit occasionally trespassing the grounds of the hostile dominant public sphere.

Klinika, however, represents a more distinct shift towards post-autonomous politics, focusing on broader social engagement and creating alliances with non-leftist groups. Klinika's strategy involved justifying its occupation by emphasising its efficiency and the creation of a "third space" outside market logic. This approach sought to make the space more open to the wider public, thus moving from the periphery of society to its centre and enabling more noticeable interventions in social events (Böhmová 2018).

Due to ASC Klinika's commitment to consistently engage with multilateral issues on local, state-level and international levels constituted a robust counterpublic. Moreover, it is fair to assume that Klinika sustained urban commons by maintaining the accessibility of resources and their mediation outside of market logic. In his ethnographic study of ASC Klinika, Tim Weldon (2023) elaborates on the specifications of the commoning practices, illustrating how the collective operated in the mode of repurposing capitalist by-product into autonomous goods that, by its nature, were beyond individual ownership and functioned according to everyone's needs.

4.2.3 Locality and Temporality

Although this thesis contends that all of the case studies constitute urban commons by virtue of direct renegotiation and production of space, I would like to further

problematise the notion of urban commons in regards to Central European squats. Their existence in a contested, oppressive public domain requires a certain element of enclosure due to potential attacks from the police and other hate groups, it is necessary to ensure the safety of the members. Thus, the issue of enclosure creates constant tension with the idea of squatting as publicly oriented commons. I would like to argue that the urban commons that the squats generate are inherently temporal, not only due to their illegal nature and the encroaching neoliberal attacks but also in terms of the sheer impossibility of open doors, at least in current political climate in the region. Klinika's post-autonomous shift towards a more open and inclusive social centre is the closest to maintaining an independent and autonomous public space that is not undermined by a dominant subcultural, political movement. Openness is a necessary precondition for the efficient functioning of the "third space", however the risks are significant both in terms of the nature of the squat and the well-being of its members. When the autonomous open space designated for supporting, housing and mobilising the counterpublic(s) overwhelms the capacities of activists, it is important to reevaluate its capacities in this struggle. Thus, squatting as urban commons entails a continuous redefinition and shifting of concepts of private and public, playing around with them to fit the needs of the community, (un)intentionally challenging the politics of rigid separation between the two. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the relational position with the squatters in Western Europe that local activists express (Gagyi 2016). Although the need for alternative spaces and commons is as pronounced in Central Europe as elsewhere, the very recent history of squatting in CEE puts it in a peripheral position with its Western counterparts that display accumulated knowledge, extensive resources and institutional support. Many practices spread from this direction and Ludmila Böhmová (2018) delineates Klinika's distinctive shift to a post-autonomous framework from the long-standing autonomous movement in Germany. In the Hungarian case, a Centrum activist expresses regret for the lack of squats in the country, "because it is a shame we don't have a squat in Hungary" (Gagyi 2016, 87). Hence, there is a certain flow of ideas and practices and occasionally a sense of frustration at the absence of opportunities and resources to sustain and occupy spaces.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to gain a better understanding of how political squats in post-socialist Central Europe affect the discourse around public space and employ methods of direct action to establish autonomous spaces devoid of market logic. This thesis has established that political squats often occupy a liminal area between an open, publicly accessible community centre and a more enclosed, often sub-culturally oriented space reserved for those possessing necessary social and cultural capital to enter it. Notwithstanding the degree of openness, the literature review has shown that participants in the studied squats have described their respective spaces as a type of "flagship", a space that connected various nodes of social groups and movements that allowed for exchange of ideas, resources, alliance building and overall strengthening counterpublic repertoire of action.

One of the central questions of this thesis is if political squatting can be considered an alternative to institutionally mediated public space and if it revives the ideals of public space that collapsed with the fall of the communist regime. I contend that, in principle, squats establish an alternative urban commons, however unstable and temporary. These commons are not universal and thus not accessible to an extent that a public space is. This question depends on individual squats and the degree of openness they imply. In this way, the squats establish a very distinctive relation to squatted spaces that cannot be conceived by the concept of public and is captured by urban commons that encompass an aspect of agency over resources. In cultural terms, the ethos of squatting certainly counteracts the spirit of privatism by commoning material and immaterial resources in a way that renders private property obsolete.

