

# European *Alternatives* Journal

English

Democracy  
Equality & Culture  
Beyond  
the Nation State

TRANSEUROPA<sup>23</sup>  
Festival of Arts,  
Politics and Culture

Holding Spaces

Wednesday 11

<i>Opening</i> 18:30 – 19:00 Tranzit House	<b>Festival Opening</b>
<i>Exhibition</i> 19:00 – 20:00 Tranzit House	<b>PATA – Stories and self-representation of people living in Pata-Rât</b> Marion Colard
	<b>SELECTION FROM THE ARCHIVE OF TRANZIT HOUSE. Installation, 2012</b> Csilla Könczei – Szilárd Miklós
	<b>IN THE LEADING ROLE: ILONKA NÉNI (1932 – 2022)</b> Commemorative exhibition
<i>Theatre Performance</i> 20:00 – 21:00 Tranzit House	<b>FORECASTING</b> Stratagème Theatre Company
<i>Informal get-together</i> 21:00 – 22:00 Tranzit House	<b>Hold my glass</b>

Adresses Tranzit House George Barițiu Street, 16
Ziz – Art and Social Area Paris Street, 5-7
Reactor Petőfi Sándor Street, 4
Cinema Arta Universității Street, 3
Anna's Studio Câmpina Street, 62, 2nd floor

Programme  
11 – 15 October 2023

Thursday 12

<i>Workshop</i> 10:00 – 14:00 ZIZ – Art and Social Area	<i>Theatre of the oppressed</i> <b>DISCONNECTED</b>
<i>Exhibition</i> 12:00 – 14:30 Tranzit House	<b>PATA – Stories and self-representation of people living in Pata-Rât</b> Marion Colard
	<b>SELECTION FROM THE ARCHIVE OF TRANZIT HOUSE. Installation, 2012</b> Csilla Könczei – Szilárd Miklós
	<b>IN THE LEADING ROLE: ILONKA NÉNI (1932 – 2022)</b> Commemorative exhibition
<i>Masterclass</i> 15:00 – 17:00 Tranzit House	<b>BARBARA MATIJEVIĆ: INTERMEDIALITY IN PERFORMING ARTS</b>
<i>Theatre Performance</i> 17:00 – 18:10 18:30 – 19:40 Tranzit House	<b>PLAYDATE</b> Created and performed by Csenge Schneider-Lőnhárt

<i>Workshop</i> 17:00 – 18:30 ZIZ – Art and Social Area	<i>Theatre of the oppressed</i> <b>DISCONNECTED – Presentation</b>
<i>Theatre Performance</i> 19:00 – 21:00 Reactor	<b>INTERIOR – LIGHT</b> Reactor de creație și experiment
<i>Discussion</i> 21:00 – 22:00 Reactor	<b>WHAT DO WE BRING WITH US IN OUR SHARED SPACES?</b>

Friday 13

<i>Exhibition</i> 12:00 – 14:30 Tranzit House	<b>PATA – Stories and self-representation of people living in Pata-Rât</b> Marion Colard
<i>Exhibition</i> 12:00 – 22:00 Tranzit House	<b>SELECTION FROM THE ARCHIVE OF TRANZIT HOUSE. Installation, 2012</b> Csilla Könczei – Szilárd Miklós
	<b>IN THE LEADING ROLE: ILONKA NÉNI (1932 – 2022)</b> Commemorative exhibition
<i>Audio Guided Walk</i> 14:00 – 18:00 Starting point: ZIZ – Art and Social Area	<b>TIME TRAVEL AT WALKING PACE</b> Created by Panna Adorjáni, Dániel Láng Produced by Fabrica de Pensule, Universal Pleasure Factory
<i>Workshop</i> 17:00 – 19:00 Anna's Studio (Câmpina Street, 62, 2nd floor)	<b>“SHOUT IT OUT – TELL YOUR STRUGGLE”</b> Clothing sewing, repairing, and transforming workshop with Anna-Krisztina Máthé
<i>Discussion</i> 17:00 – 18:30 Tranzit House	<b>INDUSTRIAL SPACES, REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT, AND HOUSING RIGHTS</b>
<i>Film Screening</i> 19:00 Tranzit House	<b>artISt: parcurs.ideal   video installation and online platform – launch event</b>
<i>After the Screening</i> Tranzit House	<b>Open Debate and Discussion</b>

