



The Mobilization for Spatial Justice in Divided Societies: Urban Commons, Trust Reconstruction, and Socialist Memory in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Chiara Milan 

Center for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz, Graz, Austria

The article contributes to the urban studies literature and the study of social movements in divided societies by disclosing the distinctive features and mobilizing potential that the notion of urban commons retains in a war-torn society with a socialist legacy. Specifically, it investigates how urban space and urban commons are reclaimed in a post-conflict and post-socialist country such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. By using Sarajevo as a case study, the article explores several grassroots initiatives undertaken by local urban activists to reappropriate cultural buildings and public space in the city. The study discloses that in a post-conflict and post-socialist society urban commons can bear a unifying potential as acts of commoning favor trust reconstruction processes and strengthen community ties. While the erosion of social ties and the legacy of the war might not encourage mobilization for the commons, the reference to socialist-era practices and language can represent a vantage point to advocate in favor of collective governance. Throughout their actions, urban activists instrumentally referred to the historical experience of socialism to develop a discourse that resonates with the domestic cultural environment. The article points also to a generational difference amongst activists in their references to Yugoslav state socialism. While long-time activists strove to critically reappraise it, the younger ones born in the immediate post-war period appear to hold a more superficial and ambivalent historical knowledge of the socialist heritage, to which they had only partial access and no lived experience.

Keywords: *mobilization in divided societies; urban commons; Bosnia and Herzegovina, right to the city; spatial justice*

Introduction

The global economic crisis that started in 2008 deepened the process of commodification of public services, the dismantling of the welfare state, and the privatization of public space, which was already on the run all over the world. Amongst its consequences, the economic downturn intensified existing social inequalities even further and exacerbated the gap between ordinary citizens and

their leaders.¹ In terms of mobilization, the context of the crisis contributed to the politicization of civil society² and prompted the rescaling of social policies to urban and regional levels,³ increasing the importance of the local scale of governance. As a consequence, urban space gained relevance for social and political action, to the extent that nowadays cities stand at the center of political mobilization, being the main places where contentious actions occur.⁴ Starting in 2008 in Greece, “The Movement of the Squares”⁵ exposed the increased centrality of the urban setting as an arena of political action and place of resistance.⁶ Also, the Arab spring in 2011, the 15-M and the Indignados movements in Spain, and the Occupy movement in the United States and other countries across the world⁷ employed as the main repertoire of action the occupation of public space through *acampadas*, for instance, protest encampments staged in public spaces in Spain.⁸ As a consequence, the relationship between urbanization and democratization acquired increasing visibility in recent academic debates,⁹ especially in critical urban theory and studies of the right to the city movements.¹⁰

The former Yugoslav countries were not excluded from the dynamics sparked by the global economic recession. In the decade following the peak of the crisis, the exacerbating effects of neoliberalism, deregulation dynamics, and austerity politics produced deep social, economic, and political transformations in the area. Processes of privatization and commodification of urban space, natural resources, and public services altered the relation between societies and territories, while urban space acquired central importance in the region as well. Neoliberal and nationalist trends of urban renewal heavily shaped the landscape of the main capitals of the region, leading to the proliferation of malls and business centers to the detriment of public space. Consequently, contestation from below to oppose the use of space as source of profit grew to the extent that spatial justice has been defined a “fundamental post-socialist struggle.”¹¹ In the last decade in particular, urban movements in the region mobilized to oppose the commodification of public space, alongside the dismantling of the welfare state and the privatization of public services.¹² Frequently, movement actors converged under the common banner of the “right to the city” and resorted to the language of the commons to protest against spatial enclosure and destructive forms of urbanization. In so doing, they engaged in a process of politicization of the urban discourse,¹³ framing projects of urban refurbishment as a political issue. Often protests were sparked by the imposition of development projects of urban renewal that completely restructured the façade of cities, such as the gigantic “Belgrade Waterfront” in the Serbian capital or projects of urban refurbishment in the central area of Zagreb.¹⁴ At times, urban grassroots groups triggered the emergence of political parties and citizens’ platforms that later ran for local elections promoting a “commons-oriented agenda.”¹⁵

In the post-Yugoslav space, neoliberal trends of urban renewal sparked protests and low intensity mobilizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter BiH) as well, in particular in the afterlives of the 2012–2014 cycle of mobilization. Throughout

these three years, activists in BiH protested the dismantling of the Picin park in Banja Luka, in 2013 they occupied the square in front of the National Parliament during the mobilization known as *Babylution*, and in 2014 they took to the streets to violently vent their rage against unemployment and corruption in a series of protests known as *Social Uprising*.¹⁶ In all the three protest waves, urban space played a pivotal role, while the topic of privatization of services and urban commons was discussed and debated in the open assemblies that followed street actions. After this cycle of mobilization, and as a result of the networks created throughout this period, urban activist groups started to engage with issues related to the use of public space and urban commons. They attempted to involve the wider citizenry by resorting to diverse repertoires of action—from contention to self-organization and direct action, as well as community involvement in ameliorating the urban habitat. While previous literature has dealt with non- and beyond-ethnic mobilization in the country,¹⁷ little has been written so far about the recent struggle around the use of urban space in BiH, which constitutes a direct legacy of the prior cycle of protests.¹⁸

