Negotiating politics: Urban Grassroots For and Against the State in Post-Socialist Serbia

By

Emilija Bošković

Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

Supervisors: Claudio Sopranzetti

Daniel Monterescu

Budapest, Hungary

2020

Contents

Abstract: This thesis explores the narratives and practicess of an urban grassroots Initiative in the context of post-socialist Belgrade, Serbia. Looking at a civic Initiative that emerged over a proposed urbanization project of the residential neighborhood of Zvezdara, this research explores how the notions of the local, national and global are experienced as collapsing into one – the State. As the urbanization project it acts as a site of negotiation between the State and its citizens. Initiative has opened up space for civic agency and political engagement. The notion of urban space is explored in relation to political agency of citizens and solidarity-making processes between residents, and general public. Such political agency was deployed in a context of dissolusionment with the realm of party politics. As the public institutions are deemed to be corrupt and uncaring, although excessivelly present, the mobilization of citizens is termed along a normative frame of values, health and ''normalcy''. Moreover, seemingly contradictory claims of hope for and against the state are explored, sheading a light on particularities of affective engagements with not just the contamporary state, but the former socialist state as well. As the state is understood to be uncaring and cruel, a locus of hope and a point of dissapointment, excessively present and absent in the lives of citizens, the practices which arise in relation to its inillegibility should be understood as a way of negotiating political engagement.

Key words: state effect, urban grassroots movement, solidarity, affect, post-socialism, Serbia

Acknowledgments

I am thankful to those who participated in this research, who took out the time of their day-to-day lives to talk to me This thesis wouldn't have been possible without you. I am also very thankful to all of my friends who supported me during this writing process, this thesis wouldn't exist without them. I want to especially thank Višnja Begović, Olga Košarić, Anika Jugović-Spajić, Luka Novaković, Aleksa Janković, Tamara Urošević, Marija Mrkić, Jovana Mitić, Nina Mladenović, as well as the great people I met at CEU who provided emotional support, company as well as meals in these trying times Nourhan Maher, Nukri Tabidze, Jelisaveta Fotić, Marija Cvejić, Minja Bujaković, Dara Šljukić, Sara Petrović, and the Cult of Each Other, an amazing group of friends who made me feel like one of their own upon my return to Budapest.

Thanks is also due to proffesors Claudio Sopranzzeti and Daniel Monterescu, whose teachings got me to interested in the topic of urban space and its relation to civic engagemet.

Introduction

Save! Protect! Keep! Take back! The grammatic form of these words is a commanding one, showing either a wish, an order or a plea... For a long time, in the state of Serbia, citizens call on each other to protect the rivers of their mountains, to save green spaces, to take back a bus line, to not give the riverbank, to save a tree line, dam, park... It's all fun and games until the devil comes! Initiatives are emerging like mushrooms after rain. The faith and protection of the biggest green nature parks is in the hands of bare-handed people, rather that the state. The overall understanding of the importance of nature protection is more importatnt than ever, but real reason for revolts are the dissatisfaction and distrust of the citizens. Faces with decisions and plans that ignore their need because they are subordinated to only one goal – money, citizens come together in search of solutions.[1]

With these words, Milica starts a public letter depicting the struggle over the urban space in her neighborhood in Belgrade, Serbia. In September 2019, a Draft for detailed regulation of the area along Dimitrija Tucovića and Čingrijina streets, in the area from Batutova street to the complex of the Elementary School Marija Bursać was brought up for public insight. The Draft in question depicted a project which aimed to drastically change the residential neighborhood in which 4800 people live. This draft threatened the day-to-day life of the residents, as it aimed to widen the two-way street into a four-lane street, to drastically reduce walking spaces, turn one-third of a park into a parking lot, move the bus turntable, demolish residential buildings and reduce green areas from the existing 22% to 16%. The Draft was not welcomed by the residents, and it provoked intense feelings of fear, anger, and revolt towards public institutions that made decisions in their name. It wasn't long before the residents organized in order to appeal the Draft.

The residents organized themselves into the Civic Organization ''Zvezdara'', with the informal name ''Initiative Save Green Zvezdara'', with the goal to *fight for the preservation of the quality of life of the citizens who live there,* as well as to preserve their *neighborhood, their health and everyday life from noise and smog, and not allow for the green space, children, pets,*

[1] https://www.facebook.com/notes/sa%C4%8Duvajmo-zelenu-zvezdaru/grebo-vas-beton/175457180516516/

and memories to become less important than asphalt and cars.[2] Many of the residents worked day and night in formal and informal ways to have their claims recognized as valid by the Institutions proposing the Draft. Over a few days after the Draft became available for public insight, 2500 residents signed a petition and wrote complaints to the Secretariat for Urbanism and Construction Affairs. The Initiative went on to form a Viber group of around 200 people, where the Draft would further be discussed, criticized, and actions and activities proposed.

The Initiative's most active residents divided themselves into three main teams through which they tackled the Draft in different ways: a team for public disputes, a team for actions and a media team. The team for public disputes grappled with formal aspects of the Draft, contesting it on the basis of legislation, urbanization laws, and overall plans for executing the Draft, in order to appeal it at the public dispute which was scheduled for 8. November 2019. The media team coordinated the presentation of the Initiative in various media outlets – TV interviews, newspaper articles, social media posts etc. The team for actions had as their task to maintain the coherence of the residents over the period of their struggle over space, as well as create events that would be interesting to the wider public. This team organized various get-togethers that included activities such as planting of endangered species of trees, decorating trees during Christmas, making scarecrows etc. The residents were not alone in their battle, acquiring support from various experts in fields such as ecology, traffic, law, urbanism, and art in order to make their claims stronger and as precise as possible.

As the quote from the beginning stated, the Initiative Save Green Zvezdara is not the only one contesting urban changes. Since 2012, the government and the municipality of Belgrade have brought up various urbanization, renewal and beautifying projects, most of which have been met with much discontent from citizens. Civic organizations, initatives and activist groups formed, and citizens protested in the streets in order to contest these projects and stop them from happening. The point of contestion wasn't only the matter of urban space but rather the decision-making processes which allowed for such projects as well as the public institutions which authorized them.

[2] https://www.facebook.com/notes/sa%C4%8Duvajmo-zelenu-zvezdaru/sa%C4%8Duvajmo-zelenu-zvezdaru/129240115138223

As someone who lives in Belgrade, and is constantly exposed to urbanization projects and the everyday inconveniences that arise from them, I have on multiple occasions felt both extremely angry and helpless because of the ways in which urban renewal projects are realized, as projects envisioned by state officials which do not take into consideration how citizens use or imagine the space. In the words of bell hooks (2014), I felt the need to theorize the pain and anger I felt because I could perceive that it is not just a personal emotion, but rather a sentiment shared by most citizens of Belgrade, and indicative of broader power relations. The Initiative ‘‘Save Green Zvezdara’’ served as an entry point to further explore the affective engagement with the State I perceived within myself.

I argue that the question of urban space becomes one of the main channels through which power relations between the State and its citizens are understood and negotiated in the specific context of a post-socialist country going through processes of economic transformation. To understand how the political mobilization of citizens takes place, I argue that first and foremost we must understand what it opposes. Specifically, in this thesis, I am interested in showing the ways in which the Initiative develops its claims and practices in relation to how residents understand the state, that is, in relation to how the state effect emerges, and state structures appear to exist (Mitchell 1991, 94) through claims over urban space. As the state is understood to be simultaneously excessively present and absent in the lives of citizens, it leaves them with intense feelings of neglect and being left on their own, providing the basis for articulating civic engagement in terms of solidarity. As the state is understood to be the main locus of power over significant, tangible social change, citizens look for ways to have their needs met. Moreover, ordinary citizens see themselves as better able to perceive and engage with the problems brought up by the contemporary entrepreneurial state, than its corrupt politicians. The contention of public institutions and its authorities finally acquires a form of hope for the state, however, a redefined state which is collectively imagined by experts and citizens alike, proposing for a reimagination of political life as well as the notion and practices of politics.

Although grappling with a civic Initiative contesting urban space could be approached through the theoretical lens of social movement theory or right to the city approach, my focus in this thesis is primarily to shed a light on affective engagements with the neoliberalizing State. However, to understand the way the Initiative opposes itself, as well as relates to the state, I will

be using the notion of solidarity, adding to the growing body of literature on solidary practices that have long been neglected in social sciences. As I find these engagements to be affectively charged, the theoretical approach I use will be leaning primarily on the theories of the state in order to reconcile post-structuralist, phenomenological, and Marxist schools of thought (Sopranzetti 2018, 10).

The literature on urban grassroots activism has neglected the exploration of the post-socialist space focusing predominantly on NGOs (Jacobsson 2016, 6-8), and often perpetuating the idea of post-socialist societies as having a weak civic society. As Jacobsson argues, such explorations often neglect small-scale organizations, ignoring many relevant form of contentious action while stressing the professionalized NGO sector as the main civil society actor (Jacobsson 2016, 8). This research aims to fill such a void by presenting an analysis of contesting claims provided by a small-scale civic Initiative in order to reflect a more common way in which civic engagement takes place in a post-socialist country. Furthermore, by focusing on the state as a point of reference, I aim to stress the importance of the contextual embeddedness of global processes which shape mobilization and practices of the Initiative.

Contextualization

Urban planning systems from Yugoslavia to Serbia: Framing Belgrade

When framing the idea of transitional cities, Wu argues some of the characteristics of cities are the unavoidable continuities which mark it – not only in terms of the pace in which the built environment is changing (which is deemed to be slower than that of economic reforms), but also due to social relations and cultural practices which operate within and in relation to an urban environment resisting minute and drastic changes (Wu 2003, 1331). Although anthropological research has critiqued the very idea of transition as eurocentric and biased for entailing a linear road that guides socialist countries into a bright capitalist future (Simić 2014, 11), the concept of the transitional city can be useful for locating a city and its governance as historically and contextually embedded. Taking up the approach to post-socialist context as path-dependent or actually existing (Brenner et al 2002) we can understand urban planning, as a practice of reshaping the urban space, as evolving ''in response to and by adjusting to specific contexts and circumstances – political, socio-economic, and governing'', as well as in relation to history which precedes it (Vujošević and Nedović-Budić 2006, 277).