Sunday 15

<i>Exhibition</i> 12:00 – 22:00 Tranzit House	<b>PATA – Stories and self-representation of people living in Pata-Rât</b> Marion Colard
	<b>SELECTION FROM THE ARCHIVE OF TRANZIT HOUSE. Installation, 2012</b> Csilla Könczei – Szilárd Miklós
	<b>IN THE LEADING ROLE: ILONKA NÉNI (1932 – 2022)</b> Commemorative exhibition
<i>Performative moment</i> 12:00 – 14:00 Streets of Cluj	<b>DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?</b>

Saturday 14

<i>Audio Guided Walk</i> 10:00 – 14:00 Starting point: ZIZ – Art and Social Area	<b>TIME TRAVEL AT WALKING PACE</b> Created by Panna Adorjáni, Dániel Láng Produced by Fabrica de Pensule, Universal Pleasure Factory
<i>Workshop</i> 12:00 – 14:00 Anna's Studio (Câmpina Street, 62, 2nd floor)	<b>“SHOUT IT OUT – TELL YOUR STRUGGLE”</b> Clothing sewing, repairing, and transforming workshop with Anna-Krisztina Máthé
<i>Exhibition</i> 12:00 – 22:00 Tranzit House	<b>PATA – Stories and self-representation of people living in Pata-Rât</b> Marion Colard
	<b>SELECTION FROM THE ARCHIVE OF TRANZIT HOUSE. Installation, 2012</b> Csilla Könczei – Szilárd Miklós
	<b>IN THE LEADING ROLE: ILONKA NÉNI (1932 – 2022)</b> Commemorative exhibition
<i>Transnational Citizen Assembly</i> 15:00 – 19:00 Tranzit House	<b>HOLDING SPACES</b>
<i>Feminist Movie Night</i> 20:00 – 23:00 Cinema Arta	<b>ENOUGH WITH CATCALLING</b> (Chega de Fiu Fiu) <b>WE ARE COMING, CHRONICLE OF A FEMINIST REVOLUTION</b>
<i>Informal get-together</i> 20:00	<b>Hold my glass</b>

<i>Lunch</i> 14:00 – 16:00 Reactor	<b>Community Lunch</b>
<i>Pata-Rât activities</i> 17:00 – 22:00 Pata-Rât	<b>DEBATE AND CONCERT BY MUSICIANS OF THE COMMUNITY</b>



**Special thanks to**  
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Imagine, Demand, Enact

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**Reactor** – a space for creative experiments is an independent theatre collective active in Cluj-Napoca from 2014. Find out more at [reactor-cluj.com](http://reactor-cluj.com).

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Welcome to this special Transeuropa Festival issue of the European Alternatives Journal. Transeuropa is a transnational artistic, cultural and political festival organised by European Alternatives since 2007. In the past decade, it has attracted thousands of attendees and active participants through a decentralised event structure in over a dozen European cities and a high profile moment in one city.

The new 2023 edition of Transeuropa takes place in Cluj Napoca and presents a rich schedule of events prepared in cooperation with local partners in the city. The programme consists of performances, exhibitions, open assemblies, screenings, debates, workshops and community events. The theme for this year's edition of Transeuropa Festival is 'Holding Spaces'.

In this special festival edition of the EA journal, we foreground contributions from academics, activists, artists, practitioners and many others on the different and varied ways in which we can hold space. Many of the contributions are from people active in Cluj, linking together efforts of transformation in the physical, cultural, intellectual and political space. Other contributions come from elsewhere, connecting attempts to hold space transversally across continents from the local to the planetary scale. Many of the contributors are involved in some way with the Transeuropa festival and the journal is a continuation of the ideas and actions explored in the festival programme.