This article investigates how urban space and urban commons are reclaimed and produced in a country that holds the peculiarity of being a divided society with a socialist legacy. In particular, it uses Sarajevo as a case study to explore grassroots attempts to both reclaim and engender urban commons in a divided, post-socialist society. The article aims at answering the following questions: How do urban activists engage to re-appropriate urban space in BiH? How are urban commons discursively defined and engendered in a society where both the socialist legacy and divisions of an ethnonational nature constitute complex points of reference to advocate any forms of collective governance in the region? To what extent does the heritage of self-governing socialism and the erosion of social ties that followed the war influence the elaboration of a shared notion of commons? In this analysis, BiH represents the “least-likely” case study, which is “predicted not to achieve a certain outcome, and yet it does.”¹⁹ Being a divided society with numerous factors decreasing the likelihood of social mobilization,²⁰ BiH also represents a context not easily conducive to the rise of urban movements.

Engaging critically with critical urban theories and social movement studies, this article explores urban commons as spaces of resistance in divided societies,²¹ discussing how they are conceived and the extent to which previous historical trajectories shape this notion. In so doing, it also discloses the importance of urban commons for trust reconstruction processes in a war-torn society and the potential of urban movements to advance a political project with the potential to trigger social change. To that end, the article explores how urban commons are imagined and delves into the various practices through which they are reclaimed and produced, also through acts of commoning, the social process that creates and reproduces the commons (which derives from the verb “to common”).²² Drawing on the case of Sarajevo, the national capital that in the last decade experienced dynamics of neoliberal urban development characterized by “accumulation by dispossession” mechanisms,²³ the

article makes a contribution to the literature on urban studies and social movements in divided cities. It points to the potentialities, complex legacy, and multifaceted meaning that the notion of urban commons holds in a war-torn society with a socialist legacy that under certain circumstances constitutes a vantage point to advocate in favor of common governance. Furthermore, the article sheds light on grassroots mobilization and groups that are rarely visible in a literature that focuses predominantly on ethnic hatred and rivalries when dealing with BiH. By providing a first-hand account on the recent struggles for the commons in the country, the article also contributes by enriching the notion of commons, as it studies their articulation in a post-socialist and post-conflict context. Finally, this article challenges the notion of a passive civil society in BiH by arguing that activists in Sarajevo mobilized in favor of urban commons and for the re-appropriation of public space, resorting to different means of action, although not counting on a long tradition of urban activism and notwithstanding a troubled recent past.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section, I illustrate the methodology of this study. In the following one, I explore the notion of commons in literature. Then, I concentrate on how the urban commons framework has been elaborated in the post-Yugoslav region. Next, I investigate the influence of the historical experience of socialism on the articulation of the commons paradigm, showing how the connection to the past is complex and evolving, before outlining the numerous attempts to reclaim and engender the commons that occurred in the country in recent years. Next, I elucidate the ways in which urban activists rethink and retrieve the socialist heritage to inform and legitimize their struggle to defend urban commons. I conclude by reflecting on the unifying potential of the commons paradigm and on its social and political significance in a divided country.

Methodology

This analysis is based on empirical evidence from ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with activists and spokespersons of diverse grassroots groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in the struggle for the commons and against the privatization of public space in Sarajevo,²⁴ carried out between 2014 and 2019. As far as gender ratio is concerned, the sample is composed of seven women and three men. This difference mirrors the large presence of women in the protests and campaigns concerning the right to the city and public space in the country. A certain generational heterogeneity characterizes the interviewees, distinguishing an older cohort from a younger one on the basis of their militancy and participation in previous protest movements as well as their lived experience of the 1992–1995 conflict. While the elder interviewees were born before the conflict and retain some memories of the pre-war socialist period, the younger respondents were born right after the conflict and hold no direct memory of the socialist times. The latter appear

to have been only marginally exposed to the narrative about the socialist past, which tends to dismiss state socialism as a failed experiment.

The interviewees were chosen on the basis of their active participation in the protest events and their long-term involvement in protest activities related to urban space and the commons. The majority of the older respondents took part in prior protest waves in the country, such as the 2008 *Dosta!* movement and 2013 Babylution, while the youngest first approached street protests on the occasion of the 2014 Social Uprising. The different historical trajectories that activists experienced partially reflect their diverse approaches towards the socialist past, and appear to influence their strategies, as has been noted by other scholars²⁵ and as I will elucidate further throughout the article. The analysis also relies on participant observation, as I closely observed the occupation of the National Museum of BiH in August 2015. Furthermore, I have consulted documents published and available online, such as blog posts, interviews and opinion pieces, accessible on web pages and social media profiles (mostly Facebook). The research focuses on a period of two years, from the occupation of the National Museum over the summer of 2015 to the shutdown of the space called *Slobodna Zona* (Free Zone) in 2017, which represented the declining phase of the movement in defense of urban commons. Sarajevo has been chosen for the case study since, being the main urban center of BiH, it is the place where the effects of the neoliberal trends of urban renewal are most evident, in particular in the proliferation of shopping malls and business centers, and the shrinking of space available to citizens for public use²⁶ that has occurred in the last decade. Sarajevo is also the place where the majority of grassroots groups concentrate their activities.

