Housing as an Exception, Eviction as Everyday Life*

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Article: This article focuses on evictability and the eviction of the residents of one block of flats in a small southern Slovakian town. Most of the building's inhabitants are Roma, but the problem of cultural racism is interconnected with political, economic, legal, and even research and activist issues. The article is based on socially committed ethnographic research and the perspective of critical human geography. The theoretical framework is informed by the geographies of eviction, which grasp evictions as a becoming affective process. In this approach the focus is on not just the structural and other causes of eviction and its negative consequences but also and above all on the eviction that is taking place in the present and that temporally goes beyond the act of displacement – it signifies the lasting effect of sovereign power exercised through threats of eviction and 'home unmaking' brought about by the withholding of vital infrastructure. The analysis distinguishes four becoming phases. The first one shows how tenants' precarity is made when their stigmatisation as Roma intersects with the neoliberal imperatives of individual responsibility asserted by the town. In the second phase, the eviction begins, giving rise to affects of confusion, desperation, and fear. The third phase brings resistance to the arbitrary sovereign power of the town authorities. In the fourth phase the resistance sees some successes, but the town's sovereign power at the same time expands its spatiality. The state of the eviction here is not final and it can still develop in different ways.

Keywords: eviction, evictability, affect, sovereign power, tenants

Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review, 2023, Vol. 59, No. 2: 123–147
https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2023.028

* This article is a result of research supported by the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic under the ETA programme as part of project TL03000446, 'Institute of Forensic Interdisciplinary Research, Design and Architecture for Social Emancipation'

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Introduction

This paper examines the issue of housing loss among the Roma minority in a small southern Slovakian town. The analysis we present investigates a property eviction—a forced removal closely connected to the Roma origins of the tenants. However, we do not consider the Roma identity an issue that explains everything; rather, it is a variable factor in a complex web of everchanging relations among people, things and events. This enables us to see the issue in the continuity of space and time and understand the less apparent nuances that come into play during the housing negotiations. The eviction process is not straightforward, causal or linear. On the contrary, it is unpredictable and complex. The main actors in this convoluted sequence of events are the block of flats itself, the tenants, local authorities and our research team. The researchers are transdisciplinary and include individuals from different fields of expertise (anthropology, design, architecture, geography); this text, however, is primarily written from the perspective of critical human geography. In its current expanded form, critical human geography connects the perspectives of social science and moral and political philosophy considerably more than sociology or anthropology (in here see Barnett, 2017; Cresswell, 1996; Rose, 2010; Smith, 2000; Springer, 2013, 2016a; Woodward, 2014).

This text is based on ethnographic research conducted between 2020 and 2022. However, the research team on the ground, while in a different composition, has been active since 2018, and their work in the area is still ongoing. The ethnographic field site is a former mining town in southern Slovakia with a population of over ten thousand. The key point of interest is a block of flats nicknamed Chimney (Komiňák[1]), which housed over 120 tenants at the beginning of the research, half of whom were children. This text is primarily concerned with recent events that ultimately led to the eviction of the tenants as well as questioning how the daily lives of the tenants changed once they settled into the new reality. The persistent and urgent nature of the eviction (having far-reaching consequences on the tenants' quality of life), our ongoing reactions as researchers and aspiring social change designers, and the reactions of the tenants themselves all constitute this case study, one which shows that eviction is a process in which local and overarching dynamics intertwine with other and, therefore, cannot be reduced to a straightforward narrative of the oppressed fighting those in power. In order to demonstrate that (Roma) evictions differ from case to case and that our interventions (as ethnographers and social change designers) are not only an integral part of their development but also steer their course, we have employed a quasi-comparative analysis of our case with Michele Lancione's ethnography of eviction (2017, 2019).

In our text, we utilize Lancione's four phases of eviction and apply them to our case. They serve us both as an analytical tool and a template. Our theoretical framework also shares similarities with Lancione's, as he is also interested in the

[1] The actual nickname of the building has been modified.

becomings of eviction and in the affective understanding of evictions. However, we complement his framework with theories of sovereign power and *home unmaking*. In our text, Lancione's phases acquire a different content and sequence of events that contrasts considerably with the situation in Bucharest, where many activists supported the tenants during the eviction process. We place Lancione's processual methodology of evictions in a different context with an alternative process of eviction. We are particularly interested in the affective response to the eviction process as it unfolds and how the emotions of those involved shape the process on a discursive and material level. It has been demonstrated that, for example, the sovereign power of a local authority may be exercised in a way that differs from just forcing tenants out onto the streets. However, these methods and affects are no less destructive to human lives.

Neoliberal rationality, whose worldview often justifies evictions (Nowicki, 2017; Springer, 2015), takes the position that housing should be primarily competitive, thus excluding those individuals and groups who are not able to compete successfully. The excluded then feel the consequences of this on a daily basis, at the level of affective and emotional bodily experiences. These everyday experiences fall precisely in the realm of ethnographic research. Therefore, to study the power relationship between institutions of a country or a town that enforce neoliberal rationality and processes of eviction, 'we need to shift our gaze from the obvious places in which power is expected to reside to the margins and recesses of everyday life in which (…) infelicities become observable' (Das, 2007, pp. 163–164). We can talk about it falling within everyday life because, ultimately, the final forced eviction of the block of flats did not happen. Nevertheless, the (remaining) tenants still keenly feel the impacts of the eviction to this day.

Eviction as a process and the politics of affect

The goal here is to depict eviction as a multifaceted process and to advance research on evictions that highlights their variability over time and differing becomings. We present the connection between this emerging perspective on eviction, of which there are so far only a few publications despite growing numbers (Baker, 2017, 2021; Garboden, Rosen, 2019; Lancione, 2017, 2019; Purser, 2016; Wilhelm-Solomon, 2016, 2021), and engaged field research aiming to assist people facing eviction or at the risk of eviction. Our research team, therefore, openly participates and becomes an actor in the analysed phenomenon. Given this context, the politics of affect play an important role, the analysis of which can be found in contemporary publications on the geography of evictions (Baker, 2017, 2021; Brickell et al., 2017; Lancione, 2017, 2019; Wilhelm-Solomon, 2021). Its analysis shows how sovereign local authorities transform a house into 'a space of exception' (Agamben, 2005, 2011), both 'unmaking' a home (Baxter & Brickell, 2014; Burrell, 2014; Nowicki, 2014) and also denying residents the option to potentially lead a more varied life than one affected by uncertainty, fear of eviction and sadness over unmade homes.