Through the theme 'Holding Spaces', we ask festival participants first and foremost, what kind of environment do we want to live in? When we think about the ideal environment, about where we want to live, how we want to shape the world around us, we think far into the future, about our grandchildren and about what the world will be like in a hundred years' time. When we look

that far ahead, everything we imagine becomes elusive, everything seems to be fiction, guesswork, a possibility. For us, working with imagination and fantasy is of great value, because it inspires and motivates us, and is often a remedy for the harsh reality. However, we also think it is important to try to think together about these issues in the near future, to imagine how we imagine our own environment in, say, five or ten years' time.

It is also an important question to consider how we share spaces with each other and with other species. Which spaces are accessible to whom, and which communities and groups are constantly excluded, what can we do to create spaces that are inclusive? When we think about who, we often forget that there are living beings outside the human species. Where are the spatial boundaries between the spaces used by humans and the animal kingdom? How can we 'rewild' spaces? After all, humans may have got to the top of the pyramid by domesticating their environment. They created artificial spaces for their own comfort and safety. And everything that humanity has touched has the imprint of artificiality on it.

Can we determine for whom certain physical spaces are available? Are these spaces really available? Is this just an illusion? How aware are we of who created these spaces and with what intentions? In which direction do these spaces change, in which direction do the intentions change? Whose needs are decisive? When we talk about a particular physical space, we must also take into account that there are simultaneously many spaces that are no longer visible. At the same time, possible alternatives to space are all present. Can we grasp the multidimensionality of spaces? Can we deal with it consciously? Underneath the tons of concrete is earth. And the blades of grass are breaking through this hard concrete and coming out from underneath, just like the past.

"Holding Spaces" is important not only in a physical sense, but also in a symbolic sense. It is important to re-examine the values that are important to us and that should reclaim not only physical spaces, but also virtual spaces and meta spaces. We must reclaim not only the spaces of our habitat, but the space of discourse, the space of understanding, the space of caring, the space of learning, the space of change.

*Csenge Schneider-Lőnhárt*  
Transeuropa Festival  
Local Coordinator





# Holding Spaces

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# Pioneers in public space

Cornelia, one of the original gardeners from the 70s, explaining how the new developments at “La Terenuri” are affecting the community gardens, 2021.  
Photo: Radu Gaciu



A Romanian story of community work, green spaces and activism  
by Lala Panait and  
Silviu Medeşan.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A version of this text was published in Past, present and futures of Actors of Urban Change (2021), [https://www.academia.edu/64245858/Pioneers\\_in\\_public\\_space](https://www.academia.edu/64245858/Pioneers_in_public_space).

**“La Terenuri -Spațiu comun în Mănăştur” [At the playgrounds- Common Space in Mănăştur] is an urban intervention initiative started in 2012 in Mănăştur neighbourhood, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The initiative lasted until 2019 with consequences and follow-ups continuing today. It started as a 2-year European cultural project: “Landscape Choreography”, with partners in Cottbus (DE) and Taranto (IT) and continued as a local project with national and municipal cultural funds. The aim of the project was to raise awareness about citizen participation in decision making in order to save a vacant lot and to create a green meeting place in the area.**

**To show how this area can become a local hotspot for leisure, we organized cultural and community events like the neighborhood festival “Mănăştur Days”, participative workshops with students (architecture, sociology and landscape architecture) and residents. We promoted the area as a green democratic space through activist means: petitions, performances, protests. Using resident’s participation, we imagined different scenarios on how the area should look like in the future. This endeavor was a first step to promote existing and future commoning practices in a mass-housing neighborhood from Romania, through a very diverse range of activities.**



On the left is the new sports base at La Terenuri and on the right, the remaining community gardens, summer 2022.  
Photo: Dan-Cristian Lenghel.