Over the last few years, urban projects in Central Eastern Europe have been many, reshaping and changing cities, as well as providing novel representations of cities themselves (Čamparag 2018). Belgrade, as the capital of the former Yugoslav Republic of Serbia, is one of the many cities from the region that went through such changes. The dismantling of Yugoslavia fabricated not only socio-economic and political changes in the direct sense but produced also novel notions of spatial planning. These changes have most notably been ''the privatization of urban land and structures, the decentralization of government and the relinquishing of the land development process to market forces and a multiplicity of investors and other participants'' (Vujošević and Nedović-Budić 2006, 275). In this chapter, I will shortly present the changes in urban planning systems which impacted Belgrade during the last century, as to provide an overview of the context in which planning today takes place, after which I will aim to show how in the last years urban space has become one of the main political battlegrounds.

Vujošević and Nedović-Bundić make a three-way classification of planning systems[3] in the former Yugoslavia, that is, its successive independent states. Beginning in the mid-1940s, the first planning system – central-command planning reflected the ideological framework of the state. In the realm of planning, the state was central, acting as the main urban land developer through five-year plans, controlling intervention and distribution of production and property. Planning and urbanization were used as a way to pursue economic growth, and in the late 1950s, regional and comprehensive plans became the key instruments for addressing regional inequalities as well as industrial decentralization (Vujošević and Nedović-Bundić 2006, 278). In 1965 the second planning system took place, and it was one of political decentralization and societal self-management planning. Economic liberalization and political decentralization influenced spatial planning, providing planning legislation that would designate local communities as the main authorities for planning and implementation. By the end of the 1980s, that is from 1989., 'democratized' planning became the main way of planning (Vujošević and Nedović-Bundić 2006, 277-280). At first, the main characteristic of such planning was the re-centralization of government and the weakening of the impact local communes had, and not until the late 1990s did the first signs of true capitalist partaking, privatization and marketization appear. ''(N)ew ''ideologies of planning'' surfaced, rendering planning practice a peculiar mix of various ''quasi/pseudo planning'' exercises, imbued with new biases; partisanships dominating the public scene; the notion of public interest almost lost, and non-transparent priorities and interests behind the planning'' (Vujošević and Nedović-Bundić 2006, 280). In Serbia and Montenegro in 2003, *The Planning and Construction Act*[4] was implemented (although not without opposition from planners), having very few restrictions on development rights, allowing for the return to private ownership of denationalized land as well as for quick legalization of illegally constructed buildings (Vujošević and Nedović-Bundić 2006, 281).

According to the Spatial Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2020[5], the current urban land policy has as its aims rational land use and the establishment of an efficient

[3] Per these authors, planning systems are differentiated by ''variations in national legal and constitutional structures and administrative and professional cultures; they include plan-making, urban development and regulatory functions'' (Vujošević and Nedović-Bundić 2006, 277).
[4] Zakon o planiranju i izgradnji (2003) available at http://www.nmw.co.rs/downloads/Zakon_o_planiranju_i_zgradnji.pdf
[5] Strategija prostornog razvoja Republike Srbije 2009-2013-2020 (2009) available at http://www.apps.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/strategije/Strategija_PROSTORNI%20RAZVOJ%20Republike%20Srbije.pdf

system of urban land management, including adequate regulatory mechanisms, institutional restructuring, new ways of financing land development and market-based instruments of urban land policy. Per Zeković et al (2015, 66) in order to achieve these strategic aims, privatization of urban land, partly owned by the state/local municipalities, deciding on ways of managing urban land in the state/public ownership and assessing consequences of various urban land politics and tools on uncontrolled suburban expansion must be dealt with, however, these authors argue that ''a great number of basic, conceptual problems are still not resolved, and their predictable institutionalization will affect the realization of sustainable spatial and urban development and land use policy'' (Zeković et al 2015, 66).

In this thesis, I will be looking at the response that arose against the proposed Draft of a detailed regulation plan for a part of Zvezdara neighborhood. The residential neighborhood in question was a post-Second World war project. The modernist project of Belgrade, which was for the first time conceptualized into a master plan in the 1950s was a local interpretation of a broader urban planning consensus made over the question of optimal organization of space in cities in the modern age, which was created in 1933. during a congress organized by the International Congresses of Modern Architecture. During the congress ''the participants agreed on the importance of separating different urban functions, conceptualized as dwelling, working, leisure and circulation. They also endorsed the separation of different types of traffic and its banishment from residential areas, as well as the provision of collective services to housing districts'' (Le Normand 2014, xiv).

After World War II, Belgrade was rebuilt in relation to the modernist functionalist model, as it was in tune with the Yugoslav regime's plan for economic modernization (Le Normand 2014, xvii). The residential area in question can be thus seen as following such a model that, per Le Normand, followed an imperative of providing the public with conditions for physical and moral health through access to clean air, sunshine, and ample spaces. In order to provide such conditions, ''the traditional city block would be abandoned in favor of apartment buildings freely disposed in green space. Leisure and service, such as nurseries and sporting facilities, would also be embedded in parks'' (Le Normand 2014, xvi).

Belgrade (and) politics in contemporary Serbia

In 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, latter in text SNS) came to power. The same year, as part of the election campaign, Belgrade Waterfront project was presented by the current president and at the time country's Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić[6], as a way of attracting foreign capital and pushing further Serbia's economic growth (Domachowska 2019, 4).

Belgrade Waterfront project is the largest investment up to date which is realized in Belgrade. As a public-private investment, the contract for its implementation was signed by the United Arab Emirates company Eagle Hills and the Serbian government, with the government holding 32% of shares, and Eagle Hills the remaining 68%. The project would be covering 1 850 000 square meters at the Sava riverbank and is expected to be completed over 30 years (Domachowska 2019, 3-4). The intended space was according to the General Urban Plan of Belgrade from 2008., that was to be in power until 2021., intended as a place for public institution buildings and spaces[7]. The project was thus deemed controversial by both the public and multiple institutions, such as the Association of Architects of Serbia[8], on account of multiple reasons. First off, there was no referendum prior to it, although this is required by law; there was no bidding process for the investors; most importantly the Serbian government implemented legislative updates to ensure that the project would be completed. The project was declared of special importance for the economic development of the Republic of Serbia in 2014., and in 2015. legally confirmed as falling under the public interest[9]. The Joint Venture Agreement which set the rules of the private-public partnership between the contractors was signed in 2015., bringing about changes in the existing legislative framework. The document was made available

[6] Aleksandar Vučić who is currently Serbia's president has been a controversial figure. He was politically active in previous rulling parties, working as the Minister of Information during the administration of Slobodan Milošević. As Vučić moved through several parties during his political career, foreign journalists had a hard time positioning his politics due to his past in an far-right party, as well as ''pro-European'' affiliations and concerns about the government being authoritarian (Popović et al, 2017).

[7] https://www.dw.com/sr/beograd-na-vodi-brzo-i-neuko/a-18318581 accessed 16th November 2019

[8] https://aas.org.rs/beograd-na-vodi-niotkuda-i-naopacke/ accessed 15th April 2020

[9] http://www.parlament.gov.rs/ accessed 16th November 2019

only after public pressure and was thought of as having unclear and contradictory elements, which were different to those that circulated before[10] (Čamparag 2018, 188).

Although the project was introduced in 2012., it didn't gain wide public attention for a few years. However, ultimately, it did go through scrutiny by various institutions and the public. After a public debate in 2014., Initiative ''We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own'' stressed that the project is against the law and citizens' interests, starting a series of protests. With catchphrases such as ''Whose city? Our city!'' And ''Belgrade is not small/Belgrade is not Mali[11]'', a series of protests started demanding that the city be given back to its citizens rather than staying in the hands of corrupt politicians. Gaining public recognition and popularity, in 2017. the Initiative first became involved in national elections by supporting the oppositional candidate, Saša Janković (Domachowska 2019, 5-11). Ultimately, with the presidential win of Aleksandar Vučić on the 2nd of April 2017, protests in Belgrade, but also other cities and towns became massive, with explicit political mottos.

The protest in 2017. was termed as Protests Against Dictatorship, and have been argued to have no official organizer or political parties behind them, stemming from a Facebook event. The Initiative ''We won't Let Belgrade D(r)own'' joined the mass demonstrations, creating a continuance with prior protests that initially started as a critique of the ''Belgrade Waterfront'' project and urban politics, that over time became more and more explicitly political. With crowds of tens of thousands of people, these protests are deemed to be the biggest protests in Serbia since 2000. anti-regime demonstrations of the 5th of October that toppled Slobodan Milošević (Popović et al, 2017), and were often publicly compared to anti-regime demonstrations of the 1990s and 2000 (Fridman and Hercigonja 2016). These spontaneous protests integrated the question of urban politics with broader political critique, often using the controversial Belgrade Waterfront project as an example (Wielen 2019, 9) of issues such as corruption, lack of transparency, lack of media freedom etc. The protests ultimately produced clear requests, demanding protection of the rights and statuses of all workers; protection of living standards of the population; fully publicly funded and accessible education and health; fair and free elections; freedom of the media;

[10] Although Eagle-Hills was to, according to initial information, invest 3 billion Euros, the amout was lowered to 150 million (Čamparag 2018, 188).