The second question in this research relates to how the squatters subvert the public/private dichotomy. The most salient finding to emerge from the analysis is that political squatting blurs the lines of private/public distinction by reclaiming private or state-controlled properties and repurposing them for communal use. This act of occupation generally challenges the neoliberal logic of privatisation and commodification, creating a potential for inclusive spaces. Through the process of commoning, political squatting establishes alternative forms of urban commons that emphasise collective governance,

mutual aid, and sustainable practices. These alternative commons provide a counter-narrative to the dominant neoliberal urban order, highlighting the potential for grassroots movements to destabilise neoliberal urban imagination and reimagine the possibilities of life in terms of solidarity and mutual aid.

Lastly, I would like to highlight possibilities for further research which span from zoomed-in portraits of individual squats in under-researched countries such as Slovakia and Hungary to further comparative analysis potentially extending to all of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe. The study of squatting across the region would provide ample insights into the state of counterpublic(s) and their quest for equitable urban space underpinned by commons.

Bibliography

Bailey, Joe. 2002. ‘From Public to Private: The Development of the Concept of the “Private”’. *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 69 (1): 15–31. https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2002.0012.

Böhmová, Bc Ludmila. 2018. ‘Od autonomie k post-autonomii? Případ Autonomního sociálního centra Klinika’.

Bottero, Wendy. 2005. *Stratification: Social Division and Inequality*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Cheong, He-in, Agnieszka Lyons, Robert Houghton, and Arnab Majumdar. 2023. ‘Secondary Qualitative Research Methodology Using Online Data within the Context of Social Sciences’. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22 (January):160940692311801. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231180160.

Debelle dos Santos, Galvão. 2020. ‘Squatting, Commons and Conflict: A Discussion of Squatting’s Challenges to the Commons’. University of Salento. https://doi.org/10.1285/I20356609V13I3P1338.

Florea, Ioana, Agnes Gagyi, and Kerstin Jacobsson. 2022. *Contemporary Housing Struggles A Structural Field of Contention Approach*. Cham: Springer International Publishing AG.

Fraser, Nancy. 1990. ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’. *Social Text*, no. 25/26, 56. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240.

Gagyi, Ágnes. 2016. 'The Constitution of the "Political" in Squatting.' *Baltic Worlds* 9 (1/2): 80–88.

Gagyi, Agnes, and Ondřej Slačálek, eds. 2022. *The Political Economy of Eastern Europe 30 Years into the 'Transition': New Left Perspectives from the Region*. International Political Economy Series. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78915-2.

Gavison, Ruth. 1992. 'Feminism and the Public/Private Distinction'. *Stanford Law Review* 45 (1): 1. https://doi.org/10.2307/1228984.

Grabkowska, Maja. 2023. *Post-Socialist Cities and the Urban Common Good: Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe*. First Edition. Routledge Contemporary Perspectives on Urban Growth. New York, NY: Routledge.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Harvey, David. 2012. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. New York: Verso.

Hirt, Sonia A. 2012. *Iron Curtains: Gates, Suburbs and Privatization of Space in the Post-Socialist City*. 1st ed. Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118295922.

Jacobsson, Kerstin. 2016. *Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge.

Kalmar, Ivan Davidson. 2022. *White but Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press.

Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. 2019. *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. First Pegasus books hardcover edition. New York ; London: Pegasus Books.

Kuřík, Bohuslav, Yasar Abu Ghosh, Pavel Barša, and Joseph Grim Feinberg. 2015. 'Revolutionary Amoebas: Political Versatility as the Art of Resistance in Contemporary Germany'. Dizertační práce (Ph.D.)–Univerzita Karlova. Fakulta humanitních studií, 2015.

Martínez, Miguel A. 2019. 'European Squatters' Movements and the Right to the City'. In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary European Social Movements*, edited by Cristina Flesher Fominaya and Ramón A. Feenstra, 1st ed., 155–67. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2020. | Series: Routledge international handbooks: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351025188-12.

Martínez, Miguel A., and Dominika V. Polanska. 2020. 'Squatting and Urban Commons: Creating Alternatives to Neoliberalism'. https://doi.org/10.1285/I20356609V13I3P1244.

Marx, Karl. 1976. *Preface and Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. First edition. Peking: Foreign Languages Press.

Marzec, Wiktor. 2020. 'Civil Society and the Public Sphere. Historical Trajectories in Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria'. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 28 (1): 7–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2020.1812941.

Mihaylov, Valentin, ed. 2020. *Spatial Conflicts and Divisions in Post-Socialist Cities*. The Urban Book Series. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-61765-3.