This particular eviction and the focus of this research was triggered by a notice announcing the lease would not be renewed, delivered to all tenants at the end of September 2020 as the cold autumn weather and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic approached. Even prior to the eviction, we aimed to find ways to improve the living situation of the tenants, primarily by testing the town services since the municipality was the housing provider. We negotiated with its management, offered advisory services regarding grant opportunities for building social housing and conducted a systematic search for strategic partners who could help solve the adverse situation of the Chimney's residents. While risk of eviction was always present among the tenants given that contracts were only signed for three-month periods, the town's response, particularly its timing, surprised both the tenants and ourselves, and we were forced to react. Uncertainty about the future was ever-present on the ground. For this reason, newer ethnographic approaches to eviction, such as those by Michele Lancione (2017, 2019), have explicitly referenced inspiration from the 'anthropology of becoming' (Biehl & Locke, 2017) and from geography's now widely recognized 'non-representational theory', which focuses on the politics of affect (Simpson, 2020; Thrift, 2007).

These approaches are specific in how they perceive time: there is something else and different always becoming, arising from the virtual potential of the present moment, and this creates the necessity to accept becoming into our ethics (Deleuze, 1994; Deleuze & Guattari, 2010; May, 1994, 1995; Newman, 2001, 2005) as the becoming of eviction can be a highly rhizomatic and differentiating process (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2016). The rhizomatic and becoming nature attributed to the studied terrain must necessarily also be assumed by ethnography itself. The complexity of the terrain where eviction occurs compels us as participants to accept pragmatic responsibility and answer the question of what the next best thing to do is, not as concerns a pre-theorized utilitarian code, 'determining what is "best", but in relation to skilful judgement, determining what is best for now' (Rose, 2010, p. 343). The ethics of pragmatic responsibility are not guided by any kind of transcendental idea of justice but rather pay 'critical attention to the conditions of dialogue and response through which manifest injustices are recognised and addressed (or not)' (Barnett, 2017, p. 270).

Most existing studies on eviction rarely emphasize the ongoing and becoming stages of eviction. Instead, these studies focus on the causes of evictions, on what events led to evictions, or, conversely, they examine the aftermath of evictions on displaced tenants, the future after eviction. Both of these areas fall under various academic disciplines, such as law, social work and sociology. The law describes how legislation facilitates or prevents evictions and how (and if) they assist evicted people. Social work addresses supporting people at risk of eviction in a way that prevents it, as well as working with those who have experienced eviction to minimize the negative impacts. Sociology examines the societal structural causes of eviction and its social consequences for both society and evicted individuals (Vols et al., 2019). Current Czech research on eviction follows the

same pattern and also falls under the two areas of research and, therefore, the aforementioned academic disciplines (e.g., Kupka et al., 2021; Walach et al., 2021). A detailed look into the circumstances of the eviction process as it happens has been omitted: 'In simple terms, we have excellent accounts explaining *why* evictions happen and what their impact is but less about the processes and materials that constitute and complicate [becoming] eviction.' (Baker, 2021, p. 797)

In the context of the current state of the art, some authors have been calling for a shift from research on eviction to research on the process of 'evicting' (Baker, 2017, 2021; Garboden & Rosen, 2019; Purser, 2016). Eviction is then understood not only as the event of being expelled from a property but also as a broader process, not limited to the usually violent act of forcing people out of their homes but also including the preceding threats of eviction or subsequent resistant or submissive behaviour of those evicted. Garboden and Rosen (2019, p. 655) emphasize 'the importance of the period of time during which a tenant may be living under the threat of eviction, but importantly, is still living in the home and maintaining a relationship with the landlord'. This period may be filled with uncertainty and emotional anxiety. Most crucially, the predictability of human life is disrupted as it is not clear what will happen next. 'Forced evictions are detrimental processes that hurt, haunt and linger before, during and after their eventuality.' (Brickell et al., 2017, p. 11) In his key publication, *Evicted: Property and Profit in the American City*, Matthew Desmond (2016) implicitly captures this processual concept. Baker (2021, pp. 804–805) thinks this new approach is 'moving away from the perception of eviction as a discrete event or output that lies at the end of a procedure, towards one grounded in how eviction compresses, stretches, appropriates and produces time. For this reason, evicting must be thought of as an affective relation between space and time.'

The emerging understanding of evictions in space and time is gaining prominence in current critical human geography. The concept is often linked to research on the practices of home unmaking, which is complementary to that of *home making*: 'Home unmaking is essentially a critique of the centrality of homemaking in the literature on home.' (Baxter & Brickell, 2014, p. 134) In both Anglophone literature on classic and critical home studies (Blunt & Dowling, 2006) and Czech literature (Gibas, 2017; Vacková & Galčanová, 2014), the possibility of home unmaking is implicitly present, but it is completely overshadowed by the focus on analysing the diverse practices of home making. A critical perspective on home unmaking practices is key for eviction processes, especially in coproduction with home making practices (Burrell, 2014; Nowicki, 2014): 'Home is made, unmade and remade across the lifecourse, subject to a seemingly unending variety of factors: financial, conjugal, sociopolitical and so on. Home can shift from a site of safety to a site of violence, and back again.' (Nowicki, 2014, p. 788)

Eviction occurs in a spatial-temporal dimension and unmakes homes, negatively impacting the people who experience it. Brickell et al. (2017, p. 3) propose questions we should be asking, for example, 'What is the relationship between

tenure insecurity, forced evictions and wider economic and political processes? To what extent do evictions prompt us to rethink the links between homes, bodies and spaces? How are evictions mobilized across different affective, emotional and material registers?' A common argument in the politics of affect is that everyone has individual affective capacities to influence their life and surroundings in various ways (Simpson, 2020; Thrift, 2007). In the case of home unmaking and forcible removal from homes, 'affective capacities and potentialities (…) are not simply impacted as a by-product of evictions and other forms of displacement; they are precisely what is being dispossessed' (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2021, p. 977). People lose control over their lives and are often left at the mercy of events and relationships that they cannot influence. They also lose the ability to live according to choices that are at least partially their own. Their human potential to form a collective capable of united political acts may also be an example of another thing lost.