[11] The former mayor Siniša Mali's surname also means ''small'', so the catchphrase works as a pun claiming that the citizens have more power than the politicians.

departization and decentralization of political power[12]. ‘‘We Won’t Let Belgrade D(r)own’’ ultimately became a candidate in Belgrade elections on the 4th of March 2018.[13], terming their program as stemming from a fight to a just and solidary city and resistance to the political elite’s arrogance[14]. What started as a contention of a specific urban project lead to a broader interrogation of the political state in Serbia, involving questions about democracy, stability, corruption, and economic crisis (Fridman and Hercigonja 2016, 23) and producing new-left socio-political requests (Popović et al, 2017).

Massive resistance didn’t stop the project, and Belgrade Waterfront is emerging, with SNS still in power[15]. Since then, even more renewal and beautifying projects took place in Belgrade, reconstructing mostly the city center, in an attempt of rebranding the city (Čamparag 2018) as a tourist-friendly European capital[16]. These projects all bear with them certain controversy, as they seem to be inconsiderate of the needs and material realities of both the city and its citizens. Although some of the projects are funded from the Serbian budget (mainly the reconstruction projects), a lot of them will be funded both from the budget and by private foreign investments[17]. As reconstruction projects leave most of the city center in construction sites, closing off multiple vital streets and changing routes of public transportation they leave a severe impact on the everyday life of citizens. Moreover, the topic of the city becomes the main form of discussing politics in day-to-day life. Such discourse on politics is mainly directed at critiquing the state and its institutions, which is why the theory I will be leaning on comes from the theoretical framework of the anthropology of the state.

Theoretical approach

[12] https://p-portal.net/marko-dordevic-nezaposlenost-je-najveca-medu-onima-koji-imaju-najvise-potencijalne-politicke-energije-medu-mladima/

[13] Gaining 28.017 votes however, they did not pass the census.

[14] https://nedavimobeograd.rs/program/

[15] The rulling party which is implementing projects is itself very contraversial, with the former Mayor Siniša Mali, who authorized some of the projects, being relieved of his duty on account of plagiarising his doctorate. The legitimacy of SPP’s rulling position is often brought into question as elections are not considered legitimate because of people being coerced into voting for the rulling party. Currently, there is almost no media freedom to voice such concerns, as there is notable interference of the party in what is being represented in the media, and how.

[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdW6ZLH2cik&feature=emb_title accessed 20th May 2020

[17] https://www.beograd.rs/images/file/d56e8b7af5fd868300db7b1115b156d3_6392041228.pdf accessed 16th November 2019.

State effect and affective states

In the following pages, I will shortly sketch how anthropology engaged with the notion of the state, as to provide an overview of a theoretical framework that allows for analysis of the state as experienced by its citizens, as acting as a social subject in everyday life.

Political anthropology, as a specialized field within anthropological studies, did not appear in this form until the 1940s. The book that is deemed to have brought about modern political anthropology is the famous African Political Systems, edited by Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Prichard (Lewellen 2003, 1-7). With it, the very beginning of the anthropological study of the state was laid down, through Radcliffe-Brown's famous preface. In this Introduction, Redcliffe-Brwon rejected the state as a real phenomenon or an empirical entity. Deeming the state as no more than philosophical fiction, the author argued that, in reality, the state can empirically only be recognized as an assembly of people connected through a complex system of relations (Radcliffe-Brown 1950 per Simić 2017, 16-17). Almost forty years after, the author Philip Abrams (1988, 58) will revisit the question of the state, concluding that although the state is not a material phenomenon it is a phenomenon that can be analytically approached.

Abrams argues that a state is not a rounded, material entity, but that rather that it should be understood in its dual nature, existing as a state-system and a state-idea. While state-system relates to tangible everyday practices and the institutional structure of a state, acting as a dominant unit, the state-idea acts as a reification of such a system of power, of an illusion of a state as a coherent system existing outside of society (Abrams 1988, 58-69). The state so becomes a structural effect of political practice – as the construct becomes reified it detaches itself from practice and becomes a false expression (Abrams 1988, 82).

Timothy Mitchell extended this notion, deeming that the state-system and state-idea are actually two sides of the same coin (Mitchell 2006 per Simić 2017, 19-20). Namely, Mitchell proposes that, while the state appears as a system of regulations, plans, programs, and frameworks, therefore, as something that could be described as a structure (Mitchell 1989, 18) such a structure is a metaphysical effect itself, consisting only of specific social practices. Structure is so understood as ‘‘the (very powerful) appearance certain kinds of practical

arrangement take on, when their practical aspect is made to disappear from view and they come to appear as something fixed, abstract and nonmaterial'' (Mitchell 1989, 23). Arguing that structures are effects, and not a ''thing'' (Mitchell 1989, 23), Mitchell proposes they should be analytically explored as a discursive effect (Mitchell 1898, 18). To approach the state through such a lens means to explore the binary form the political and social reality obtain when understood as standing apart from one another (Mitchell 1991, 94). Mitchell's approach is especially relevant for my analysis as it allows for an access point to studying the state as it emerges in the everyday life of citizens. To perceive the state as a discursive effect, rather than a bulk of institutions means to grapple with both the understanding of structures as well as ways of contesting them. However, as will be evident in the analytical chapters, my informants engaged with the state through much more affective relations, which is why I think to approach the state as a discursive effect only doesn't take into consideration reality as actually experienced.

Some authors noticed that what often escapes notice in studies of the state is the world of the affective, ''subtly excluded as if somehow untouched by the intimacies of state power'' (Linke 2006, 206). In social sciences such as anthropology and sociology, the notions of affect and emotion had their own histories, at times used differently, at times synonymously (Barrios 2017, 5). Most often, the notion of affect is used as a way to overcome the individualizing and psychologizing nature that is ascribed to the concept of emotions, and consequently, to allow for an analysis of the ways in which feelings are created in relation to the world we inhabit (Pelkmans 2003). While emotions are understood as relating to the subjective experience of the individual, affect is conceptualized as being intersubjective - shared, and as such as able to illuminate the domain of the emotional that arises before, or beyond, the very narration of feelings (Laszckowski and Reeves 2015, 4-5). This domain represents a space of productive encounters of subjectivity, language, aesthetics, and materiality of state practices, through which "the state acquires its peculiarities that are felt in the womb" (Laszckowski and Reeves 2015, 5).

In this manner, the anthropologist Begona Aretxaga (2003) explores the state as a social subject in everyday life. Aretxaga argues that the state does not exist without its subjective component which connects it with the dynamics of people and movements. To consider the subjectivity of the state according to her means to consider ''bodily arousals and sensuality, powerful identifications, and unconscious desires of state officials; performances and public

representations of statehood; discourses, narratives, and fantasies that are created around the idea of the state '' (Aretxaga 2003, 395). The author goes beyond Mitchell's approach to the state as a discursive effect and emphasizes the affective and the bodily – ''the state as a phenomenological reality arises through discourses and practices of power, created in local, everyday encounters, as well as through public discourses, mourning and celebration rituals, and encounters with bureaucracies, monuments, spatial organization, etc. '' (Aretxaga 2003, 398). As will be shown in the analysis, my informants would often talk about various feelings that emerged for them in relation to the state, feelings which not only took place when interacting with public institutions but rather inspired their various ways of interacting with them and opposing them. A term which thus becomes relevant is one proposed by Uli Linke (2006) who argues that that the emotional possesses creative power, an ''embodied agency'' (Linke 2006, 207), and suggests an analytical focus that would look at the ways in which states are invested in creating a sensory and bodily experience through emotional structures (Linke 2006, 206-207). Spaces of affective responses, the author suggests, should be viewed as contact zones in which state intrigues and embodied subjects meet, and within which political subjectivities are created (Linke 2006). Such affective responses, however, do not happen in a vacuum, rather they are always in relation to contexts in which they emerge.

Schwenkel (2013, 257) proposes that, when thinking about the state engineering of affect in relation to (re)constructing of urban spaces, a fruitful approach can be a focus on post-socialist affectivity, which recognizes ''the present as fundamentally intertwined with and even dependent on sensitivities generated in the past'', as well as on the lingering feelings and yearnings of the socialist period that shape urban subjectivities today. While noting ''the regulation and management of sentiment as central to the exercise of statecraft'' (Schwenkel 2013: 256), the author shows how affective communities and solidarities accept, refuse and negotiate urban transformations and meanings attached to them.

Solidarity in a post-socialist space: Between affect and materiality

The notion of solidarity has since it was first introduced to social theory by August Comte, been related to the understanding of the nation-state. The author argued that solidarity

originates from the inter-dependence of individuals upon one another due to the division of labor. As labor division increases, Comte stressed, individuals in society are directed towards each other for cooperation. As people grow closer, solidarity becomes ''the consciousness of extreme complexity and dependence within industrial society'' (Mertz 1999, 194). Comt argued that it is the great task of the national state to ensure such social cohesion, in the light of constant hindrance that is individualism, which brings about the disintegration of society (Mertz 1999, 194). The most famous treatment of the term in classic sociology, however, probably comes from the pen of Emile Durkheim, who differentiated mechanic and organic solidarity. While mechanic solidarity is understood as being based on the similarity of members and the dominance of collective consciousness over individuality, organic solidarity is deemed dependant on the interdependence of different individuals and the social division of labor (Vasiljević 2019). For Durkheim, the development of solidarity as consciously adopted ''is the moral recognition of a mutual dependency between the individuals within a society involving an extreme division of labor'' (Metz 1999, 196).