Moskvina, Yuliya. 2022. 'Waking Up from Neoliberal Totality? How We Invented a City in Which Nothing Can Be Created.'Dizertační práce (Ph.D.)–Univerzita Karlova. Fakulta sociálních věd, 2022.

Naeem, Muhammad, Wilson Ozuem, Kerry Howell, and Silvia Ranfagni. 2023. 'A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research'. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22 (January):16094069231205789. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789.

Novák, Arnošt. 2021. 'Every City Needs a Klinika: The Struggle for Autonomy in the Post-Political City'. *Social Movement Studies* 20 (3): 276–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2020.1770070.

Novák, Arnošt, and Bob Kuřík. 2020. 'Rethinking Radical Activism: Heterogeneity and Dynamics of Political Squatting in Prague after 1989'. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 42 (2): 203–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2019.1565820.

"Obsaď a Žij!" 2008. September 20, 2008. https://praha.squat.net/2008/09/20/obsad-a-zij/index.html.

Piotrowski, Grzegorz. 2011. 'Squatted Social Centers in Central and Eastern Europe'.

Polanska, Dominika V., and Grzegorz Piotrowski. 2015. ‘The Transformative Power of Cooperation between Social Movements: Squatting and Tenants’ Movements in Poland’. *City* 19 (2–3): 274–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2015.1015267.

Polanska V., Dominika, and Grzegorz Piotrowski. 2016. ‘Local Differences & the Importance of Cohesion Poland’. *Baltic Worlds* 9 (December):46–56.

Pruijt, Hans. 2013. ‘The Logic of Urban Squatting’. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37 (1): 19–45. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2012.01116.x.

Punch, Keith. 2014. *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches*. Third edition. Los Angeles, California: SAGE.

“Rozbrat Squat.” 2017. November 19, 2017. https://www.rozbrat.org/our-activity/157-rozbrat-squat.

Ryback, Timothy W. 2021. ‘Protest Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Prague, Spring 1968’. In *Global 1968*, 192-. University of Notre Dame Press.

Shulman, Alix Kates, and Honor Moore, eds. 2021. *Women’s Liberation! Feminist Writings That Inspired a Revolution & Still Can*. Library of America, Special Publication. New York: A Library of America.

Soule, Sarah A. 2022. ‘Diffusion and Scale Shift’. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, edited by Donatella Della Porta, Bert Klandermans, Doug McAdam, and David A. Snow, 1st ed., 1–6. Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm430.pub2.

Piotrowski, Grzegorz. 2014. “Squatting in the East: the Rozbrat Squat in Poland,1994–2012” in *The City Is Ours: Squatting and Autonomous Movements in Europe from the 1970s to the Present*, edited by Steen, Bart van der, Ask Katzeff, and Leendert van Hoogenhuijze. Oakland, CA: PM Press.

“[Squat!Net] - New Squat in Budapest.” n.d. https://old.squat.net/en/news/centrum_budapest081104.html.

Sýkora, Ludêk, and Stefan Bouzarovski. 2012. ‘Multiple Transformations’. *Urban Studies* 49 (1): 43–60.

Vasudevan, Alexander. 2015. ‘The Makeshift City: Towards a Global Geography of Squatting’. *Progress in Human Geography* 39 (3): 338–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132514531471.

Virtová, Tereza. 2019. “Podepsala Bych to Znovu.” | A2 – Neklid Na Kulturní Frontě. https://www.advojka.cz/archiv/2019/11/podepsala-bych-to-znovu.

“Význam Squatovania. Ako Si Zobrať Späť Mesto - Amnesty Slovakia.” 2024a. Amnesty Slovakia. May 20, 2024. https://www.amnesty.sk/vyznam-squatovania-ako-si-zobrat-spat-mesto/#:~:text=Zn%C3%A1mej%C5%A1%C3%ADm%20pr%C3%ADkladom%20slovensk%C3%A9ho%20squatovania%20je,Danube%20a%20Slovenskej%20n%C3%A1rodnej%20gal%C3%A9rie.

Weldon, Timothy D. 2023. ‘Being Autonomous: A Squatting Collective’s Quest to Build Community’. https://doi.org/10.7282/T3-9399-6587.

Weldon, Timothy D. 2016. ‘The Nuances of Squatting in “the East”.’ *Baltic Worlds* 9 (1/2): 89–90.