Urban Commons and the City as a Site of Contestation

In literature, the notion of the commons has been used to denote resources that are managed without the interference of either the market or the state, which, therefore, find themselves outside state regulation or private property regime.²⁷ Originally, the concept referred to natural resources (known as “environmental commons”) subjected to the process of enclosure, which constituted a crucial turning point for the development of capitalism.²⁸ The notion later expanded to include culture, knowledge, and other social resources produced by human beings and endangered by capitalist property relations.²⁹ Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize with her work on the commons in 2009, conceived them as a third approach to the state–market dichotomy in terms of governance, and the public–private dichotomy with reference to property.³⁰ Other scholars criticized her for the lack of structural critique of capitalist relations, arguing that she did not regard commons as an analytical and political concept with the potential to transform the logic of capitalism. By contrast, they envisaged the commons as not merely having a complementary role to that of the state and the market, but rather as a “Third Way” beside private and public prop-

erty.³¹ Amongst them, the Italian critical legal scholar Ugo Mattei elaborated an activist theory of the commons that approached them as strictly connected to the economic–judicial dimension. In his view, commons are those resources that should be excluded from privatization and made public because of their collective importance, such as water, for instance.³² Mattei’s elaboration sparked debate over common goods in Italy and a series of initiatives that followed, such as the campaign for re-municipalizing water³³ undertaken at the national and European level.³⁴ In particular, Mattei maintained that conflict retains an important dimension in the definition of commons, which he envisioned as a political act of claiming resources in common against commodification and commercialization.

More recently, radical critical theorists underscored the political and contested nature of the commons, which they interpreted as social processes, emancipatory spaces,³⁵ or social relations³⁶ rather than static goods.³⁷ In so doing, they stressed the importance of commoning, intended as the act of producing and maintaining the commons.³⁸ Harvey in particular argued that what distinguishes public from common goods is the political action of re-appropriation: While public goods are resources controlled by the state, common goods are those characterized by social control over state-owned resources, meaning that they are re-appropriated by people acting in direct confrontation with the state.³⁹ This direct confrontation transforms public goods into commons, differently from the mainstream approach of Ostrom who conceives the common good as an inherent characteristic of the thing.⁴⁰ In Harvey’s view, the notion of community also assumes central importance. De Angelis explores this aspect further by defining the community as the plurality giving social meaning to the commons.⁴¹ In so doing, he switches attention to the social dynamics underneath the production of commons. Other scholars stressed that these characteristics of goods are attributed through the social dynamic of the “commoners.”⁴² As the sociologist Silvia Federici argued, commons cannot exist without a community producing them, which she summarized with the phrase “no commons without community.”⁴³ A community, she argued, “has to be intended not as a gated reality, a grouping of people joined by exclusive interests separating them from the others . . . but rather as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals.”⁴⁴ Federici conceived the achievement of such a community as just a beginning, not a substitute for anti-privatization campaigns and the reclamation of the common wealth.⁴⁵

While the notion of commons, and in particular urban commons, has been investigated in depth in the United States and Western Europe, the available literature devotes a relatively modest interest to how it has been articulated in the post-Yugoslav space,⁴⁶ a region characterized by its socialist heritage and where the notion of social property was particularly important. Before delving into the case studies, the next section introduces the characteristics that the commons paradigm debate has assumed in the region.

The Commons Paradigm in the Post-Yugoslav Space

While the commons paradigm gained in interest and visibility over the 2010s in Western Europe, the concept resonated also with the activist community in the post-Yugoslav space, where it served as a source of inspiration for different types of struggles. At the theoretical level, systematic scholarly effort was put in place to think about and elaborate on the commons in the region. Conferences and summer schools, like the biennial “Green Academy” in the Croatian island of Vis and the Balkan Forum organized in the framework of the Subversive Festival that took place in Zagreb in 2013, connected intellectuals and activists to reflect on the notion of the commons as a framework for governance innovation.⁴⁷ At the same time, struggles for the commons have come, over the last decade, to the center of political mobilization in the region, where natural resources and publicly managed services have been more and more exposed to privatization processes⁴⁸. In Slovenia, for instance, a successful campaign, started at the grassroots level, succeeded in introducing in 2016 a constitutional amendment declaring drinking water a fundamental right and “a public good managed by the state” rather than “a market commodity.”⁴⁹

The post-Yugoslav space differs from the Western European and US context in its historical trajectory. Between the 1950s and the 1990s, the countries of former socialist Yugoslavia experienced a singular and distinct socioeconomic system called self-governing socialism, based on self-management experiments and self-governance practices.⁵⁰ In the 1950s, the Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia introduced the social property of public spaces and of industrial and natural production, which included the social ownership of all means of production. One of the most important systemic features of socialist Yugoslavia was that “social property did not belong to anyone, including the state, but to the whole society.”⁵¹ Notwithstanding the potential of social property of housing, for instance, the problems arising from the misuse of socially owned housing disclosed a gap between practice and theory in Yugoslav public life. The distortions and social inequalities produced by the systemic abuse of privilege on the part of party bureaucrats and also ordinary citizens surrounding housing or socially owned property contradicted the narratives of housing equality.⁵² This dissatisfaction raised criticism and fueled discontent to the extent that in August 1982 a campaign was launched against the unlawful occupancy of socially owned flats. Another distinctive feature of Yugoslav socialism were workers’ councils, which represented “the core structures of socialist self-management,”⁵³ and which introduced workers’ participation in decision making. However, political guidance and interference remained a constant characteristic of socialist Yugoslavia, while the fact that “the designated self-management institutions were ineffective and plagued by vested interests of local political and economic elites who were profiting from the status quo”⁵⁴ disclosed the flaws in the system.