Analysis of the notion of solidarity has been for a long time neglected in the social sciences, however, in the last several years the concept is finding its way back into scholarly literature mostly due to economic and refugee crises that provoked questions about communal bonds, mutual aid, and solidary practices as substitutes for vanishing welfare institutions. In the context of post-socialist Serbia, the exploration of solidarity becomes an important aspect of articulating claims of various social movements contesting the state's practices. Although definitions of solidarity are many, some defining features of the notion can be found across them. Both theoretical and historical accounts of solidarity have always been understood in relation to the political community as well as a sense of belonging, shared fate, and collective identity. Contemporary ethnographies position solidarity within the realm of politics, and often in relation to crises (Habermas 2014, Rakopoulos 2016, Cabot 2016), with Cabot (2016) even terming it as ''the other side of crisis''. As crises emerge as a result of the processes of neoliberal capitalism, people are inclined to create new forms of social organizing and gathering. (Cabot 2016). However, as will be explored, solidarity doesn't only come in place of welfare institutions but rather goes past them to propose different forms of political engagement. In this sense, Rakupoulos' notion of solidarity as a bridge-concept, as well as Jelena Vasiljević's notion of solidarity in relation to citizenship regimes become especially important.

Rakopoulos (2016) explores solidarity as a bridge-concept, one that can bridge ‘‘diverse modes of practice, forms of sociality and mechanisms of envisioning future prospects for people’s lives’’ (Rakopoulos 2016, 142), linking people’s actions and understanding of selfhood within a broader discussion of crisis. Rakopoulos wishes to move away from the notion of solidarity as just filling in the gaps left by the collapse of the welfare state, as well as more than just an automated reaction to hardships. ‘‘In the crisis’s unsettling configurations, temporary bridges are built over rising gaps between state and society, as services collapse; seemingly firm, though perhaps temporary, modalities of sociality come to the fore; and bond structures based on ‘traditional’ idioms are both resuscitated and reconfigured.’’ (Rakopoulos 2016) Rakopoulos thus stresses that solidarity is deeply contextual, interacting with or reconfiguring longstanding social ties, frameworks of belonging and institutional venues, producing solidarity practices that are specific to a particular crisis within a specific sociocultural history.

Jelena Vasiljević links solidarity with citizenship and citizenship regimes. She argues that citizenship and solidarity are intertwined in a complex manner, where citizenship presents formal components such as rights, duties, and membership criteria, and solidarity acts as a social glue for the former. Apropos, legal categories such as equality, justice and membership are not just that, since they act as subjective experiences, as well as effects of objective social relations that are not reflected in the formal-legal language of citizenship; they are so discursively produced and maintained. However, to stress the changing discursive and ideological underpinning of citizenship regimes, the notion of citizenship agenda, put forward by de Koning,Jaffe and Koster is used: ‘‘We define citizenship agendas as normative framings of citizenship that prescribe what norms, values, and behavior are appropriate for those claiming membership of a political community. These agendas are concerned with defining the meaning of membership in explicitly normative ways that go beyond conventional, legal-formal citizenship status. Citizenship agendas prescribe relations between people and larger structures of rule and belonging, which are often but not exclusively nation-states.’’ (de Koning, Jaffe, and Koster 2015: 121 per Vasiljević 2019). Vasiljević approaches the history of Ex-Yugoslav countries as the history of different citizenship agendas legitimized and discursively maintained by specific solidarity reasoning, that is, the specific answers that arise to questions with whom should we be solidary and why, within a political community (Vasiljević 2019). Solidarity thus obtains a role as a rhetorical tool that can maintain and mobilize support for a concrete citizenship agenda, however, as one that can also

serve to mobilize and legitimize counter-narratives that challenge these dominant agendas and assert a different kind of solidarity reasoning (Vasiljević 2019).

For exploring solidarity in the case of Initiative Save Green Zvezdara, where solidarity is forged in and over the question of physical space, Muehlbach's work on a deindustrialized, working-class town in Northern Italy seeking heritage status becomes relevant for understanding the relationship of solidarity and physical space. Muehlbach explores how material remains of an ''industrial lifeworld'' become grounds for an ethical heritage, that is, for the ethics of solidarity. Muehlbach explores this affective dimension of solidarity as more than just a sentiment or an ethical commitment, but rather as being grounded in materiality (Muehlbach 2017). Invoking Marxist authors, Muehlbach emphasizes materiality and material forms as mediators of solidarity and social relations. ''Working with a materialist conception of solidarity thus means accounting for bodies and embodiment, rhythm and refrain, as well as for the built environment and infrastructure that allow for the generation of proximities, coordination, and likeness across difference. It means thinking of solidarity as a particular assembly of bodies in time and space and of these bodies and their movement together as generative of political feeling and action'' (Muehlebach 2017, 100).

Methodology

The intended methodological approach to this study included a dual approach. As I wished to explore the affective reasoning of the state, I planned to integrate a participatory approach with semi-structured interviews. Guided by examples such as the ethnography of Stef Jansen (Jansen 2009), who was interested in the affective aspect of bureaucratic processes, I wished to explore narratives about the state rather than to follow the already established approach of an analysis of the sovereign's perspective (Jansen 2009, 816). However, focusing on the affective dimension of such narratives during the design of my research I needed to keep in mind that the attempt to ethnographically capture the affective is similar to ‘‘chasing tiny firefly intensities that flicker faintly in the night, registering those resonances that vibrate, subtle to seismic, under the flat wash of broad daylight, dramatizing (indeed, for the unconvinced, *over*-dramatizing) what so often passes beneath mention’’ (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, in Lasckowski and Reeves 2015: 6).

The initial research design implied that I was to spend a month interacting with people active in the Initiative in question. This time was meant to be spent participating in their daily activities, helping with organization of activities as well as conducting interviews. Moreover, since the Initiative’s task is to protect a part of their neighborhood, including the very important park over which the Initiative was formed, I was keen on conducting interviews in this very park. Following Sherry Turkle’s approach to evocative objects, that is ‘‘objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought’’ (Turkle 2007, 5), my plan was to allow for the park in question to act in an evocative manner, inspiring conversations through a life of its own.

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the lives of all in multiple ways, this plan became unattainable. This swift change in daily experiences of both me and my informants left its mark on the previous research design. Not only was I unable to visit the site and talk to people face to face, but my presumed access to all Initiative’s members was in question since many people left the city and self-isolated.

In order to execute narrative analysis in these changing circumstances, the methods of obtaining interviews had to be rethought. In the months of April and May, I conducted interviews

with five members of the core group of the Initiative, and one interview with a person who supported the Initiative and took part in creating the Initiative's anthem, as an associate member. The interviews with core members were conducted over the phone. The sixth interview can be deemed asynchronous since it was obtained through audio messaging on the Whatsapp application. The method of asynchronous interviewing was used in this case as it eliminates the problem of time-zones which was present since the interviewee was in North America at the time. Asynchronous interviewing, although disenabling exchange in real-time allows the informant and interviewer to consider answers and reference supporting materials, allowing for ''thoughtful exchanges in which both interviewer and respondent have opportunities to consider, clarify and expand their meaning'' (Lupton 2020, 9).

Most of my interviewees were between the age of 25 and 33, presenting, in the words of one of the informants, the young and most active part of the Initiative. The sixth person is 56. All of the informants are employed in their respective fields. The conversations we had revolved around the topics of the Initiative, the neighborhood, the city and the state. The goal of these interviews was to see how they understand the Initiative and its practices in the context of contemporary Serbia.

Since the Initiative's usual activities were abruptly stopped too, due to the COVID-19 crisis, online content became their main form of promoting the Initiative's activities, and of also ''doing'' activism. Online content of the Initiative's social media became ever more important for this research. This content served not only as preliminary fieldwork, but online interviews, as well as the appearance of members in a podcast, were used as sources in their own right. Online content, especially online interviews, as ''cultural artifacts created outside of a research context (…) carry a sort of naturalistic quality that lends credibility while also demanding careful contextualization – who produced, for what audience, at what time, etc.?'' (Lupton 2020, 27). In this research, three interviews in the form of videos were used, and a podcast episode. Two of these were made by the Initiative, with its members talking about the Initiative and it's activities and were posted in November and December of the previous year when the Initiative was most active. The third interview was with a member of the Initiative, however, it was conducted by a Belgrade collective The Ministry of Space (Ministarstvo Prostora), which monitors urban development of Belgrade and other Serbian cities, and was posted online in March 2020. A

podcast in which two members appeared as guests was also used. The podcast named Zvezdarology (Zvezdarologija) was posted on Radio Serbona's YouTube page in the beginning of February 2020. Content in the form of photographs, the Initiative's anthem as well as illustrations and promoting material were considered as having their own communicative aspects, through which a group expresses their system of values. All of the content analyzed and considered is publicly available online without restrictions.

The narrative analysis I use in this research is an interdisciplinary approach of literary theory, linguistics, sociology, anthropology and other humanities. Narratives here are not understood as ''stable and immutable formations, nor do I consider them to be the sole and privileged source for examining human experience, but a good window into how our informants create meanings related to particular social phenomena'' (Jugović-Spajić 2014, 3).

What's in a place: Urban space as a place of valuable engagement

In September 2019. a piece of information started circling around the Zvezdara neighborhood that Poljanče, a green surface encompassed by residential buildings was to be turned into a parking lot. Neighbors were spreading this information amongst themselves, sharing their thoughts about the Draft in informal gatherings, or even at instances such as tenant meetings. Some printed out the information with the link to the document and placed it on every building entrance. During the following days, the word spread. In order to appeal the Draft, residents needed to collect a number of signatures, and for this reason, they organized what would be the Initiative's first meeting on Poljanče. The Initiative started from a collective endeavor to save the space in question, as Smilja said: *Everything started with Poljanče.* This space simultaneously played a part in both mobilizing residents and framing their actions.