The spatial-temporal environments of evictions in progress can become 'spaces of exception', as Giorgio Agamben (2005, 2011) uses the term. In these spaces, people are not perceived as adequate members of the human community but reduced to 'bare lives' — lives excluded from society and dehumanized. Spaces of exception, where the abnormal event of eviction becomes ordinary, often originate in situations where political authorities use an unexpected and unusual event to rid urban districts they govern of unwanted residents, such as poor or non-compliant populations (Adams et al., 2009; Zhang, 2017). The fundamental nature of states of exception is that the political, sovereign power is capable and willing to treat unwanted people unjustly, regardless of any legality or legitimacy. In spaces of exception, this state becomes constant, as is the trauma of ongoing evictions for those who live in these spaces (Adams et al., 2009, p. 632). Arpagian and Aitken (2018, p. 448) add that for these people, 'uncertainty becomes ordinary until the prolonged slow violence of dispossession is interrupted by the trauma of displacement. These actions push legal liminality, spatial instability.'

Evictability, evictions and the Roma population

In the case of the Roma people affected by eviction in Slovakia that we examine in this text, it is possible to identify specific structural causes which led to them becoming involved in the process. These causes stem from the stigmatization, marginalization and segregation of the Roma population in Central and Eastern Europe (Černušáková, 2020; Mihály, 2019; Ort, 2021; Powell & Lever, 2017). Since the 1990s, there has been virtually no quality housing policy in Slovakia that would systematically address the needs of people from different parts of the socioeconomic spectrum. Neoliberal rhetoric, which looks down upon rental housing and promotes home ownership as an aspirational goal for everyone, 'reflects an ever-expanding ideology that frames the forced eviction of those on low or no incomes as morally just' (Nowicki, 2017, p. 123). As a result, impoverished

Roma individuals in small towns often face disrespect simply because they are not homeowners. Those not owning their home in this competitive environment are almost permanently at risk of losing their rental housing.

The literature on issues concerning the Roma population refers to the persistent threat of housing loss as *evictability* (van Baar, 2016) or the virtuality of eviction. Huub van Baar (2016, p. 214) defines evictability as the ever-present 'possibility of being removed from a sheltering place' and connects it to the efforts of cities and municipalities to expel Roma residents from their administrative districts. The stigmatization of the Roma populations often involves the stereotypical idea of Roma as nomads who do not necessarily mind moving from their place of residence and who are not able to 'settle' in a way that would benefit the local community, usually economically (van Baar, 2011). The situation of evictability is linked to allegedly 'honest' efforts of cities and municipalities to 'activate' Roma populations, efforts that are destined to fail, as the cause of local authorities in our case also shows. In this way, local authorities reproduce '"the habits" of the majority to sub-humanise or even dehumanise the Roma' (van Baar, 2012, p. 1297). Van Baar's concepts of eviction and evictability are, therefore, concepts that point to injustice but do not go beyond cultural, structural analysis.

Michele Lancione (2017, 2019), who is known for blurring the lines between his ethnographic and activist work, offers a processual conceptualization of the eviction and evictability of the Roma population. His *processual methodology* highlights not only the cultural discursive dimension of eviction, which is prevalent in van Baar's work, but also places emphasis on the dimensions of the body, lived experiences and the material, allowing for an exploration of the affective dynamics of the eviction process. In this text, we draw on Lancione's methodology and divide the eviction process into four successive but often overlapping phases. Despite different contexts in Lancione's case and our own, partly determined by the dichotomy between a capital city and a small town, there are certain similarities, which make it possible for us to think of the eviction process in phases as well.

In his study, Lancione (2017, 2019) breaks down into phases the process whereby precarity is created as regards an evicted population in Bucharest. The first phase is referred to as *the pre-making of precarity*. In this phase, the relocation of Roma people to older homes with substandard living conditions took place. This was triggered by a mixture of factors, such as racialized stigmatization, exclusion from the majority population and exclusion from the capitalist processes of neoliberalization, housing commodification and gentrification. 'Housing became of crucial nexus for today's urban precarity', a result of a post-socialist state becoming an ally of the free residential market without regard for the economic needs and rights of its citizens (Lancione, 2019, pp. 185–186). This laid the groundwork for eviction, which began to take place during the second phase, called *the in-making of precarity*. During this phase, the block of flats was privatized, the new owner refused to renew tenancy agreements, and the city utilized the police to evict residents without securing suitable alternative housing.

The third phase is called *the un-making of precarity*. In this phase, the evicted residents refused to leave the space on the street in front of their former home and protested the eviction by transforming this space into their new home. This created 'an uncanny affective atmosphere', inspiring resistance through the protest's energy and leaving the city unprepared and unsure of how to respond (Lancione, 2017, p. 1019). A number of activists gradually joined the evicted residents, and the protest grew into a show of resistance against the city's housing policy as a whole. 'Occupation of the sidewalk made them, and their political demands, apparent to the many, embodying a politics *for the many*.' (Lancione, 2019, pp. 187–188) Although people were not particularly united when living in the house, they became a cohesive community on the street and 'immediately started to talk about themselves as one. Their aim was to obtain housing for the whole community' (Lancione, 2017, p. 1021). The fourth and final phase, *the re-making of precarity*, describes the response of the local authorities to the previous phase. In an effort to thwart the resistance efforts, they proclaimed them illegal. Meanwhile, the people had been living on the streets for a significant time without any signs of a change, and some lost their energy to resist and moved away (Lancione, 2019, pp. 188–189). The last remaining former tenants were evicted again a year later, this time from the street.

Lancione's processual approach in his research is driven by the following questions: How does the historical context intersect with the present? How is the subject affected? What can anybody do to resist? If governance is reasserted, how? According to Baker (2017, p. 156), 'There is a need to consider the affective and emotional power of eviction as a significant element of the process and outcomes of eviction.' Eviction is not a straightforward process that begins, proceeds and ends. Eviction is a process that necessarily stems from evictability but can take many forms, lead to unexpected events, bring about unforeseen developments and inspire various affects. Our contribution to the study of evictions is an analysis of how destructive the affects of evicting can be to human lives and homes, even if the authorities do not go through with the eviction.