Nevertheless, socialist governance left a unique heritage regarding self-management and experiments in direct citizen participation. For instance, the socialist regime

foresaw Samoupravne Interesne Zajednice, self-managing interest groups. These were planning bodies that brought together producers and users of public service companies, with the aim of granting direct citizen participation in the urban economy.⁵⁵ Similarly, the 1963 Yugoslav Constitution introduced a unique system of local governance through *mjesne zajednice* (local councils), “administrative units below the municipal level [that] allowed citizens to organise collectively and address many of the local day-to-day governance issues that directly affected their lives.”⁵⁶ As local and “largely self-governing institutions,”⁵⁷ *mjesne zajednice* provided useful tools to involve citizens in the planning and financing of local infrastructure.

Those provisions serve as interpretative lenses to understand the contemporary struggle for the commons, as they informed and constituted a point of reference for activists who drew on the socialist past to elaborate a theory of the commons able to resonate with the domestic cultural environment.⁵⁸ Institutions like *mjesne zajednice* still exist nowadays, although with limited powers in comparison to their original scope. They thus represent the heritage of a system that had an unrealized potential. In the aftermath of the Yugoslav breakup, nationalist forces endorsed a narrative that tended to vilify the historical experience of socialism.⁵⁹ The notion of commons and its origin in the socialist past, as well as the rediscovery of socialist associationism, has started to be re-discussed and reappraised only recently.⁶⁰ Yet, nowadays the uneven successes of the self-governance experience constitute at times a disadvantage when advocating for shared governance of common goods in the region,⁶¹ preventing the Yugoslav-era socialist practices and ideas from “serving as a resource for . . . acting upon the present.”⁶² The importance of the commons emerged from different forums and discussions as both a discourse and a practice, and a political project for the Left in the Balkans with the potential to unify diverse struggles in the region and to become a platform for larger political articulation.⁶³ The next section focuses on the advantages and disadvantages that the commons paradigm represents as an interpretive frame in BiH.

Advocating for the Commons in a Divided Society: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Nowadays, activists encounter different types of advantages and disadvantages in advocating in favor of collective governance in the country. One concerns the ambivalent socialist legacy and the abovementioned memory of the uneven successes of the self-management experience. In the account of a young respondent, such disillusionment derives from the fact that “socialism pushed that idea of the commons too much and after the war people decided they did not want to connect with that anymore.”⁶⁴ In light of the socialist past, the very same definition of “commons” results from a difficult elaboration, especially amongst young activists. They were born after the demise of state socialism and therefore exposed only indirectly to a value system that, as part of the socialist pre-war period, was destroyed with the

war, as a young activist explains:

I was born during the war, so I do not remember those times before the war, but from the literature, from history, and from the experience of people here, I know that the term “commons” had a completely different meaning and it was necessarily connected to the idea of a country, of a state and the ideology that was present at the time. Of course, this was completely shattered in the war, so after the war, we do not only have a ruined city, we also had a ruined idea of the commons because people lost trust among each other.⁶⁵

In contrast, longtime activists, who often hold lived experience of the pre-war socialist context, tend to present the socialist legacy as a potential resource and vantage point for advocating in favor of commons and common governance. They refer to the historical experience of state socialism as an experiment that deserves to be problematized, critically reevaluated and retrieved to inform current struggles against the privatization of public space and services.⁶⁶

Another critical aspect regards the institutional and political partition of the country. Besides sharing a common history with the other Yugoslav successor states, BiH also experienced a divisive conflict between 1992 and 1995. The 1992–1995 war brought about demographic change, massive displacement, and reterritorialization of people in its aftermath, which in turn reshuffled the sense of local belonging⁶⁷ and the social fabric of the country. The erosion of social ties, a consequence of the war, as well as the migration and displacement that followed provoked a detachment of citizens from their place of living, which after the war they had a hard time identifying with. From an institutional and political point of view, nowadays the country qualifies as a consociational democracy where power is shared amongst three ethno-national groups: Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), in line with the provisions of the Dayton Peace Agreement.⁶⁸ By partitioning society along ethno-national lines, this system accords “strong preference to collective rights of ethnic groups”⁶⁹ to the detriment of individual rights, reinforcing even further segregation amongst national communities.⁷⁰ In such a context, little consensus exists over statehood, a condition that also hampers mobilization and the emergence of social movements.⁷¹ The state is challenged on a daily basis by policy makers, in particular from Republika Srpska,⁷² whose political elite garners support through constant threats of secession of the entity from the rest of the country. The very definition of “commons” is difficult to work out, because of the lack of commonality that characterizes divided societies.⁷³