Poljanče was for its residents always an important place, acting as a locus of neighborhood life. For many, the proximity of the park and the woods was the reason for moving to the neighborhood. Anabela pointed out: *We have biodiversity, we have 53 species of different plants, there are thirty of them in the botanical garden. Imagine! We have a small botanical garden. Twenty-three species of birds we have, those birds will no longer have a place to land. Where to land, on trucks? Life will be completely changed*. The life she referred to was not only the environmental life but the communal life, as well as the lifestyle these spaces, allow for. Anabela continued: *We self-organized to defend our Poljanče, the famous Poljanče that is a green surface that is a mini botanical garden. We have Pančić's spruce there and there is a kindergarten nearby, our children play, not on those plastic seesaws, on those devices surrounded by those fences, like in prisons. Here, the children are free.*

Attachment to place can be understood to stem from different factors, such as biological or environmental, however, origins of such attachment can be interrelated (Low et al 1992). This attachment to place however is not only an attachment to a physical space but rather the ‘‘affective attachments to ideas, people, psychological states, past experiences and culture is crucial. And it is through the vehicle of particular environmental settings that these individual, group and cultural processes are manifested. The place may, therefore, be a medium or milieu which embeds and is a repository of a variety of life experiences, is central to those experiences,

and is inseparable from them'' (Low et al 1992, 10). As residents stressed the importance of Poljanče, they often circled around ideas of freedom, especially in relation to children and childhood, as well as communal bonds amongst residents.

Remembering her childhood, Vanja called it fairy-tale like, due to the freedom the park allowed both her and her parents. She would play and run without direct parental supervision, as she was overlooked by her parents through their building windows, and could always ask neighbors in the park for anything she needed: *We were very free. The crew from the park was always strong, and it stayed such. My parents became friends with people from the park, and I was friends with them too. My best friend and I met there, my parents employed people they met in the park. There definitely was, and still is a community in these four, five streets that circle Poljanče. Poljanče is, without a doubt the most important place in this part of Zvezdara.* The urban space allows for people to ''encounter each other within and through urban space; the urban confers the reality of the encounter, of the political encounter and of the possibility for more encounters'' (Merrifield 2012, 271), providing a space which transgresses the divide of the public and private, interweaving it with the everyday life (Jacobsson 2020, 134). Spaces such as Poljanče, which can per Jacobsson (et al 2020) be understood as common places are ''locations with common meaning where shared concerns are discussed and identities are shaped, they thus provide a basis for collective agency'' (Jacobsson et al 2020, 134).

Jacobsson (et al 2020) argues that, especially in contexts where state socialism impacted social ties by focusing on the more atomized level, everyday encounters often become a source of mobilization, connecting day-to-day life and political action. ''Engaging in activism in one's closest environment—whether this is an apartment building, nearby park, or street—may trigger the process by which ordinary people without previous experience of activism begin to see themselves as active citizens who not only have rights but can also make claims and deserve to be heard'' (Jacobsson et al 2020, 135). The Initiative formed itself in order to *refuse the plan for detailed regulation and include all of us in the process of its reworking.* In this process, already existing ties between residents became opaque, and new were forged. The right to have a say in decision-making over space was thus not framed as an individual, but a collective right, ''since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization'' (Harvey 2012, 4).

Already existing communality, or an idea of it, becomes a basis for solidarity to emerge. By solidarity, I refer to a form of political engagement, a practice from below that is ‘‘constructed based on ongoing embodied interactions in order to mutually come up with solutions to practical issues and commonly identified needs’’ (Arampatzi 2161). In the following chapters, I will explore how the Initiative negotiates the notions of the state and of the political in their struggle over space, however, here, I am concerned with how the conditions for such a struggle came to be. One of the main conditions, I argue is the perceived communality that emerged on Poljanče, which paved the way for solidary practices. As a form of political engagement, solidarity-making processes should be understood as emerging in opposition to something – in this case, a perceived disinterested view from above. As in informant states: *Those who do this don't see us, and I can't believe it. We are becoming invisible. (…) This city is the city of us all, and not only state administration.*

The 'us' in question, however, does not only imply the residents who are directly *endangered (ugroženi)* by the draft of the plan for detailed regulation. Although solidarity is forged in the space of Poljanče, it also acts across it, bridging the imagined boundaries of the community and connecting it with various other civil initiatives dealing with similar problems, as well as with the broader imagined community of citizens of Belgrade, the residents of Serbia, and even further, a global community: *All these global processes are happening, but the biggest ones are happening on the local level, you can see politics acting locally.* As the local becomes an expression of more global economic processes, solidarity becomes a way to diagnose the problems left about by the perceived increasingly disinterested state, which is brought about by the process of neoliberalization.

As postsocialist states everywhere going through processes of economic transformation and neoliberalization tend to create landscapes of ‘‘successful’’ cities and use urban space to demonstrate the success of their transition to capitalism (Smith 2007, 205), the urbanization project, implemented by the coalition of local and national level, is deemed by the residents to follow global trends. The trends at hand are those of commodifying the space and interpreting it as property in the economic sense of the term. Such labeling of space is one that provokes a contrasting claim which the residents make through their actions and narratives, stressing rather the use-value of space in comparison to its exchange value (Miller and Nichols 2013). As they

express the value of social bonds and experiences formed in Poljanče, the residents provide a critique of neoliberal transformations that are understood as trying to put a price to all spheres of life. On the contrary, the residents stress that their personal experiences and bonds are too valuable to be commodified, providing a critique of the dominant order. Not only do they perceive that global processes shape their immediate reality through the urban space, but also stress that these global processes should and can be contested through the nurturing of opposing values that become symbolized through the notion of space: *The point is that there are other ways except for neoliberal approach to thinking and people and flats and trees and parking spots, and everything, even malls. I will not live in such a place, I won't and I will do anything in my capacity for this not to happen. We don't want a neoliberal investor neighborhood. We don't want that kind of neighborhood. We want a neighborhood with trees and that's it (Anabela).* Values such as freedom, solidarity and caring relations became a basis for the group to claim their right over space.

Space not only provided the context and the object of struggle, but it also impacted the ways in which activities of the Initiative were framed and agency was formulated. The Initiative, as mentioned previously was split into three teams. While two of them, the public dispute team and the media team were understood as working on a more formal, institutional level, the third team, the team for actions was conceived as an *informal way to gather a larger group of people and inform citizens affected by the move*. The activities the residents organized *had as their goal to, through different actions mobilize and hold up the coherence of the group (Anita),* as well as to provide interesting content which would be attractive to media outlets, providing a way to inform the broader public on the work of the Initiative. Such strategies mainly took place in Poljanče, and included activities such as the planting of endangered species of trees, decorating trees during Christmas, making scarecrows which were taped to trees etc. and should be understood as an endeavor of residents to take part in the production of space, and through it to reappropriate it and claim it as their own. In their endeavor, residents aim to become legible to each other, both in the sense of becoming a coherent solidary group, as well as creating solidary relations with the broader public.

Talking about the activities the Initiative did, Bibi focused on the process of making scarecrows, saying: *On our Poljanče, we organized socializing (druženje), and children made*

scarecrows. Of course, we helped, the big children, and our small children made scarecrows to scare off those scary people who want to endanger our green Zvezdara. By using the space and focusing on it as a space of interactions rather than as a space of economic investment, the Initiative shows the legitimacy of their claims, stressing its already existing purpose and solidarity of its inhabitants. Furthermore, as space is not only important for its function but in itself, feelings of attachment to place as well as of loss (or fear of loss) should be understood to act as a mover of social action as well as a fundamental dimension of human experience as ‘‘inequity, vulnerability and recovery are conditions that are first and foremost *felt*’’ (Barrios 2017, 10). My claim that strategies of practice and narrative employed by Initiative's members, and which will be explored in the following chapters shouldn’t be understood only as a means to an end, but rather as a process of interacting with broader social structures and responding to their hegemony. In this case, the broader social structures often seemingly collapse into one – the state.

The present corruption and the past State

Practices of urban renewal and opposing claims for the preservation of space require grappling with understanding and attaching worth and value to places from both of the proposed worldviews. Through the perceived institutional assessment of what urban structures are worth preserving, as well as which are architecturally, historically, and culturally worthless, both the past and present are evoked (Schwenkel 2013). Space itself turns into a ‘‘terrain of resistance’’ (Jansen 2001, 38) in a two-fold manner, providing the literal space where problems are conceptualized and activities take place, as well as a representational space through which events are interpreted. Moreover, modes of conducting urbanism act as a contact zone between the citizens and the perceived state – in both the imaginary of past, present, and future. As the state acts as a social subject in everyday life, it’s underlying ideologies and logic are constructed, as well as ways of opposing them.

The plan for detailed regulation caught the residents by surprise. Finding out that their neighborhood is supposed to go through a massive change left them feeling angry and scared. The proposed draft for detailed regulation acted as a mediator between the perceived state and its citizens, not only allowing for administrative control but simultaneously shaping practices, objects, subjects, and even institutions (Hull 2012, 253). As a space of productive encounters of subjectivity, language and materiality of state practices, document production produces mediators through which ‘‘the state acquires its characteristics that can be felt in the womb’’ (Laszckowski and Reeves 2015, 5).

The draft itself seemed incomprehensible not only for its specialized language but rather as a proposition in itself. To the residents, the plan didn’t make sense in relation to how up to that point life has evolved in the neighborhood. Smilja states: *They have these plans, and we don’t really know what is behind them. (...) It is really skimble-skamble (bezveze), it makes no sense nor does it relate to anything in the slightest matter.* Although the plan was deemed proposterous to a certain extent, many people noted there are actual problems with certain spaces and the traffic that need to be resolved, however, not in the way they have been intended to. The plan as such – the way it used and changed space wasn’t welcome, but even more importantly, the life of the draft itself reflected to the residents the shortcomings of the public institutions and of their

relationship with them. In the following chapter, I will refer to various public institutions the residents encountered over the months as the State, since when they talked about these institutions, the residents used the terms the state interchangeably with terms such as the city and the municipality, implying a regime ''that includes all people in positions of authority – from the lowest bureaucrats to the national government – who are involved in governing and therefore have more or less bureaucratic power that translates into the disposition of resources'' (Kojanić 2017, 50).