Methodology

Our interdisciplinary research utilizes a range of combined social sciences and social design methods, the most crucial method being similar to what some authors term 'patchwork ethnography' (Gökçe et al., 2020). 'Patchwork' is a fitting term because, while the research team has been conducting fieldwork since 2018, their in-person presence on the field has not been continuous. In other words, since the beginning, the research has not been based on long-term fieldwork but on short, intense regular trips. Even though this approach could have been considered 'patchwork' by design, the circumstances of 2020 made it a necessary decision. Team members went on regular 'field trips', usually lasting several days, that formed (and still form) various research 'patches'. Further patchwork is done

via virtual communication (cf. Dalsgaard, 2016), which the team members have maintained with key contacts from the field.

One team member moved to the field site between August 2020 and March 2021, a crucial period when a physical and almost continuous presence was essential both for supporting the tenants in their adverse living situation and also for ethnographic research in the service of design, the aim of which was to generate a solution to the critical situation. The researcher was originally meant to operate covertly and move into the Chimney block of flats as a tenant. This was to ensure the success of the original plan for the role, which was to test the services of the town and map formal and informal processes in relation to the tenants of the block of flats. By concealing this identity, the team member would not endanger any of the residents. Moreover, since the researcher would not be existentially dependent on the housing situation, they would be able to document specific problematic issues concerning the living conditions in the building without hindrance. Our designer could then produce specific solutions. This plan failed when local authorities refused to allow the team member to apply for housing at the Chimney. Instead, the team member moved elsewhere and regularly visited the building. Nevertheless, after the state of evictability transformed into the eviction process, the team member began to operate openly as a researcher and lay social worker in the field. They still continue to hide their identity from local authorities.

The Chimney initially served as a hostel for labourers and, after the revolution, the headquarters of the tax office. By the second half of the 1990s, a tax office was no longer needed in that area. The building underwent renovations and began to serve as temporary housing for tenants from other council flats whose agreements had come to a premature end. The building has only one-room flats; nevertheless, the local authorities still placed up to eleven people in one flat. Knowing that flats ranged from 16.81 to 33.89 m², a November 2020 survey provided evidence of the cramped living conditions. It found that five or more people were living in nine of the 23 households. At the time, 129 tenants lived in the building, including 70 children. However, the local authority has never acknowledged the overcrowding in their official statements about the building. The block of flats mostly houses people with low income and housing difficulties, possibly lacking external family support. Most belong to the Roma community in Slovakia, and some are in vulnerable categories, such as single mothers, seniors, people with disabilities, people at risk of addiction or former convicts. A peculiar feature of the rental agreements in the building is that they are signed for a fixed term of three months, even though some of the tenants have lived in the building for up to ten years.

The start of our study dates back to 2018, when team members conducted the first round of interviews with households living in the Chimney. A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded. The team also made notes on the state of the building and its atmosphere at that time. Another round

of semi-structured interviews followed, this time with local authority officials, who refused to be recorded. During subsequent field trips, team members visited the building on a mostly informal basis and established contacts for further, regular unstructured virtual communication or phone calls with the tenants. Team members also took notes during these visits and communication exchanges. This combination of regular field trips and phone and virtual communication continued in this form until August 2020, when one of our team members moved to the field site, adding a new element to the data construction.

This team member recorded their field notes on an internet discussion forum only accessible to the team, allowing everyone on the team to stay up to date on the current developments at the field site. The team member did not post daily but provided a summary of recent events every few days. After the researcher left the field site in March 2021, another team member conducted and recorded semi-structured interviews with the households in the block of flats collecting descriptions and evaluations of the period of their presence in the field. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted and recorded with two social workers who started working in the field during this period at the request of the research team. The team also analysed official and judicial correspondence and documents related to the eviction process as well as articles in the local print newspapers that mentioned the building and its situation.

When utilizing processual methodology, certain ethical rules apply. Whenever ethnographers examine social situations, cultural patterns or material-discursive arrangements, negotiations always take place about which patterns, situations and arrangements are more appropriate and acceptable. Teamwork in the field requires pragmatically differentiating not only the appropriateness and acceptability of the aforementioned but also what is achievable and possible. In the intervals between individual trips, we always analysed the preceding one, planned our next steps and remotely negotiated with various interested parties. The involvement of a lawyer is a good example. Having collected data from the field, legal expertise serves as a tool for disrupting the sovereignty of the town. It attempts to firmly anchor the debate in the legal system and to formalize it as the communication between the town and the residents only took place verbally until our intervention. In the evictability phase, legal involvement stays at a diplomatic level in the form of calls for the improvement of housing conditions. In the phases of eviction and resistance, our lawyer offers consultations and prepares a legal defence for the moment the residents are formally threatened with a court order to vacate their flats. In this phase, residents are also provided actual legal representation in court. In the final phase, legal expertise contributes to the fact that police still have not physically or forcefully evicted the residents of the investigated building.

Phase One: Evictability

Chimney, the block of flats at the centre of our interest, was built before 1989 as a hostel for labourers. In the 1990s, the town repurposed it as a temporary home for people who have nowhere else to turn. The temporary nature of the housing legitimizes the refusal of town authorities to sign rental agreements of more than three months, the idea being that during those three months, tenants will be able to find other housing. This is proving near impossible as tenants cannot afford the more expensive market-rate rents. Many are racially stigmatized as 'unadaptable' Roma, and paradoxically, the stigma of living in the Chimney reduces their chances of finding other accommodations. The reputation of the building in the town is poor, and many stereotypes, such as 'trash', 'noisy' and 'laziness', are associated with it. It is an example of a place with 'characteristics that influence our characterization of the people in them or from them' (Cresswell, 1996, p. 154). Leaving the Chimney and moving to a better housing situation is ideal for most people, but they themselves consider it largely unattainable, no matter how much they might differ from the stereotypical Chimney residents.