Alongside reinforcing ethno-national partitioning, the war brought about the erosion of social ties. Nowadays, the lack of social trust is another element that makes the notion of “commons” of difficult elaboration, since a certain degree of fear amongst people is still present. In the words of a respondent, “people do not talk to each other, . . . they are literally afraid to interact.”⁷⁴ Moreover, the citizens of Sarajevo seem to be afraid of their urban environment, as “a lot of spaces around their houses are destroyed, even now, twenty years after the war, and [individuals] do

not see these spaces as theirs.”⁷⁵ Ristić pointed at the war-generated reconfiguration of urban space by explaining that the urban environment of Sarajevo nowadays holds a “contested heritage and competing memories.”⁷⁶ The current reconfiguration of the capital is a result of the deliberate wartime destruction of the shared heritage of Sarajevo, a destruction that was used as a strategy of violence during this siege. The 1992–1995 conflict, and the forty-six-month siege of Sarajevo, provoked a series of detrimental consequences for its urban fabric. More than twenty years after its end, the number of war-shattered edifices is still high, and the space of Sarajevo appears partially surrounded by the remnants of the siege. By contrast, the number of multi-story shopping malls, luxurious hotels, and business centers, side by side with ruined buildings, has been constantly on the rise in the last decade. The transition from the socialist to the neoliberally transformed city, introduced after the war, profoundly altered the urban and social fabric. The current urban development phase in Sarajevo is mostly driven by foreign developers, in league with an unaccountable domestic elite and in the absence both of clear strategic plans and public participation in the decision-making process. Taking advantage of a not yet completely developed legal framework, foreign investors have financed malls and business centers catering mostly to wealthy businessmen from the Middle East,⁷⁷ to which the majority of Sarajevo’s inhabitants have no access.

Problems of a legal nature related to property rights, which are a consequence of both the socialist regime and of the war, complicate the scene even further, as “the government is still not sure which law they should implement . . . they are unsure when they can give us permission to use public space and when not.”⁷⁸ This, in turn, translates into a widespread uncertainty when it comes to using, even when not necessarily occupying, public space, for fear of suffering police repression. Finally, another challenge to the shared elaboration of an idea of the commons concerns the mentality of Sarajevo’s inhabitants, affected, according to a respondent, by a “destructive disease”⁷⁹ that translates into the little care devoted to public space and almost no respect for places devoted to collective use.⁸⁰ All these elements—the fear of space, the erosion of social ties, the uncertainty about property rights, the contested nature of the state—represent elements that render the Bosnian–Herzegovinian context a highly relevant case to investigate urbanization dynamics and contentious issues concerning the commons and the urban space. Against these odds, actions to reclaim urban commons and defend public space have been undertaken in the country over the last decade, as will be illustrated in the next section.

Reclaiming and Engendering the Commons in a Divided Society: Commoning Attempts in Sarajevo

Several initiatives have emerged since 2015 aimed at both reclaiming and engendering urban commons in Sarajevo. These actions targeted public institu-

tions (a library, a museum, parks of significant cultural meaning), natural resources (rivers),⁸¹ and public services (the water supply system, a hospital). The diverse urban grassroots groups that mobilized to protect and safeguard the cultural and environmental commons from the threat of privatization and commodification deployed different repertoires of action: occupation, re-appropriation, and cominging. The first action occurred in 2015 and addressed the country's National Museum (*Zemaljski Muzej*) located in Sarajevo. A heritage of the Hapsburg administration, the museum had been closed since 2012, officially owing to the scarcity of funds available for national cultural institutions and also due to the political unwillingness to finance an institution embodying the existence of a common national culture and a shared historical heritage. The museum reopened after a summer of mobilization. Backed by international and EU organizations, the campaign was undertaken by civil society together with NGOs, practitioners, and members of the Sarajevo's plenum working group on culture and art.⁸² The working group had been formed during the 2014 Social Uprising and gathered together artists and cultural workers to deal with problems related to this sector. The group continued their activities in the aftermath of the mobilization, deciding to stage a campaign for the reopening of the National Museum. The museum eventually reopened to the public in September 2015, thanks to the campaign #*jasammuzej* (I am museum), which engaged ordinary citizens and domestic public figures to symbolically take care of the museum by acting as "people on duty" (*dežurni*)⁸³ over the summer months.

In addition, the National Library (*Vijećnica* in local language), destroyed during the war, reopened after restoration in 2014. The edifice that used to house the old National Library since 1949 had been set ablaze in August 1992. Once renovated, it reopened with a different intended use: instead of being a public library as prior to the war, *Vijećnica* hosted the city hall offices and a private space of a commercial character, available to be rented by private individuals.⁸⁴ Thus, the inhabitants of Sarajevo found themselves displaced from their city and from their space in the city, being deprived of the main public library of the capital. To contest the designation of a former public building for private use, in December 2016 a group of citizens, coordinated by the citizen association Jedan Grad, Jedna Borba (JGJB; One City, One Struggle) and the Sarajevo-based collective Dobre Kote (DK; Good spots), staged a protest on the staircase leading up to the building. In a sign of protest, they also organized reading sessions while holding a banner reading "People's Reading Room: *Vijećnica* Is Ours" (*Narodna čitaona—Vijećnica je naša*).⁸⁵ This action represented just the beginning of a series of demonstrations that directly targeted the privatization of (former) public space that decreased dramatically the number of spaces for collective use of a non-profitable nature.