The draft was understood to be a product of a thieving venture of the public institutions. As people would give their own interpretations of the reasons for this urbanization project to be proposed, such as the necessity for better traffic connections in order to make the city center more tourist-friendly or gentrification, they stressed reasons that excluded them from the caring realm of the state. The permeating feeling of neglect created what Jansen (2015) terms an elusive state effect. Although the state administration was encountered constantly during the process of disputing the proposed Draft, and opaquely present through the fear that lives of residents will be forever changed for the worse, the decision-making institutions seemed at the same time hard to grasp, dispersing into one another, making ''the state seem simultaneously excessively present and absent'' (Jansen 2015, 144), with ''incompetent, cynical and thieving politicians as taking advantage of this institutional dispersion'' (Jansen 2015, 145).

Another general feeling that permeated various narratives was that *no one knows what is behind these plans.* Hence, the state was often implicitly or explicitly criticized by residents ''as a backdrop against which corrupt practices took place'' (Kojanić 2017, 50), stressing a sense of alienation from the state as a ''nexus that enables some people to economically advance to the detriment of others'' (Kojanić 2017, 50), provoking intense feelings of neglect: *Half of Zvezdara will be destroyed, which means that we are directly endangered [...] Our city, which is the investor, doesn't care about our lives. The car, the road, and some investment are more important to them. Our lives mean nothing to them.*

Not only were the public institutions seen as collapsing into one, but residents found it hard to distinguish between the State and market relations. In this manner, a resident states: *This beauty, this greenery someone wants to destroy, and who is that someone? An investor. And who is this investor? Well, the city of Belgrade.* Such a perception of a unified entity can be

understood in relation to Mazzucato's (2013) notion of an entrepreneurial State. Namely, in her endeavor to debunk the myth of a separate private and public sector, Mazzucato argues that, contrary to the popular understanding of the private sector as an initiator of markets and innovation, and the public sector as bulky and bureaucratic, these sectors take up opposite roles. The State should rather be understood as entrepreneurial, as ''able to take risks and create a highly networked system of actors that harness the best of the private sector for the national good over a medium- to long-term time horizon. It is the State acting as lead investor and catalyst which sparks the network to act and spread knowledge'' (Mazzucato 2013, 43). The state not only creates a legal framework through which the market operates but rather creates markets itself, taking up the role of the innovator, making initial large investments, and employing the private sector in order to allow for development to occur in a dynamic way (Mazzucato 2013). Such processes are not necessarily deemed legible, or even desirable by citizens, although they are termed to be in their best interest. Bibi states: *We as people do not interest the state administration at all. They see an investor there, and the investor is a saint for them, a God and a bludgeon*[18]*, and we are here, but it doesn't matter whether the road will go through your house, whether your house will disappear, whether your business will disappear, whether your child will be ill with bronchitis, you will have heart problems or you will go crazy from the noise, or a bomb will blow you to pieces.*

To my informants, both the public and the private sector were seen as compressing into one, together with the municipal, local, national, and global level, creating a situation to be exploited for the personal benefit of the political elite. The elite was conceived as working on their own interests and spreading its influence through all levels of decision making, with, as an informant stated, *mafia-investors* on the top of the food chain. Such an elite was the one to collapse the private and public sector, taking up the main place at the dining table. The actually existing state of Serbia is thus understood to be made up of ''real people who are failing to produce order, a synonym for greedy and corrupt politicians'' (Rajković 2017, 36). *This is an inhumane, reckless, ad hoc move with the goal to turn Zvezdara into an investor Mecca, I don't know what else to say – their point is that someone will take some money, to chip in (talnu) for some apartments, some malls (Anabela).* These real people, corrupt statesmen, whether a part of

[18] Bog i batina – a term used to explain that someone has unlimited power and respect - their decisions/statements/ideas cannot be questioned.

the city council or state government, were often named by my informants, after which an insulting term such as *debil* (moron) or *slina* (bugger) would be added. For example, when summing up her experiences of the public debate over the draft for detailed regulation, Smilja singled out one of the main speakers, saying: *He took a stroll through all of the regimes and all functions, it is just incredible.* These specific people were also placed in relation to their political past which often stemmed a long way back, namely to the years of the break-up of Yugoslavia.

Naumović (2013, 140) argues that the discourse of inherent corruption should be understood as a reproduction of an anti-communist discourse, as the corrupt political realm is linked to the ex-communist political elites, as well as to remains of the grand influence of the state which blocks progress. This anti-communist discourse is contrasted by the post-communist democratic governments, which in opposition are deemed righteous and virtuous (Naumović 2013). However, the understanding Naumović proposes was quite opposite to how my informants understood the political elite. The current political elite is one that emerged during Slobodan Milošević, whose government is considered as having started the implementation of neoliberal policy in Serbia, understood as processes of increased privatization, and partial withdrawal of the state from the sphere of economy, with a subtext of private institutions as more able to grasp market signals in comparison to a grand state (Jugović-Spajić 29). As the contemporary Serbian political elite is traced back to the government of Slobodan Milošević (Fridman et al 2017) it becomes synonymous with the dissolution with the democratic state in which once hope was invested, but which is now deemed to have brought about no change in political culture, whilst normalizing corruption, privatization and low standards of living (Greenberg 2014). Smilja states: *Sadly, these things are always in connection to some big money, with some investors, some big shots who invest something, and have a deal with someone, and it becomes a really hard battle (borba), and it depends how big the players are. I keep thinking this isn't the worst it can be but we will see. We keep hoping, but in this society, we are witnesses to everything that is done, from cutting trees overnight – it really makes you wonder*.

Such perspectives on the corrupt state were not understood to be residues of the socialist system as is often perceived but as residues of the transition to capitalism which started in the 1990s, as well as of the actually existing neoliberalism in the proposed context. Corrupt practices should thus be understood as ''phenomena relevant for the negotiation of the relationship

between individuals or collectives and the state in the conditions of changing patterns of state provision. Positioning oneself through narratives about corruption entails adapting to the changes of the state and of political and economic relations, and at the same time making sense of, and judging those changes (Kojanić 2017, 49). Often, one of the ways to criticize the contemporary order of things was invoking of the socialist past.

Vanja, for example, stated: *I think that this part of Zvezdara, surrounding Poljanče is one of the rare untouched parts of Belgrade that still exploit that old and very cleverly designed socialist urbanism where buildings have an interspace which, in itself creates a sense of community, and gives people access to nature.* Nostalgia for the past has throughout the spaces of former Yugoslavia often had a prefix ''yugo''. Such nostalgia didn't necessarily entail a yearning for the socialist state as such, but rather for values and status people believed they had in the former country (Simić 2014, 4). Vanja's words emphasized the decision-making processes regarding urban space under the socialist state, as counteracting to urban renewal processes under the transforming/neoliberal Serbia. While the later is conceived as incomprehensible, profit-oriented and corrupt, the former depicts a caring state, one that puts its residents and their needs first. Moreover, the former state is not just one which cared enough to take up residents' suggestions, but also which itself tried to find the best urban solutions, hypothesizing and assuming the best interests of its citizens. In this sense, the residents often invoked the memories of life and decision-making processes under the socialist state. Although Vanja is 25 years old and didn't experience the Yugoslav state and its decision-making processes first-hand, her life was obliqued by the remembrance of the past, in which the 1990s presented a harsh rupture with normality.

As Simić states, ''whether people experienced socialism or not, their thinking about the state or the system was formed around the idea of ''normal'' life which usually meant that something is ordinary in a good way – stable and predictable'' (Simić 2014, 42). In this sense, it is relevant to note that informants would often stress the abnormality of the current regime's decisions, expressing the attitude that the urban decisions the state indorses are not emblematic for *normal* or *serious* states. Such yearning for normality becomes a diagnostic category, pointing at a desire for ''an external environment in which one has the agentive capacity to translate a promise or a wish into reality'' (Greenberg 2011, 93).

Opposing the state –expertise and healthy politics over state negligence

As a subject in everyday life (Aretxaga 2003), the state left an impression of being corrupt, unaware, disinterested and bureaucratic. Simultaneously omnipresent for its sovereign power and bulkiness and dispersive in its neglect for citizens, it spread as an elusive state effect. Such experiences of the state generated a hands-on approach to fighting for the draft of the urban project to be stopped, stemming from a sense of being left to one's own devices (Jansen 2005, 145).

The first legal instance the Initiative needed to go through was the collecting of signatures in order to appeal the Draft of the plan for detailed regulation. A public dispute was scheduled at two weeks after the signatures were sent in, and during the dispute, the residents were expected to provide arguments against the draft of the plan. As the first instance of actually collectively interacting with the public institutions, throughout narratives this public dispute was often in focus as a contact zone (Linke 2006) of the state and the citizens. The meeting with the state was an important encounter for which one had to be prepared for. Knowledge and expertise became a tool to be mobilized in the *battle* (borba) for the neighborhood, through the public dispute. Such notions of knowledge and professionalism were starkly contrasting the imaginary of the state and the idea of party politics as its unwanted companion.

Members of the Initiative would often speak about each other in terms of their own respective professional fields or in relation to skills acquired through various forms of civic engagement, as well as social capital. For example, Smilja states: *We were really lucky because often it is hard to gather people even for things regarding the building, but we were lucky here to find that neighbors from many occupations somehow appeared, and somebody had experience with urbanism or with environmental protection, and architects, and construction engineers, and journalists and what else not.* According to their skills and prior interests, residents divided in three main teams – the media team, the team for actions, and the public dispute team. Although most of the people took part in various teams and tasks and helped out wherever they could, the labor division was deemed central for the success of the Initiative. Each of the teams was overseen by coordinators, most often people whose professional lives or prior knowledge could closely inform their skill of organizing and overlooking a team.