Local authorities also reproduce the stereotypes about the Chimney and make few attempts to conceal their desire to get rid of the block of flats, residents included. The approach of their landlords, along with their three-month contracts, leads to constant anxiety among the tenants, who worry their housing situation could come to an end at any moment. To live in the Chimney is to live in a continuous state of evictability, a constant 'possibility of being removed from a sheltering place' (van Baar, 2016, p. 214). This first phase corresponds to Lancione's (2019, pp. 185–186) phase of pre-making precarity. The most noticeable affects of the residents are those of resignation, hopelessness, futility, and they frequently abandon efforts to improve their living conditions. During the pre-making of precarity, local authorities actively influence the attitude of the tenants by treating them all as one mass of people who are to blame for the situation in the building and around it. As one of the tenants told us:

> That week we all had to go out and clean. That is what I heard. At half past seven they made them all go out. They all had to go out and pick up rubbish outside. All right, I can see one side of this, but it's mostly children who make the mess. Why should an old, retired person go out and help clean up? It's the same old principle, that everyone should. They can't sort it out with them [who are responsible for the mess], let them know.

'Being messy' is one of the primary stereotypes attributed to everyone in the building, as observers from the town often see rubbish around the house and in the hallways. This makes many of the tenants unhappy, as they keep their flats tidy. However, the observers ignore their invitations to come inside and look. By focusing exclusively on the hallways and the outside of the building, they perpet-

uate the notion of the residents as 'messy'. The town's practice, one among many, causes the residents to argue about who is responsible for the mess and who is to blame for their circumstances and the unwillingness of the town to improve their living conditions. The tenants who have lived in the building the longest reflect that the situation keeps deteriorating every year. The authorities absolve themselves of responsibility for the state of the building and instead put the blame on all the tenants. At the same time, they still perceive tenants as individuals, in that they hold each tenant responsible for their housing situation and their own life. The local authorities see neoliberalism and its principle of individual responsibility as universally correct 'as its discursive formations take on "common sense" qualities that penetrate to the heart of political subject formation' (Springer, 2016b, p. 59). From the town's point of view, the tenants are personally irresponsible and change must originate within them. In line with neoliberal thinking, the municipality advocates that 'we all have to become the same everywhere in order to qualify for admission to the regime of universal (in this case neoliberal) rights and benefits' (Harvey, 2009, p. 52). In this way, neoliberal logic is disconnected from lived reality as it overlooks the fact that people cannot control everything in their life, such as the social environments in which they are born (cf. Smith, 2000).

The block of flats is falling increasingly into bad condition, with many things requiring repairs. The primary concern is the regular extermination of rats and insects. According to tenants, exterminations are carried out improperly and with unsuitable products. The town blames the tenants for this as well, saying, 'The effectiveness of the elimination of insects is directly dependent on the responsible attitude of the tenants. Primarily, they are required to provide access to their flats. During the last insect extermination, six tenants did not provide access to their flats.' (letter from the town to the ombudsman, October 2, 2020) Perhaps these six tenants were not at home, or there was a different reason. Nonetheless, no consideration is given to the possibility that they might have different time schedules than that which the town considers the norm (Osman & Pospíšilová, 2019). Moreover, the entire mass of tenants (a much larger number than just six flats) is blamed for the extermination failure. Similarly, tenants say that when they report things which require repairs (windows, doors, radiators, hot water, etc.), the town at times sends a handyperson but often refuses to do so, claiming that the object in question would soon be destroyed again. During our research period, the municipality did not spend any money from the fund specifically designed for repairing municipal flats, including the Chimney; instead, tenants were forced to do repairs on their own.

As a consequence, relationships among neighbours in the building are poor. They blame each other for the problems in the building, and the local authorities feed this narrative by either failing to act or appealing to individual responsibility. Several years ago, they cut off the hot water supply for everyone because some of the tenants' bills were overdue. Conversely, if tenants want to make improvements to their flats on their own and ask for permission, they are

denied. As one tenant put it, 'They don't let you touch the system here. You can't demolish anything. You can do nothing. I wanted to install plastic windows here. They said, "No way."' The tenant continued, 'It will just turn against you anyway. The town will drag everyone into it and tell them, "If you want things to work and be repaired and you want to be comfortable, you all have to join in."' When it comes to placing blame for problems, local authorities do not accept the notion of an individual mistake but ascribe that mistake to the mass of tenants. However, when it comes to fixing mistakes, authorities rely on the individual responsibility of each tenant who is supposed to fix them, such as doing repairs on their own. But should the individual repairs lead to an improvement in their housing, the town reverts back to seeing tenants as one mass and requires everyone to cooperate. Consequently, the tenants in the Chimney live in a paradox, in a state of exception; thus, we can identify the block of flats as a space of exception as well. Local authorities reign as sovereigns over the building; that is, they have sovereign power over it. Most tenants also perceive them as such. According to Agamben (2005, p. 35), 'The sovereign stands outside (…) of the normally valid juridical order, and yet belongs to it.' The sovereign can establish a space of exception outside the juridical order and annul the norms within that space of exception (Agamben, 2005, 2011). The norm annulled here is the norm of adequate housing.

The town defends its policy of only offering rental contracts for a fixed period of three months by arguing the temporary nature of the Chimney's design. However, some residents have temporarily resided there for over ten years as they cannot obtain other housing. Evictability, the threat that the eviction process could start at any point, is a paradox: while the sovereign guarantees the tenants the right to housing by law, the right is exercised in the space of exception, which can only exist within the law by being outside of it, the norm annulled. The Chimney is simply not a de jure 'normal' residential building, even though it is a de facto 'normal' residential building. This leads to another paradox: the tenant is seen as either an individual or one of the tenant mass depending solely on the whim of the sovereign (the local authorities). They are treated as individuals when the building is considered normal or as just part of the mass if it is considered abnormal. The space of exception here is not a 'killing machine' as in Agamben's (2011, p. 162–174) analysis of concentration camps. However, it is undoubtedly an eviction machine and a machine of home unmaking (Baxter & Brickell, 2014; Burrell, 2014; Nowicki, 2014).