We followed our agenda in the neighbourhood to create free spaces for meetings and real community centers for our activities.

### A failed project? Participation before its time

In 2015, we were selected to be part of the Actors of Urban Change program with a project to transform through participation an old cinema from the area into a space for local community needs and cultural production<sup>2</sup>. On the ground, we wanted to move some of the outdoor activities into an indoor space during winter and have a full year of mobilisation together with the local community. And yet, our project failed. Back in 2015, participation was not yet a buzzword for the local decision makers. Things changed in the meantime in Cluj, but participation in culture and urban planning is still used as a “therapy” or “to inform” citizens, rather than to delegate citizens control over the process of building our cities, taking Sherry Arnstein’s terms from the ladder of participation<sup>5</sup>.

Following this moment, when we realised that somehow we are on our own — that the City authorities don’t really (want) to take the ‘real participation’ path — we did our best to work on empowering local groups of residents. After 2-3 years of working in the neighbourhood, we made connections with local journalists, NGOs and very active citizens who wanted change in their neighborhood. The yearly neighbourhood festival began to be co-organised with local residents, and we succeeded all together in printing a local newspaper. In our meetings we formed a very diverse ‘initiative group of concerned citizens’ meeting up in local bars and pizzerias, because the authorities didn’t facilitate our presence in the old cinema. Maybe our mistake was not understanding that a diplomatic relation with the authorities within legal terms must be kept, rather than an activist way of interacting. But we followed our agenda in the neighbourhood to create free spaces

<sup>2</sup> See a previous text detailing this experience: “Cluj-Napoca, Romania - Mănăştur Central - Cinema Dacia” in Actors of Urban Change 2015-2017. Program Documentation. Link retrieved from: [https://www.academia.edu/84004180/Cluj\\_Napoca\\_Romania\\_M%C4%85n%C4%85tur\\_Central\\_Cinema\\_Dacia\\_Developing\\_a\\_concept\\_for\\_a\\_new\\_community\\_center\\_in\\_a\\_vacant\\_cinema\\_in\\_a\\_large\\_scale\\_housing\\_district\\_using\\_a\\_participatory\\_process](https://www.academia.edu/84004180/Cluj_Napoca_Romania_M%C4%85n%C4%85tur_Central_Cinema_Dacia_Developing_a_concept_for_a_new_community_center_in_a_vacant_cinema_in_a_large_scale_housing_district_using_a_participatory_process).

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.citizenshandbook.org/arnsteinsladder.html>.

for meetings and real community centers for our activities, and we challenged the authorities when they worked against the local community.

The peak of the collaboration between us (the urban activists) and the local community happened in 2018 when we co-organised an event along a stream that linked the “La Terenuri” area and Cinema Dacia. Street artists worked hand in hand with local teenagers to co-produce street art; architecture and landscape architecture students worked with residents to make the stream banks more accessible by designing and building a bridge; and the local NGOs organised recycling workshops with locals. These synergies convinced the municipality to announce a project to transform the “La Terenuri” area into a public park and to build a sports facility.

In 2019, we realized that this group of citizens were ready to organize their own festival, without any intervention. Even though the loss of control and responsibility towards all our work was emotionally difficult for us, the initiators, in the end we participated at the 7th edition of the “Mănăştur Days” fully organized by the residents. Odd feeling, but this was the greatest achievement that we never imagined could happen in the first years of the intervention.

In parallel with the plans for redeveloping the urban space of “La Terenuri” and very close to our green area, a new private real estate development was proposed on top of a dozen community gardens. These gardens have been here since the 70s, when the first inhabitants moved into the new block of flats, and they were encouraged by the communist authorities to ‘take care and to arrange’ their block’s green spaces<sup>4</sup>. The development of the new 13-story collective housing was accompanied by a demolition of some of the gardens (in April 2020 - in full lockdown!). This was the moment when we understood that the city is actually produced by a sum of interests that are not always equal, and that the civic actors and the local community are the most vulnerable and less powerful. The future of the city is most of the time ‘forged’ in the opaque rooms where the policy makers meet the ‘investors’.