Besides the transformation of the National Museum and the National Library into sites of contention, in January 2016 the attempted closure of the main city hospital named after Dr. Abdulah Nakas provided another spark for mobilization. The

decision of the FBiH government to shut down the hospital was motivated by the need to save money on health care provisions and to reduce the cost of public health care in the Sarajevo canton.⁸⁶ Yet according to Sarajevo's citizens, the closure of the main hospital was likely to dramatically reduce the quality of the (already inadequate) public health care for the residents of the capital. After the announcement, doctors and patients together started to collect signatures to protest the closure of the General Hospital, endorsed by Jedan Grad, Jedna Borba. The group staged the campaign "We Won't Give Up Our Hospital" (*Ne damo našu bolnicu*), eventually preventing its closure. Other similar initiatives followed suit. Over the summer of 2017, for instance, the group organized rallies and sit-ins to voice citizens' discontent with the water shortages occurring in the capital owing to the mismanagement of the water supply system.

Alongside the abovementioned struggles and campaigns to defend urban commons, other initiatives were undertaken with the intention to (re)create and engender commons. The informal group⁸⁷ Dobre Kote strove to engage local communities in activities aimed at first imagining, and then re-appropriating and transforming abandoned spaces by integrating art into public places. Since its foundation in 2015, Dobre Kote has become involved in converting abandoned or looted spots in different neighborhoods of the capital (such as parks, courtyards, etc.) into common places, by resorting to the help of neighbors and involving bystanders in clean-up days called "community actions." During these initiatives, neighbors and citizens engage in gardening, painting, and small refurbishment activities.⁸⁸ According to the press, the "self-organized movement transform[ed] Sarajevo's public spaces into common free zones of solidarity, love and art through direct action"⁸⁹ all over the city.

Another action, which can be defined as a re-commoning initiative, involved a space that had hosted the first community garden during the war. The backyard, known as *baštica* ("little garden" in local vernacular), was cleaned in 2016 by a group of individuals, comprising some eighty volunteers, from high school students to pensioners. The cleaning action also aimed at reconstructing community ties lost because of the conflict, building on the symbolic meaning that the place retained for having allowed several families to survive during the war in Sarajevo.⁹⁰ Since 2013, the politically engaged NGO Association for Art and Culture Crvena⁹¹ (Red) has also become involved in a series of projects and initiatives aimed at studying and researching urbanization dynamics in the city. One initiative consisted in mapping vacant buildings and ruins in the city to identify abandoned spaces that could be used for the collectivity.⁹² On October 2015, Crvena organized "Neighborhood days" (*Kvartovski dani*), weekends in different locations of Sarajevo aimed at engaging inhabitants of the neighborhoods and raising awareness of the potential that abandoned and neglected urban spaces, such as backyards, retain for collective use. The action aimed at stressing the possibilities these places offered for non-consumeristic socialization, as opposed to the numerous cafés and restaurants of Sarajevo which, located

inside the shopping malls, offer socialization opportunities in exchange for money, inducing consumption.

Another commoning action took place in a courtyard located in the city center of Sarajevo, behind the Markale's city market. Re-appropriated over the summer of 2015, the yard was cleaned up by a group of high-school and university students, who removed the waste that covered the area and engaged in communal gardening, renaming the area *Slobodna Zona* (Free zone). The group was evicted from the space two years later, owing to uncertainties related to a dispute over the ownership of the space and the opposition of political parties, coupled with urban plans designating the area to the construction of a commercial building. Throughout the two years of occupation, though, the youth organized in the backyard communal gardening activities, creating an urban garden, and staged music performances and several activities of a cultural and artistic nature, highly welcomed by Sarajevo's youth.

The Social and Political Significance of Commons in a Divided Society

Alongside campaigns and commoning activities, in BiH the notion of urban space and commons also triggered debates and attempts to define its meaning. Discursively, commons have been framed by an activist as “the lowest common denominator amongst citizens,”⁹³ understood and conceived as something concerning all individuals regardless of their ethno-national belonging. Looking backwards to the pre-war socialist period, movement actors defined the commons as goods and services citizens were deprived of and which they possessed before the conflict, but which were lost with the breakup of Yugoslavia. Later, they became profitable because of the neoliberal privatization process that followed the war. As Svjetlana Nedimović, one of the leading members of the JGJB organization and one of the major contributors to the debate on the commons, elucidates, the decision of the group to raise awareness and to eventually mobilize in defense of the commons followed an in-depth reflection on the social and urban changes that have occurred in Sarajevo after the 1992–1995 conflict, in particular over the last decade. The commons framework was thus perceived as a concept likely to resonate with the wider citizenry and with the potential to have a broad popular appeal beyond “this sort of very small enclave of intellectuals, and longtime activists of universal profile.”⁹⁴ In Nedimović's view, the notion of commons bears the potential to unify citizens and communities regardless of ethno-national belonging, as she articulated:

We essentially understood the commons in terms of fundamental communal services, something we took for granted as public and available, although it eroded over the years and its quality worsened . . . for instance the schools, the health sector, public transport, water, electricity, etc. . . . Those will be the target of the next wave of

privatization in BiH: the erosion of services and privatization of the possibly profitable ones.⁹⁵

Following the massive privatization of public service utilities, the commons were then defined as the “basic, fundamental communal services” whose existence and availability had been taken for granted so far, and which citizens had been equally deprived of during the post-war neoliberal transition process.