The exception for the Chimney's tenants is not about suppressing their right to life (Agamben, 2011) but rather about categorizing them as residents who do not deserve housing, who cannot improve their housing as individuals and can only worsen them as a mass. This also prevents them from transforming from a mass into a community that would fight for their rights together. The town's approach reinforces poor relationships among neighbours. Town authorities are afraid, in a way similar to the authorities in Lancione's (2017, 2019) Bucharest

evictions case, that the tenants could start working together with the goal of obtaining better housing for the whole community, which could be a much more effective resistance to the town's rule. This kind of thinking by the authorities 'is the paralysis of human capabilities; it adversely affects human potential by reorganizing our communal ideals in the service of individualism' (Springer, 2013, p. 622). The collective or community struggle for rights, and livelihood tends to be the nemesis of neoliberalism and also the one thing that advocates of the imperative of individual responsibility fear the most (Newman, 2010; Springer, 2016a, 2016b). Local authorities demonstrate that this fear influences them by keeping tenants as a mass and engaging in practices that prevent their development into a community or collective.

In this stage, the stance of the research team towards the residents and local authorities was shaped by the goal of mapping the problematic aspects of miscommunication between them. Given the power imbalance and resulting injustice according to the tenants that we noted, the research team tried to help the residents negotiate with the local authorities about possible minor improvements to their living conditions (such as a truly effective extermination of the rats and insects). However, the town was dismissive and, ultimately, declined the researcher's offer to cooperate. This was likely when the local authorities decided on actions which would become fully apparent in the next phase.

Phase Two: Eviction

During the field trips in the summer of 2020, the research team decided to throw a social event with the Chimney residents in the space behind the house. The goal was to create a friendly atmosphere where people can get to know each other, talk through topics that create tensions among them and together point to problems that are common for all the tenants. The working title for the event was 'Barbecue'. During the summer, the research team visited all the flats with invitations, so essentially everyone was invited. The event took place at the end of the summer, and around three-fifths of the tenants attended. Apart from the barbecue, there were children's games, and adults had the opportunity to discuss any topic related to their lives in the Chimney. The barbecue achieved its objective only partially, as many attendees did not understand its message. Others were reserved as they were not used to this type of social event. However, the party revealed the potential for future events that could create an atmosphere for cooperation, where the tenants could get more insight into the efforts of the research team, and many of them could develop better relationships with each other.

The local authorities, however, cut short the potential for similar events in the future. They were likely surprised as well, as they are not accustomed to this type of social event. Their reaction indicates that it was at least partially this event which pushed them to evict the tenants—an ever-present possibility in a state of

evictability and yet never really expected. Several days after the barbecue, all the tenants received a letter signed by the mayor titled 'Notice of Termination of Tenancy Due to Closure and Evacuation of the Building'. It stated that

> [the town] as the owner of the block of flats on [street name] had decided to close and clear out the said building by 31 October 2020. After the deadline, the supply of energy for heating will be terminated. The rental agreements will not be extended and tenancy will cease at the end of the contractual rental period. (letter to tenants, 23 September 2020)

This letter, delivered in printed form, is a physical object that provoked a strong affective response. A desperate kind of mistrust took hold of the tenants, and they turned on each other and the research team. The search for the guilty party began, and people expressed opinions such as 'We trusted someone who promised us a better life, and once again, it was a mistake.' As Baker (2017, p. 155) notes, 'The loss of the home, and housing precarity, inspire clear feelings of depression and desperation.' Using virtual communication, one of the tenants said to the town, 'What annoys me most of all is that you lump us all together,' and asks, 'How can you destroy so many lives with one piece of paper?' Despair and confusion overwhelm the vast majority of the tenants. 'Confronted with cynical state agents, unpredictable legal exceptions, and precarious political relations, individuals encounter confusing affectivity and alienating emotivity—guilt, abjection—as political relations' with the town as the sovereign (Woodward, 2014, p. 29). The municipality contributed to the confusion by responding to questions about why this happened with 'thank the Czechs', referring to the research team, and claimed that 'the Czechs could have bought the house for one euro but refused'. In this way, they once again absolved themselves of their responsibility as an institution.

Stress spread through the block of flats. Anyone who could move in with their family or to other flats did so, but many people do not have this option. Some promptly returned when the new accommodations did not pan out. The research team spent most of their time and energy reassuring people. We promised them that were, after 31 October, the court to indeed issue an order for eviction, we would contest it (taking advantage of the fact we were now working with a lawyer). The local authorities did not seem to be making an observable effort to offer alternative housing to the potentially evicted people, but they claimed to be working on a solution with the local community centre, which had so far ignored the Chimney. They said, 'Based on our experience, the key to success lies mainly with the tenants and their attitude. They seem unaware of the gravity of their situation and refuse to cooperate and work with our proposed solution.' (letter from the town to the ombudsman, 2 October 2020) The town again refers to the idea of individual responsibility, which the tenants in the building have supposedly failed at. A local weekly newspaper, which is financially dependent on the

town, published an article on 12 October titled 'Every Person is Responsible for Their Housing'. The article first describes the upcoming eviction and then provides this value-laden conclusion:

> We will continue to update you on the situation surrounding the eviction of tenants from the dilapidated block of flats and, most importantly, what actions the adult citizens have taken to maintain and keep their decent housing on the pages of [name of the newspapers]. The fact remains that every adult must take responsibility for their own housing and its upkeep. It would be utopian to think that you don't have to pay for your housing, that you don't have to maintain it, and that someone else will do it for you.

This phase of becoming eviction roughly corresponds to Lancione's (2019, p. 186–187) phase of in-making precarity. Unlike in his study, the eviction has yet to actually proceed, and the town has bided its time. Nonetheless, the initiated eviction process affected everyone involved as a current, imminent threat that could be enforced at any moment. The research team responded to the situation by having the team member, who was at the start of their continuous physical presence for ethnographic observation, fully reveal their identity to the tenants. They began working partly as a researcher and partly as a lay social worker in the field and gained back the tenant's trust in the team. In this phase, the position of the research team moved from considering possibilities of dialogical cooperation with the municipality to attempts to assist and help the evicted people. It is clear that establishing a closer, cooperative relationship between the tenants and the research team was what motivated the local authorities to initiate the eviction process. This also meant that the research team had to openly and explicitly take a position against the town and attempt to counteract its actions, whether by providing legal recommendations to the tenants or by possibly legally contesting the town's decision. As in Lancione's study, moving from evictability to eviction meant a significant step forward in home unmaking, as the following phase reveals.