In 2021, Lala accepted the challenge to work in the Braşov City Hall - a Transylvanian city with more than 270,000 inhabitants, where she relocated. Inside the Community Innovation department she was coordinating strategies for developing new ways of working within the city and inside the city hall: bridging sustainable relations between civil society, local communities, active citizens and the municipality, but also inside the city hall between different offices. A sort of an ‘activist trojan horse’ endeavor inside an institution with new political directions. This was the second best lesson in her professional life so far, after the “La Terenuri” engagement. She learnt how the system looks on the inside and how all that she dreamt in terms of public space, freedom, active citizenship is seen from ‘the other side’. She resisted for only 6 months in a very difficult work environment, but it felt like 6 years of struggles, contradictions, hope, strategies, tactics, ego, politics, and hope again. It was no place for idealists or dreamers. She realized that she could do better being on the

<sup>4</sup> See article 6 from Legea nr. 87/1976 privind sistematizarea, proiectarea și realizarea arterelor de circulație în localitățile urbane și rurale.

community’s side. A place outside the public sector where you still can have freedom, where you can act together with your peers without formal reports or hierarchization. After all, we imagined and created all the activist practices, stories and true meeting spaces by thinking freely.

In 2019, we realized that this group of citizens were ready to organize their own festival, without any intervention.

### Common (sense) conclusions

Throughout this journey we realized that our hopes and dreams for the cities do not always coincide with the ones of the authorities and, sometimes, even of citizens. In the urban realm there are always contradictions between politics, strategies, ecology, local and private interests. As urban pioneers, many times we felt left aside, even though we were talking about directions that later were published in official studies and European projects. There is an acute need for *co-producing* these documents, we all need to find our voice in the strategies that the city is proposing to their citizens. But, unfortunately there is a *real fear of participation* in the neoliberal governments that rule the Romanian cities. Our leftist agenda for inclusion and opening up the process of city-making is not very popular within the public sector, and often is declarative.

Actors of Urban Change program helped us to scale up our grassroots activism to a strategic, more zoomed out action involving urban practitioners, policy makers and politicians. We also learned to choose our fights, and sometimes, to give up. In activism there is a dark side, rarely talked about: we need to take care of ourselves, we are vulnerable human beings who intervene bodily in changing our worlds, and sometimes this can be a Sisiphean task. We have to prevent our burnouts. At the same time, we need more introspection: ‘Why do I do this? For whom?’, ‘Am I following the dogmas I am preaching, or I am just projecting them on others?’. We need to be an example while working in the communities close to us, we need to be empathic and learn *to see with the other*, to be ethical in our activism, to give credit and space, to collaborate with our peers, to learn from each other, to construct rather than just deconstruct, to have a hobby, to just take a break from time to time!



Activities in 2018 on the river banks together with the Local Initiative Group. Photo: Sebastian Florian

Unfortunately there is a real fear of participation in the neoliberal governments that rule the Romanian cities.

Lala Panait is an anthropologist and urban activist born in Cluj, now in Braşov. She is a member of Colectiv A association, coordinator of the initiative presented above. She holds a PhD in anthropology on cultural interventions in public spaces. In the last few years, she worked as a community facilitator and project evaluator, helping young initiatives to thrive in a difficult economic context.

Silviu Medeşan is an architect, researcher and urban activist based in Cluj and working as a lecturer in architecture in Oradea. He is interested in the role of design and designers in civic participation and sustainability transitions. Together with Lala he co-edited cARTier. Peripheral interventions and he published Form follows situation, based on his PhD thesis. Currently, he is teaching at the University of Oradea and he works as an architect at his own practice. He is planning to move to a village in between Cluj and Oradea where he bought a house with friends to work on its rehabilitation.

# Industrial spaces, real estate development, and housing rights

Enikő Vincze calls for a return to  
housing as a social good.