The residents were not only knowledgable but also capable and prepared to connect with others and learn. Anita, who was one of the coordinators of the public dispute team explained the process of preparing. One of the key points of preparation was the solidarity with other civic organizations and activist groups that were previously successful in contesting similar urbanization projects or grander urban renewal[19] or beautifying projects. Such allies allowed the members to acquire a gaze into the near future, and help predict, to the best of their ability, how the public dispute would proceed. These entities became sites of ''knowledge production about the limits and possibilities of agency and structure within a given society'' (Chester 2012, 147).

The members attached value not only to the professional and expert skills they obtained but even more to the preparedness of Initiative's members to acquire new knowledge. Anita says: *There was a lot of studying (...) Here, mostly educated young and old people live, and somehow everybody knows what it means to prepare for a test. So we studied – we studied what PDR is, what PGR is, what GUP is, how these are connected to each other. We learned why the study of feasibility wasn't executed, why the study of traffic was missing, why the study of the impact on the social environment was not executed.* In processes of preparation, members were learning how to navigate urbanist documents and legal frameworks, but also the state's bureaucracy and institutions. This process, however, was not imagined as egalitarian, but rather as a battle inside of a longer war, where the opponent must always be outwitted as this is how the rules of the game were appointed. Maja, for example, noticed: *We understood that the system was cheating us. And then we thought, and not only did we think, we were forced to think of a strategy to, in a smart way, defend our neighborhood.*

What the members of the Initiative were grappling with was the double nature of the state – on the one hand, the institutions were deemed as procedural, as informants would talk about the number of drafts of regulation plans that would be approved during the course of just one day inside these institutions. On the other hand, this disinterested facade was read as having a much uglier, almost cruel, interior. Smilja said: *In these public disputes their idea is to humiliate you and burry you and not give you any space, people just want to be finished with their job, this formality, and move on.* The institutions are not trusted to be disinterested – while they show no

[19] E.g. Renewable and Environmental Regulatori Institute (RERI) which contested the Gondola project, at the River Bank and shut it down.

interest for the public, their interests are understood to be economic or personal. Summing her impressions after the public dispute, Smiljka noticed: *This skill they have, especially if you don't have a lot of experience, that it seems as if they are on your side, which they cannot be, as if there is some understanding, and then, while you actually realize what's going on, when they turn their back, it's too late.*

Fighting for the environment: negotiating politics

One of the most prevalent arguments the Initiative's members made over space was the importance of environmental benefits of the neighborhood. The very name of the Initiative evokes the greenness of the neighborhood, and public interviews are abundant with such claims. The Zvezdara anthem, which is in preparation by the Initiative also stresses this through lyrics:

I walk its paths,

I breathe with full lungs,

Every tree! Loved is Zvezdara,

Our house of greenery,

It gathers us all in its parks, gardens, and on benches.

It is Zvezdara, our Zvezdara

It is Zvezdara, the crown of my Belgrade,

Blossomed, green, free and rebellious,

It is our Zvezdara!

I propose that such claims don't only relate to attachment to place or just environmental consciousness but rather that they should be understood as another channel of grappling with the elusive state effect. As Kopf (2016) shows on account of biking activism in Belgrade, the argument for sustainability can be understood ''in opposition to city authorities and politicians who rather walk the walk than talk the talk'' (Kopf 2016, 115), as specific actions and activities, as well as claims in this case focus on the tangible, local level in order to render the claims

legible to the higher institutions, as well as present a broader critique. The moral dimension of environmental claims takes a role in the critique of urban planning and decision-making of public institutions without providing an explicit political critique, as environmental critique can be understood both as a mistake of the national as well as the global level of governing.

Andrea Muehlbach (2012) analyzed volunteer practices in Milan, showing how a previously strong welfare state going through processes of neoliberalization left the civil society to take up roles which the state previously occupied. As the civil sector increased, it not only took up such roles but created a novel understandings of the role of the state and citizens in it. In relation to an uncaring state, citizens took up the caring role creating a new form of governmentality – a deeply moral neoliberal public that connected citizens not only on account of their perceived equality but also as responsible for righting the felt wrongs personified in misfortune and suffering. As the public sphere becomes humanized, depoliticized forms of solidarity become pragmatic practices of citizenship (Muehlbach 2012, 132-133). However, in the case of the Initiative the political realm wasn't necessarily refused or neglected, but rather negotiated. The notion of politics presented itself as a loaded term, which needed to be grappled with. The residents needED to find their place somewhere on the scale whose two poles can be understood as party politics (''real'' politics) on the one side and apolitical engagement on the other.

In a podcast, one of the residents talked about a visit to the Municipality of Zvezdara, before the public dispute. She noted that the representatives of the institution seemed confused by the Initiative, at first mistaking them for a political party: *When we went to the meeting he (the Mayor) said: ''Oh, we thought that you were some party''. I told them they were xenophobic, we are regular citizens. This is different from politicing (politikarenje). As I said, we should do politics, and what we are doing is politics of our lives, politics of preservation of the environment, and healthy life in our neighborhood, and we are against party politicing (strančarenje[20]). Who does party politicing, we don't want to talk about it, we came to resolve our problems.* Such *healthy politics* the Initiative articulates should be understood dually – as doing politics of a healthy life as caring for the environment, as well as healthy politics – one that is guided by solidarity, care and engagement rather than personal and economic interest. Another

[20] Strančarenje is a derogative term for the activity of doing politics in a corupt way through political parties.

example of this is a public letter a resident wrote, named *May concrete scratch you! (Grebo vas beton![21])*, stating: *The overall acknowledgment of the importance of preserving nature is stronger than ever, but real reasons for rebellion is dissatisfaction and distrust of citizens. Faced with decisions and plans that neglect their needs and which are subordinate only to one goal – money, citizens come together in the search for answers.*

Linke (2009, 215) explains the importance of locating the engagement with the state in temporal and spatial coordinates, articulating the creation of political subjectivities as a continuous, constitutive process. ''The dynamic structure of feeling does not exist in cultural emptiness: it 'does not arise from timeless space' and is never 'non- and transhistorical', but is 'historically placed precisely in our everyday understanding and experience' (Plessner 1970, 18-19).'' (Linke 2009, 215). Exploring the aftermath of the 5th of October revolution in Serbia, Jessica Greenberg articulates civic engagement that came in the place of massive protests, as a form of politics of its own - a politics of disappointment. Greenberg argues that the disbelief in the revolution as a break with the old and the start of radically different future brought up such a new kind of politics, one which was grounded in pragmatism and the messy present, rather than in a hopeful strive for a utopian future (Greenberg 2014). In this context, civic engagement as opposed to the notion of politics, as the latter became a term imbued with negative meanings, related to the missdoing of politicians and disappointment in the corrupted democratic politics. The notion of expertise thus became particular ethics of knowledge -''an important way to be actively engaged but not ''political'' '' (Greenberg 2014, 124). In interviews with my informants, the notion of politics was still related to corruption and bad party politics.

Although my informants didn't disregard themselves as political, the notion of expertise and the civic organization was stressed as a healthy way of doing politics. As was mentioned, the Initiative collaborated with different civic sector organizations. While some members had previously worked in NGOs and been active in various organizations that dealt with social and urban issues, some members themselves were active in the We Won't Let Belgrade Dro(w)n Initiative. This Initiative gathered some of the most massive protests since the 5th of October over the question of urban governance and later competed on city elections. Although this Initiative did not win the city elections, it entered the realm of ''real'' politics. In many

[21] The title is a pun, alluding to ''Fuck your concrete'' through sound similarity.

interviews thus, my informants mentioned that no one who had affiliations with this or any other political party/initiative would be present in the media as a representative of the Initiative, as to not represent publicly the Save Green Zvezdara as explicitly political, that is synonymous with party politics.

Agency of experts and engaged citizens

The term ''građani'' (citizen) was often used to denote the particular position of the residents, creating a claim that, as the people are ''of the city'' they deserve to have a word in its construction (Kopf 2016, 112). Throughout ethnographies on post-socialist Serbia, the notion of the citizen has often been analyzed as used to express a ''positive self-definition of the urban educated civilized citizen'' (Kopf 2016). Furthermore, citizens stressed not only the civic nature of their requests but appealed to the professional expert knowledge in their ranks rather than political knowledge. Greenberg ties the category of the expert to the Yugoslav self-management context, as relating to those who ''would disinterestedly guide but not trump decision making by all citizens''. An expert was ''valorized as a coordinator of knowledge, necessary to mediate and respect local practices'' (Greenberg 2014, 116). Although an expert takes a part in the social life, they are deemed to be ''somehow above the fray of messy political and ideological life, and thus better able to represent the interests of the people. As such, expertise was understood to be a form of democratic representation within a social idiom'' (Greenberg 2014, 116-117). In this sense, Anita's words were very instructive: Anita says*: We lack knowledge, we've become stupid. At the time of comrade Tito, this was called to be cadred (kadrovan) – there must be ways or places, and these places are no longer parties, parties are technocratic groups with interests, I would even say of mafia and followers, and we need cadred citizens who will build cadres. People who will guide and lead and educate further how to run these things. A group of people who are known (to be good), whose moral compass is working, diligent people who know exactly at which positions to build something – without this, I think it would be hard to make something – it will be ad hoc*.

Nostalgia for a previous state should not be understood as a tendency to reproduce Yugoslavia or socialism for that matter, but rather as a way to provide a diagnosis of the current order, as well as the crisis that started with the dismantling of the socialist state and that has since

become a permanent state (Simić 2014, 40-41). Petrović (per Vasiljević 2019) argues that solidary mobilization across the post-Yugoslav region is often abundant with references to Yugoslav socialism. The author claims that the socialist past becomes a reservoir of memories of agency, meaningful belonging, and active citizenship which have been reduced within the transitional neoliberal state. Although civic engagement exists and has existed even in the period of the break-up of the socialist state, a time often understood as ''fall from grace'' (Simić 2015), such civic engagement was since the break-up understood as more of a struggle than a state-recognized right to have a say in decision-making processes. Vasiljević (2019) argues that, contrary to political discourses on socialism which portray the state as paternal and citizens as passive, citizens have an opposing view of such relations, perceiving themselves as having a framework for more agency during socialism than in neoliberal or transitional times.