Phase Three: Resisting Eviction

The last day of October marked the deadline for the eviction. However, most tenants remained in the building, as they had nowhere else to go. The local authorities kept their promise and turned off the heating. The tenants were given reassurances from the research team that they could not be evicted without a court order and that their lawyer would defend them. Nevertheless, fear was creeping in. The tenants were afraid the police would come and evict them at any moment, and they were scared of the approaching winter, which would be particularly difficult without heating. Although the first concern had no legal grounds, the second one was becoming a reality. After the heating was disconnected, a rumour started to spread among the tenants that the town was planning to turn the

water off as well. Though there was no statement from the municipality regarding the matter, nobody was certain about what the town would do, as they had not hesitated to turn off the heating before the winter, and the temperature was continuing to drop. Air temperature is affective materiality, and its affects work on different scales (Anderson & Wylie, 2009): low temperatures affect things differently than high temperatures. Turning off the heat turns out to be an affective practice in home unmaking, both materially and imaginatively. The material reality of low temperatures is its negative impacts on health. People (especially children) start falling ill regularly. Imaginatively, low temperatures influence feelings of 'homeliness' (Gibas, 2017; Vacková & Galčanová, 2014). The flats are no longer a place of 'hearth and home', as the saying goes, reflecting the connection of warmth with home in the public discourse. What constitutes home for people living in precarity is always very similar to those who have faced colonization. In both cases, people from the outside hold more power over their homes than they do (Massey, 1994). Tensions in the building escalated, leading to disputes between those who were able to move to alternative housing and those who were not. Local authorities added fuel to the fire, exacerbating the confusion, uncertainty and distrust among people as, for example, the field team member recollected (below in its entirety):

> I don't remember his name, but they called him Zorro. I was talking to people in the hallway, and he came out angry and yelled at me: 'Why am I helping the gipsies? Can't I see how they destroyed the building?' He was trying to distance himself from the others living in the building. He had been to the town that day, and he was promised a flat on [a different street]. So he fixated on that promise, and suddenly he didn't feel like one of the Chimney residents. So he turned hostile to me and the people around him. The following day it turned out it was disinformation from the town—they were taunting him and others too, and he was not going to move. Suddenly, his attitude changed. He became one of the Chimney people, and he started to see my agenda, me wanting to help them with the housing and talking to them about the court case, in a different light.

The fact that many people in the block of flats had nowhere else to go, and the reality that the town was actively pursuing home unmaking (primarily by turning off the heating, threatening police eviction and confusing the residents about possibilities of alternative housing), led to the creation of active resistance against the eviction. In our case, resistance was not an activity that originated outside the reach of power and in freedom of power, as some romanticized conceptualizations of resistance claim. Instead, resistance was a response to the power of the sovereign, and it would not exist without that power. 'Once we see resistance as a deployment and diagnostic of power rather than its opposite, the spatiality of domination/resistance becomes more entangled.' (Cresswell, 2000, p. 266). The practices of home unmaking by the dominating power and practices of home remaking by the resistance become similarly entangled.

Once the heating was disconnected, the research team and the residents of the building began to regularly measure the temperature inside the house, recording it as evidence for the upcoming lawsuit. The research team started exploring the options of providing at least portable electric radiators and space heaters to the flats. Eventually, using various connections, the research team managed to collect 30 of these appliances and lent them primarily to families with children. Were they to cause a power outage when turned on simultaneously in large numbers, the research team had obtained a key to the room with electric breakers, and duplicates were made so that each flat could reset its own breaker. We found that repeated home making always works in response to home unmaking. Every practice and incident of home unmaking was countered with a practice that tried to remake 'homeliness' again. However, the home remaking efforts should not be seen as returning the home to its original state before the disruptions. For example, the portable electric radiators and space heaters could not heat the flats as efficiently and achieve the same temperatures the residents were used to during previous winters. Similarly, the feeling of 'homeliness' was not the same for the residents as it had been before the eviction. The process of remaking a home always reflects the event which led to home unmaking; it is a response from the position of resistance. The experience of home was (especially), in this case, somewhat fluid and open to destabilization; home is not just a stable final place where one can put down roots and feel safe, where life is predictable (cf. Gibas, 2019).

This phase corresponds to Lancione's (2019, pp. 187–188) phase of un-making precarity. The people of the Chimney did not resist by occupying the street in front of their former home as the evicted people in Bucharest did. However, most of them occupied the very house they were supposed to vacate by continuing to live in it. While dealing with the exercises of home unmaking executed by the authorities, they attempted to remake their homes with the support of the research team, even though the town continued to unmake them. During this period, the eviction order was brought to court, and during the second half of 2021, the first hearings took place with the 12 households that remain in the Chimney. The lawyer received power of attorney from all households to represent them in court and made regular trips to the field site, along with the research team, to keep the residents informed. The patchwork activity in the field site mostly concerned processing evidence (forensic materials) from the past to be used in the upcoming court proceedings. The research team openly took a stance as advocates for the evicted people and as a plaintiff, bringing the case against the town. Moreover, the research team did more than just support the resistance against the local authorities, it motivated people to resist, and it opened their eyes to the options they could take to not let the town's sovereign power subdue them. This essentially closes off any possibility of a potential reasonable dialogue with the town to find a solution both for the research team and the evicted people. However, the research team took this stance, knowing that the town had demonstrated they had no intention of cooperating with them in this manner.

Phase Four: Stagnation

In his research, Lancione (2019, pp. 188–189) calls the fourth phase re-making precarity, describing a situation where home remaking efforts and court proceedings do not progress fast enough, and the desired charge is not imminent. People slowly start to move elsewhere, and the last remaining people (living on the street) and resisting are finally evicted by the city. In our case, a different scenario ensued, which we refer to as *the stagnation of precarity*. Even though the tenants do not have a valid lease agreement and should not be living in the Chimney according to the town, they still visit the municipal office and attempt to pay rent. After some time, the office started accepting the rent payments. Although the payment receipts say 'late rent payment' as the reason for payment, it is material evidence that the clerk has started to again see the Chimney as a block of flats occupied by tenants rather than just a building that should have been vacated.