Housing is a complex phenomenon produced at the intersection of social and economic policies, but both in academia and in politics, it is conceptualized and debated as a rights issue or an economic matter of production/consumption/investment. In this article, I discuss the historically shifting connections between these two dimensions while also relating the production and distribution of housing to alternating industrial relations.

I am writing this piece of analysis in Cluj-Napoca, a city that, in the past seven years, has become the most expensive locality in Romania from the point of view of the housing market. In the past three decades, changes to the political economy were built across the whole country on the “creative destruction” (Harvey, 1982) of state socialism, including its economic and housing regime. Therefore, in the first two sections of the article, I will address housing as a right and housing as an economic matter in the context of these transformations. In a third step, I will demonstrate that the transformation of former industrial platforms into assets and sites for new real estate development contributed to forming a new housing regime that prioritizes the interests of capital accumulation and neglects housing rights. Most importantly, in this article I will argue that after three decades of capitalist transformations in Romania when housing became accessible predominantly through the market, there is a political imperative to prioritize housing as a social need and human right, and subordinate the concerns of capital accumulation to this perspective.

## Housing as a socioeconomic right

In Romanian state socialism, housing was not recognized as a constitutional right, while the right to personal property (among others, to home) was so recognised. Nevertheless, the governmental policies aimed at providing a home to everybody linked to employment, and the system elaborated and implemented a mixed housing regime where the residential units in the property of the state or state-owned enterprises were complemented with a small amount of co-operative housing and a significant percentage of homes in personal property. During state socialism, personal property was controlled by the state to avoid its transformation into an instrument of creating/increasing inequalities (Vincze, 2022).

After the right-to-buy laws from the 1990s started to make their effects in parallel with the privatization of the whole economy (see Figure 1), and due to all the governmental measures sustaining the private production of private homes, the housing market, the privatization of the banking system and the appearance of investment funds, the access to an adequate home became dependent on people's financial capabilities.

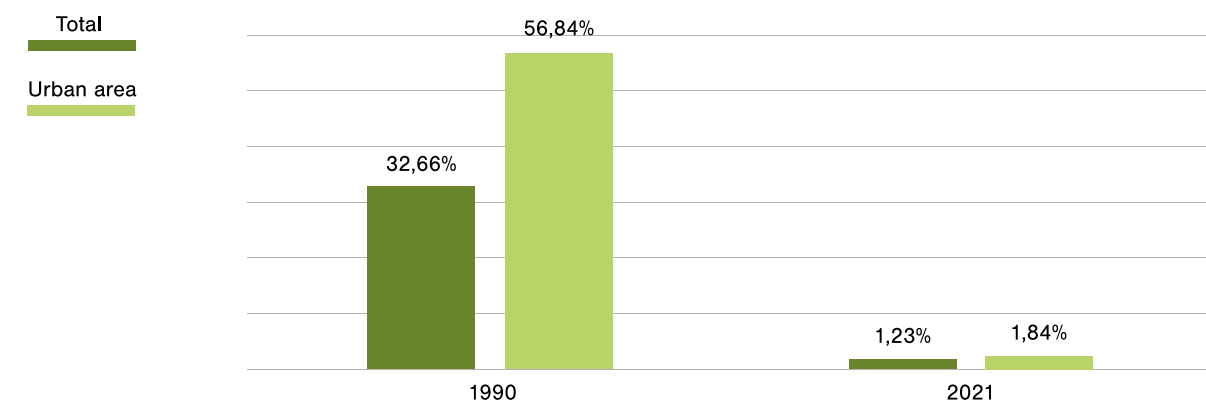


Figure 1. The evolution of the percentage of housing units in public property compared to the total housing stock in Romania and urban areas between 1990 and 2021.

Cluj-Napoca is a city that, in the past seven years, has become the most expensive locality in Romania from the point of view of the housing market.