While contentious actions organized to reclaim the commons revealed the political significance of this notion in BiH, commoning actions like the “Neighborhood days,” the cleaning of *baštica*, and communal gardening exposed the important social function commons perform in the trust reconstruction process. Commoning acts aimed not only at re-appropriating abandoned, ruined or privatized spaces, but also at rebuilding social ties amongst citizens by means of their involvement in community actions. This, in turn, favored socialization processes in a divided and atomized society. In doing so, commoning actions and struggles to re-appropriate abandoned space reveal their social importance, since they intend to (re)create ties amongst individuals in a community affected by a lack of trust, another consequence of the war—the community Silvia Federici referred to in her statement “no commons without community.”⁹⁶ Hence, commons disclose their unifying potential for the social, inclusive dimension intrinsic in the acts of commoning that involve the wider citizenry and contribute to re-establish ties and rebuild communities. As an interviewee explained while talking about the purpose of the initiatives organized by Dobre Kote, “We wanted to make something good for our community. I guess that this was the main goal.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, these commoning experiences managed to involve and mobilize individuals across the community and across generations⁹⁸ by bringing back to life neglected spaces, some of which used to be commons in the past.

Reappraising the Socialist Heritage: Building upon the Legacy of the Past

On several occasions urban grassroots groups made reference to the socialist past in their actions. For instance, to invite bystanders to join the cleaning and painting of backyards, Dobre Kote deliberately called these initiatives “work actions” (*radne akcije*). In former socialist Yugoslavia, the practice of “Youth Work Actions” consisted in working days that the Yugoslav youth from different parts of the federation volunteered to build roads and railroads as part of “youth brigades.”⁹⁹ Voluntary youth labor actions constituted one of the most important features of Yugoslav socialist society, aimed at fulfilling the common project of socialist Yugoslavia.¹⁰⁰ While in socialist times the term was used “to create a feeling of solidarity amongst people, of doing something for their country,”¹⁰¹ the youth of Dobre Kote re-appro-

riated it in an attempt to rebuild society and unite individuals, as the following quote explains:

Since [nowadays] there is no country and now there is no government [in BiH], we decided to use the term amongst ourselves to mean “grassroots working actions.” . . . We, as people without a government, have to rebuild our society and it worked really well, firstly because people had a lot of connections with Yugoslavia, like the older people who, when we said “working actions,” reacted like: “God, we want to do it again.” The young people were interested more in the socializing value because they saw so many people gathering around our project.¹⁰²

Similarly, during the 2017 campaign against water shortages, JGJB put up banners all over the city reading *Voda Narodu* (Water to the people), which recalled the socialist slogan *Sloboda Narodu* (Freedom to the people). In doing so, both groups appear to reappraise the historical experience of socialism, taking up the language of socialist times, thus “turning a popular nostalgia into a potential source for political claims . . . and memory-production into political claim-making.”¹⁰³

The reappraisal and rehabilitation of the socialist past is the result also of a process dating back to the 2008 wave of protest in the region. Back then, demonstrators called for free education and social justice, protested against austerity measures, and for the right to public space. It was during that period that activists and movement participants “decided to drop the reference to transition from their vocabulary, opting to refer to the region as post-socialist rather than a transitional one.”¹⁰⁴ During the protest waves that followed the outbreak of the 2008 crisis, activists in the region began to rehabilitate some concepts that used to belong to the socialist period, such as social justice, equality, commonality, and class struggle. The debate following the 2008 crisis in the region thus paved the way for the introduction of a progressive agenda and radical thinking into the dominant discourse.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, it helped to call into question the political and social life during Yugoslav socialism, and to articulate an intellectual debate over the need to recuperate and repurpose “the unrealized potentials of Yugoslav socialism” and its forgotten, and often delegitimized, emancipatory dimension.¹⁰⁶ Both nationalist and liberal discourses that became dominant after the breakup of Yugoslavia, which definitively ended state socialism, had dismissed Yugoslav socialism as a political and social project.¹⁰⁷ In BiH, activists taking part in the 2014 Social Uprising acknowledged that the post-war neoliberal project disappointed their expectations regarding the improvement of living and economic standards, to the extent that they called themselves “losers of transition”¹⁰⁸ and of the “seemingly endless transition to liberal democracy and neoliberal economy.”¹⁰⁹ Other scholars noted that the post-war transition translated to a constant “yearning in the meantime,”¹¹⁰ meaning a widespread state of immobility that led BiH citizens to yearn for a better life and a functioning state, while at the same time longing for the previous state of affairs, namely, the everyday lives of the socialist past.