Such a stance reflected the articulation of solidarity in the Initiative's ranks. Contrary to Muehlbach's (2012) notion of the moral neoliberal whose solidarity is expected to be mediated by the state, and is less related to perceived equality than moral claims, here we can perceive a fluid interconnectedness of both, as solidarity was articulated across class affiliations, gender and age termed even as solidarity of *kin*, as a resident stated: *the neighborhood has become one big family* over a perceived shared problem. Interestingly, solidarity-making itself leaned on the history of struggles, as Anita stressed the gendered dimension of the Initiative's work linking it back to the activism of Women in Black during the anti-war movements that marked break-up of the socialist country, noting that although men, sons, and husbands helped and worked on the work of the Initiative, it was women who carried out the most of the labor, *as it used to be the case in the break-up of Yugoslavia.*

Feminist solidarity in the anti-war movement provided a parallel not only in terms of understanding gendered relations, but also in terms of a movement that opposes the state. Vasiljević argues that such solidarity was the most clearly articulated of all in the anti-war movement, as it ''advocated an opposing logic of citizenship and solidarity, by rejecting nationalism and the rhetoric of war, and insisting on solidarity with the victims of war – no matter their ethnicity. Within the movement, it was feminist activists that especially questioned the idea of citizenship, the frameworks of the state, and rights and belonging, while at the same time articulating the problem of solidarity: With whom should we be solidary and how, and what

constitutes our communities of belonging and our basic rights? As Zaharijević (2013: 14) explains "feminism of the early 1990s became preoccupied with the state: whose state that was, what were its borders, who belonged, who did not and why, and what was the price of the unreserved loyalty one was expected to give to the newly formed nation-states'' (Vasiljević 2019, 13). Such solidarity Vasiljević terms situational solidarity, ''born out of an affective reaction to an imposed situation'' (Vasiljević 2019, 14) going against proposed national solidarity and shaping feminism as a form of activist citizenship, ''always in search of alternative ways of imagining communities and acting within them'' (Vasiljević 2019, 14), stressing a particular kind of citizen agency. Such solidarity can be understood as taking part here, as residents affectively engage with the state, and created a community on account of shared space and problem, rather than on account of an imposed idea of national progress through the processes of restructuring and re-branding the city.

Yearning for a State

Solidarity under the socialist state was termed as a relation between the state and citizens, where ''apart from brotherhood and unity, the promise of free healthcare and education, affordable housing and social security were seen as forms of solidarity'' (Vasijević 2019, 16). The neoliberal narrative, however, stamped such practices as state dependency, urging citizens to show solidarity to the state, if needed, while assuming full responsibility for their economic security (Vasiljević 2019, 16). Vasiljević defines two forms of contemporary solidarity – reactive and political solidarity. Whilst the former is termed as solidarity with vulnerable groups, filling in the void of an absent and ineffective state, the later is described ''as more than just a remedy for the most vulnerable, but as a social value and principle worthy of political struggle'' (Vasiljević 2019). Reactive solidarity can be seen as normalizing the moral neoliberal, urging for proactivity of citizens over reliance on state assistance, and overcoming obstacles without institutional help. Political solidarity, however, renders solidarity a political issue, arguing for solidarity as a value that should be embedded in social and political institutions (Vasiljević 2019).

While at a first glance the Initiative might seem to propose reactive solidarity as it, as even some informants noted, lacks an explicit political critique, I argue that such imagery is more

of an articulated mirage that came to be as a result of a perceived need to negotiate the notion of politics in order to obtain one's goal. As argued previously, the Initiative often frames its practices and narrative as critical of the corrupt elusive state and its institutions, however, such critique remains without an articulated goal of changing the existing laws (Vasiljević 2019). However, my informants weren't only critiquing public institutions or jumping in their place but tended to provide various propositions, as well as act as an example for other civic organizations. The residents expressed neither hope for a paternal state, nor an explicit refusal of stateness, but rather a middle ground where both systemic security and civic engagement could exist – solidarity from and with the state.

As the state was understood as a regime of individuals with more or less authority, such an imagery provided the residents with not just a place of critique but also a channel to relate with the state in a caring manner. Anita told me that not all who work in public institutions were opposing their battle, but rather that those with the least executive power acted as allies, anonymously giving the residents tips and documents in order to help them fight for their cause. As the state was understood to be a regime ''that includes all people in positions of authority'' (Kojanić 2017, 50), those with the least authority – closest to ''ordinary citizens'' in terms of having limited resources to influence institutions became a channel for imbuing the notion of the state with hope. Anita said: *They (street-level bureaucrats) found us charming, maybe they would even be friends with us* - the real problem was the corrupt, powerful statesmen, and not the stateness per se. These people were also not deemed untouchable although perceived corruption was deep-seated, rather they were understood as a problem that could be solved by bottom-up politics. In this sense, Bibi said: *What is important is that we citizens learn that public institutions work for the public interest, and not for some private, or other interest.*

The residents strived for a system, but a different one. Even the framework the state provided wasn't necessarily seen as useless, as Bibi said that: *we studied and worked to be able to fight in a civilized, legal manner, with everything that the state allows for*. However, as the framework wasn't respected by those in positions of power, the members were open to more *radical* forms of protesting, as Smilja remembered: *We talked about this – a lot of people think that we should just lay on the streets and not move.* At first glance paradoxical, these seemingly contradictory claims actually stress the same thing – a yearning for a state. While a system was

something residents strived for, the system they envisioned was one that is respected by all and respectful of all.

In this line of reasoning, the residents provided institutions with propositions on how to improve state practices in order to create better relations between institutions and citizens: *At the public debate, we also suggested to the commission and the authorities of the city how to improve. Not to publish in Informer, but to send information to those living in the space that PDR is regulating, to send this information together with taxes.* Stressing that all citizens are equal in relation to the state, as tax-payers who provide for it, the residents expressed a right to expect the care and solidarity of the state, as well as to have solidarity proposed as a value from the top-down, returning back to the normalcy of the welfare system. Simultaneously, the residents refused the idea that the state should take up all the work: *The lesson is that citizens must organize themselves. The lesson is that there are allies in institutions. The paradox is really that people from institutions have started calling us to give us information from within, plans, blueprints, and encourage us: don't stop, push forward. It was really almost a surprise, and if the experts, the people working in institutions and the neighborhood, citizens who are directly interested in their neighborhood would come together this could work, of course, if only the responsible people wouldn't block that cohesion.* The citizens are thus perceived as a valuable source of information and perspectives that should be taken up and pushed for through the common work of citizens, experts, and institutions.

Critiquing anthropology of the state as often perpetuating the libertarian paradigm of the state as an imposed externality, Jansen (2014) urged scholars to account both for the social movements against the state as well as hopes for it – ''the suppressed yearnings, loud clamorings and tireless struggles of people to be incorporated into gridding of improvement, and their investment in becoming, not to put too fine a point to it, part of legible populations. The fact that at other points and in other ways these same people also wish to remain illegible and ungridded does not discount this desire as irrelevant, nor does the fact that they seek incorporation on their own terms '' (Jansen 2014, 257).

Concluding remarks

In the first chapter, I argued that the space, especially the shared public space of a park plays a role in the political becoming (Jacobsson et al 2020) of individuals and collectives, providing a source for solidarity and agency, as well as shapping further activities and claims over space. Jacobsson et al (2020, 134) argue that '' Small acts of everyday life that constitute the first steps toward activism and collective action for change are especially important in the post-socialist context, which is not usually conducive either to trust in others or to publicly visible or widespread collective action''. Although the Initiative's work can hardly be termed as a small act of everyday life, it does reside in a context of a state which has over the last decades gone through multiple changes which ultimatelly negativelly affected the quality of the lives of its citizens. Such changes brought about a dissillusionment with the realm of politics, which ultimatelly lead to the proliferation of acts of resistance which cannot be termed large-scale, although they are political acts never the less.

In the second chapter I focused on the state, as it is understood to be the main executionair of tangible social change and thus the main opponent to tackle. I aimed to show that the state was simultaniously understood as an ally and an enemy, uncaring, but excessivelly present, which further articulated ways of relating to it. The state was understood in opposition to its socialist history in which 'normalcy' existed. The current corrupt system was understood as inherent to the neoliberalization processes that deteriorated the sense of a dignified life of citizens.

The third chapter grappled with ways in which the Initiative engaged against the state through narratives and practices. The residents asserted a normative understanding of their relationship to broader institutions, asserting their knowledge, values and solidarity as a normative frame. Such a frame simoultaniously put them above the State's politics and corruption while arguing for the inherent value of a non-political/non-corrupt perspective from bellow for improving of material conditions of life. The contention of public institutions and its authorities however, ultimately acquired a form of hope for a reimagined state, one that would present a return to normalcy by interlacing the work of politicians, experts and citizens into a form of healthy politics.

Scholars often claimed that the civil sector of post-socialist countries lost its political power through the de-politicisation of the NGO sector (Jacobsson et al 2020, 131). Such assessments, however, fail to acknowledge various relevant practices which blur the line between the political and the non-political sphere. My aim in this thesis was to depict the workings of an urban grassroots initiative as well as to provide an understanding of its activities and narratives its members generate, focusing on the specifics of urban activism which enable a critique of broader national and global socio-economic changes. Although cloaked in rhetoric of civic engagement and healthy politics, narratives and practices of Initiative's members should rather be understood as providing a political critique of a neoliberalizing state and its vanishing welfare institutions whose absence is encountered on a daily basis. The Initative not only provides a critique of the process of transformation but proposes alternatives through solidary engagement.

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