Several months after the deadline for the tenants to vacate the building, the ombudsman's office decided that the eviction 'violated the right of tenants to protection against the illegal exercise of property rights (…) and the right to adequate housing' (letter from the ombudsman, 6 May, 2021). The ombudsman's conclusion is being presented as evidence in court by the team's lawyer. However, the uncertainty surrounding the eviction process remains, with most tenants living in their flats without heating or hot water. In early 2022, the town also cut off the cold-water supply. With valid first-instance court judgments ordering the town to provide them with alternative housing in the event of eviction, the residents continue to question the town about the future of the block of flats, but the town has given non-committal answers. The persistence of the situation may well impact the tenants, and they might stop resisting, just as the tenants in Lancione's study did. However, many have nowhere else to go, so the future remains uncertain.

The Chimney remains a space of exception, and residents continue to attempt to move out of the building, albeit with sporadic success. The full effect that the state of exception has on mobility has become apparent. When applying for municipal housing, residents from the building are stigmatized as 'those from the Chimney'. They also apply for flats without legal certainty of impartial assessment, as the local authorities make the assessments from the position of sovereign power, assessing the very people they themselves placed into a state of exception. As a result, the norm of adequate housing is also annulled for them in this way. Agamben (2011, p. 122) argues that spaces of exception tend to expand in these modern times. For the residents of the Chimney, the space of exception has virtually expanded to encompass the entire town. The research team is actively assisting people attempting to find new housing. Given the impossibility of working with the local authorities, the team is also attempting to establish or further develop partnerships with other actors who could make a positive intervention in the situation, such as non-profit organizations and social workers. Reflecting on the past events that resulted in the evicted residents becoming somewhat reliant on the activities of the research team, it is clear that the team cannot simply leave the field site if they are to maintain ethical standards.

Conclusion

To be housed is not a state that lasts forever once it begins. The risk of eviction and eviction itself are extreme situations that expose the human body to the trauma of a loss of shelter or the long-lasting threat of this loss. In this text, we attempted to argue that those traumas are comparable; that the process of waiting and the uncertainty have a very negative impact despite the prospects of a favourable outcome in court. Secondly, we attempted to demonstrate that interventions with the ambition of improving the situation of the affected people are a complex project, both ethically and logistically. Moreover, it is a project with an uncertain ending, as every moment depends on the progress of the eviction, which cannot be reliably predicted. Another key observation we aimed to emphasize is that eviction is not a universal process when evicting Roma people everywhere in the Central and Eastern European region. This article shows that solutions can only be found through a broad and open mapping of this process. By comparing our case with Lancione's, we attempted to highlight how locally specific and complex each eviction is, even though we demonstrated it is possible to break its progress into four similar phases. The trajectories of processes connected with the precarity of Roma people (stigmatization, marginalization and segregation) always intersect with other trajectories at the specific location of the eviction. Unlike in Michele Lancione's studies (2017, 2019), the police have not forcefully removed the tenants from the house to the street in our case.

During the evictability phase, the affective dimension behaves similarly to Lancione's case: we observed tenants seeming resigned and lacking the drive to improve their living conditions. Once the tenants received the notice of termination of their tenancy in the eviction phase, they experienced confusion, uncertainty, despair, fear and mistrust. Some even left the building. Though they were not physically forced out of their homes, their access to heating was limited, and the building itself deteriorated. The affective atmosphere of the place became even worse for living than in the first phase of evictability. The third phase describes the resistance, where tenants, in cooperation with the research team, attempted to remake their homes with limited success. A legal expert entered the process at this point and responded to the eviction orders, moving the case into a new forum. Assisting tenants in making their living conditions more tolerable only served to mitigate precarity, and the legal defence against eviction was time-consuming. We refer to the fourth phase as stagnation. While in Lancione's case, people left the street and potentially from the reach of the city's sovereign power, in our case, the town's sovereign power still keeps a hold over the people. Although the town has started accepting rent payments again, thus acknowledging that actual eviction may not occur, this effectively expands the space of exception for the residents of the Chimney.

The most crucial difference between our case and Lancione's Bucharest evictions lies in the spatiotemporal reach of sovereign power. In his case, people were evicted from their houses onto the street and forced again from the street.

As a result, the temporal aspect of the sovereign power ended. In our case, people are not physically evicted onto the street, but the possibility of eviction continues to impact the tenants as a threat, meaning they remain within reach of the sovereign power of the town, and the town has actually expanded the space of exception where they reside. Spatially speaking, the sovereign power enlarged the space of exception. Even though the state of evictability and the process of eviction has not led to tenants actually being forced onto the streets, this is not a 'victory' over eviction, as some previous studies on evictions might suggest. Perhaps the exact opposite is true because, as our case shows, people remain in the space of exception, still exposed to the power of the sovereign and whatever they decide, including the affects that will follow. People still struggle with home unmaking and try to remake their homes even though the town will unmake them again. This process does not bring new events into their lives but rather a continuous process of dealing with similar struggles, which is exhausting over a long period of time and will likely lead to more negative affects. The temporal aspect of this study thus underscores the importance of studies that do not only focus on the root causes of eviction in the past or the consequences of eviction in the future (cf. Vols et al., 2019). This study focuses on the constantly changing presence of eviction, an ongoing process that continuously evolves, thus transforming its content. This area of focus, inspired primarily by (still relatively rare) international geographies of eviction that emphasize the politics of affect (Baker, 2017, 2021; Brickell et al., 2017; Lancione, 2017, 2019; Wilhelm-Solomon, 2021), introduces a new perspective to the domestic context of eviction research.

The perspective is particularly untraditional as it is based on engaged field research. Since our research team did not merely observe the process but consciously intervened, it is clear that we co-produced the analysed event. Local authorities initially approached for negotiations began to distance themselves from us after a couple of initial interventions. On the other hand, some tenants overcame their understandable mistrust and developed a friendly relationship with the researchers during various phases of mutual contact (some before the eviction, others during). The power dynamic of patronage and dependence between the research team and tenants has been occasionally and unavoidably apparent, and the team has continuously reflected on this. The key realization is that this power is not grounded in repression, as is the case with the town as a sovereign, but in assistance and effort to collaborate. 'Power is therefore not necessarily oppressive; rather, its oppressiveness is linked to whether it is used to reinforce unequal ["vertical"] power relations (…) or develop "horizontal" ones.' While the town exclusively used power in the former sense, in our case, we hope it was used in the latter.

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