Since 2010, activists in the region have thus engaged in a process of renegotiation of “the dominant historical narratives,”¹¹¹ referring to the socialist period as a “potential mine of insights and practical knowledge that could be reactivated in the difficult and often exasperating post-war political present.”¹¹² This was not a simple process in a war-torn society like BiH, where dealing with the 1992–1995 conflict and its dramatic consequences was a more urgent need than facing and discussing the socialist past.¹¹³ Gilbert explains that the state socialist experience was bracketed off from the post-war present, displacing and removing it from post-war public discussions.¹¹⁴ As he put it, “the more palpable, traumatic and immediate memory of the war has served to place state socialism . . . on a more distant temporal horizon.”¹¹⁵

The February 2014 Social Uprising partially adopted and revived the socialist era language of socioeconomic justice¹¹⁶: socialist-era terminology was used in the protests and plenums, reviving the language of class struggle.¹¹⁷ Kurtović refers to this as a process of retrieving and reappraising socialist collectivism as a form of counter-memory and a work of political subversion, which could pave the ground for the foundation of new political projects.¹¹⁸ With the 2014 Social Uprising, and the initiatives that followed on its heels, the rediscovery (and critical re-examination) of the Yugoslav socialist project, as well as the reappropriation of some aspects of its organizational model, shaped political discourses such as that on the commons. This became particularly visible in the attempts to revitalize the socialist-era practices of local governance such as that of *mjesne zajednice*, for their potential for bringing the government closer to the citizens. Some associations like Crvena embarked on a project aimed at rediscovering existing instruments of participatory democracy that are still available for citizens at the lowest level of government, for example, the *mjesne zajednice*. A heritage of the socialist system, such organizations still need to be strengthened to empower citizens and increase their participation in the decision-making process. Crvena attempted to enhance local self-governance through the reappropriation of existing self-government tools. To that end, the association published a booklet titled “Self-management guidelines,” a guide to the existing participatory tools available for citizens of the canton Sarajevo.¹¹⁹

Conclusions

This article has investigated contentious actions related to the use of urban space and urban commons in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a way to explore how the commons paradigm is used and the extent to which it resonates in a divided society with a socialist legacy—the least likely case study for mobilization for the commons. It has illustrated several initiatives undertaken by urban activists in Sarajevo to uncover the unifying potential of urban commons in a post-conflict and post-socialist area. Largely overlooked to date, these initiatives ranged from protests to reclaim

urban commons, to art production in neglected spaces, and (re)commoning acts aimed at rescuing dispossessed public space to reconstitute it to the collectivity. This article shows that these initiatives did not emerge out of the blue, but were initiated in the aftermath of a cycle of protests that lasted from 2012 to 2014 and sparked a debate over the notion of commons and the use of public space. The Picin park protest in 2012, the 2013 Babylution, and the 2014 Social Uprising were thus precursors of this local turn to the commons.

The analysis has shown that the commons in a war-torn, post-socialist society holds a mobilizing potential as they can be discursively conceived as the lowest common denominator amongst individuals regardless of their ethno-national belonging. In the case of Sarajevo, the commons paradigm has been adapted to the local context both to address the injustice and unsustainability of neoliberal forms of urbanization, and as a vehicle for strengthening community ties in a society divided and atomized after the war, with a re-socialization purpose. To that end, a certain degree of nostalgia for a common past has been instrumentally used to foster action, mobilizing memory but also reappraising the historical experience of socialism, which often constituted a vantage point for advocating in favor of common governance. In particular, urban activists reappraised some concepts and slogans of the socialist past; for instance, they reinvigorated the notion of “community actions” to mobilize certain categories of citizens, like the elders. At the same time, they involved the youth in cleaning up the ruins and liberating space as an act that symbolized the removal and overcoming of the legacy of war, as memories related to the last conflict are still alive. Hence, the article shows that commons—and in particular the practice of commoning—opened spaces for new means of participation, especially for the youth who usually refrain from taking part in activism and protest in BiH. Although the post-war rearrangement of politics appears detrimental to youth engagement, discouraging their active involvement, all the urban activist groups could count on a strong youth component. Nevertheless, certain generational differences can be noted in their references to Yugoslav socialism: the great majority of longtime activists retain a lived experience of state socialism and refer to it in a positive and constructive way. By contrast, the youngest ones, born in the immediate post-war period, appear to hold a more superficial and ambivalent historical knowledge of the socialist heritage, to which they had only partial access and no lived experience. Nevertheless, young activists differ in the degree of familiarity with the socialist history and retain different opinions at the individual level. Disrupting the vision of BiH as mainly a divided society with an apathetic citizenry, the article finds that over the last decade diverse initiatives have emerged to rescue dispossessed public space in order to restore it to the collectivity. These actions carry the potential for uniting a broader coalition of actors, and at the same time retain a social and political significance in a divided society, because of their importance for the trust reconstruction process.

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ORCID iD

Chiara Milan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2604-3442>

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Chiara Milan is currently Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Centre for Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz, Austria. She holds a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute, and has been a post-doctoral Research Fellow at the Scuola Normale Superiore, where she is a member of the Center for Social Movement Studies (COSMOS) research team. She is the author of the monograph *Social Mobilization beyond Ethnicity: Civic Activism and Grassroots Mobilization in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Routledge, 2020).