The Housing Law 114/1996 talks about the right to access a home, not the right to housing. In addition, while decentralizing housing production, this law did not provide any means by which the local public authorities could have been encouraged/motivated/obligated to respond to local social housing needs. Moreover, even the Romanian social legislation promising to protect the right to a home for vulnerable groups, children, or people with disabilities, does not imply mechanisms by which the public authorities obligations could have been translated into concrete measures in this domain.

Housing as an economic matter

The political objective of state socialism – to provide everybody with a home according to their employment, was rooted in its concerns about assuring the necessary labor force in the cities to fulfill the plans of industrialization as a major pillar of socialist transformations in a formerly agricultural and rural country. Overwhelmed by the high number of new homes needed in this context, the state produced socially rented residences in blocks of flats and sustained the private acquisition of homes via loans provided by the state-owned savings bank at a very low-interest rate. As a result, between 1951-1989, 5,528,465 new homes were constructed in Romania. From these, as Figure 2 displays, 2,984,083 (53.98%) were made with public money (calculations by the author, based on data published in Anuarul Statistic, 1990, Romania’s Statistical Yearbook for 1990).

The percentage of homes constructed under the public budget compared to the total number of newly constructed housing units was still higher in 1990 (88.07%), when the state-owned construction companies finished the blocks of flats that they started to build before 1990 (calculations by the author, based on the data of the National Institute of Statistics). The trend of relatively high levels of this rate continued in 1991 (76.97%) and 1992 (49.84%), too; however, the state built fewer and fewer new homes and, when it did, it started to do it via private construction companies. Furthermore, the percentage of dwellings made from state funds declined radically to 6.01% in 2000 and 2.28% in 2021.

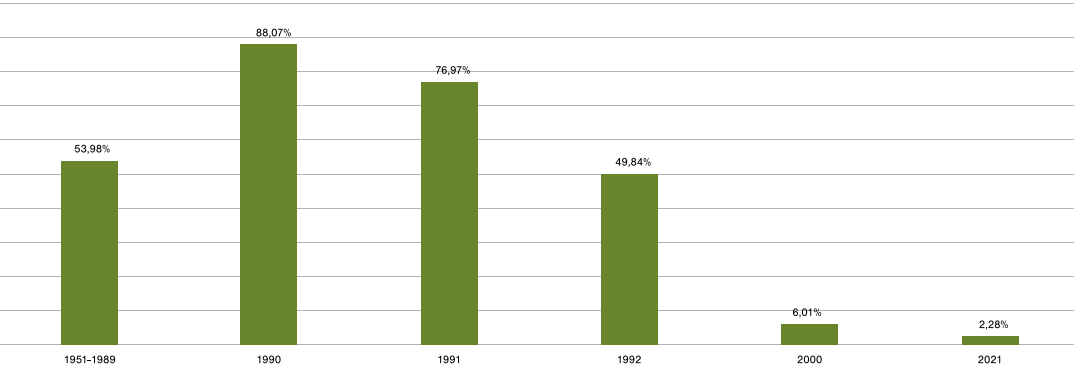


Figure 2. The evolution of the percentage of housing units built from public/state funds compared to the total number of finalized homes in Romania, 1951-2021.

In the early 1990s, international organizations playing a role in transforming capitalism at the global level emphasized that housing is a central element for the formation and advancement of the market economy (World Bank, 1993). Despite this, policymakers did not explicitly recognize that, in due process, housing became a favored site for capital investment, and real estate development turned into an important pillar of the post-Fordist accumulation regime (Aalbers & Hofman, 2019). Therefore, policymakers do not acknowledge that such a change is responsible for the withdrawal of the state from the production of public social housing and the denial of housing as a right and social need, even if, meanwhile, they continuously implement measures to ensure the (re)production of the neoliberalized housing regime.

The transformation of former industrial platforms into assets and sites of real estate development as a business illustrated the larger process of the economy’s and housing’s financialization

There is a political imperative to prioritize housing as a social need and human right, and subordinate the concerns of capital accumulation to this perspective.

The transformation of industrial spaces into assets and sites for new real estate development<sup>1</sup>

The transformation of state-owned industrial enterprises into commercial companies in Romania at the beginning of the 1990s opened the door for their privatization. As a result of transferring them from public to private ownership, industrial lands and buildings became tradeable assets and/or physical territories for real estate development as a business.

On the one hand, these former public goods could be traded by different means in and after privatization. For example, the state could sell its shares in these companies to Romanian or foreign firms through auctions (Foreign Direct Investment was strongly favored in a capital-weak context), and, in addition, it distributed a part of its shares between employees (MEBO method) and Romanian citizens (mass privatization). Further, companies or individuals could buy as many value coupons as they wanted from the market and use them to purchase stocks in other companies announced for privatization. Those who became majority shareholders could decide on the companies’ future, for example, on its liquidation, continuation of production, or other alternatives that seemed more profitable to the new owners. The shares could be continuously traded on the market and, at an appropriate time, by a particular owner, could be used as capital for investments into real estate with promising returns.

During these processes of investment and transaction, the exchange or market value of the former industrial assets was decoupled from the physical and social use of lands and buildings. Differently put, the industrial platforms’ real estate value, formerly part of the productive economy, granted a new significance to them by connecting them to the financial economy. They could be rented for any activity and generate rental income for the owners while their market value increased in time, so they could be sold at a higher price than the one at which they were initially purchased. Former industrial lands could be used as collateral for new loans from banking and non-banking financial institutions to be invested into anything. A former industrial company’s debt could be converted into and sold as assets, resulting in creditors becoming shareholders in the indebted company.

On the other hand, the privatized and liquidated former industrial platforms became physical territories/sites for new real estate development. The former industrial buildings could be demolished to make room for new construction with a high real estate value also resulting from the exchange value of the land. Due to changing urban regulations in a post-industrial context, the opportunities to change the function of buildings and land became a taken-for-granted potential to make profit from the former industrial platforms. Once used as sites for new real estate development for sale or rent, they created new sources for further profit-making. The latter was also

dependent on what happened in the geographic vicinity of the respective former industrial platforms or the city at large, i.e., on other investments made by other private actors or by the urban regeneration programs of the local public administrations. In addition, as new real estate developments could be sold through mortgages, the former industrial platforms also generated profit for banking and non-banking credit institutions and for anyone with money to invest in real estate (institutional investors of different kinds or physical persons) or to become shareholders in real estate companies listed on the stock exchange.

Conclusion: the demand to prioritize housing as a social need and right

As demonstrated in this article, nowadays in Romania, too, “the right to housing” is dependent on people’s economic condition, and the state (or the employers) do not assume a de facto responsibility in producing and distributing social housing among those who do not have financial means to provide for themselves an adequate home from the market. Therefore, housing ceased to be a right, and its acquisition became an act of meritocracy. Meanwhile, people became useful or surplus from the point of view of real estate capital depending on their ability to purchase a home from the market.

By repeating the mantra that the state lacks financial means for the production of homes, governors and experts at different levels naturally associate housing as an economic matter with the use of housing as a site of profit-making. When arguing why housing cannot be a positive right assured by the state to its citizens, they do not admit that the economic policies of housing result from political decisions about the priorities for public budget distribution. Under the cover of the apt recognition that the production of public social housing requires economic resources, the state continuously decides to use its supplies for supporting capital investment and its profit-making logic in the domain of housing, too, and dispossess itself from the instruments of assuring the right to housing for all.

Last but not least, the transformation of former industrial platforms into assets and sites of real estate development as a business illustrated the larger process of the economy’s and housing’s financialization.

In its turn, the latter made housing rights completely obsolete and, even more, conditioned on one’s capacity to use their right to access housing (that the Romanian legislation recognizes) from their financial resources. In this context, the mainstream discourses and practices that naturalize housing production via real estate development are not only to the

<sup>1</sup> I documented different aspects of this process within the research project “Class formation and re-urbanization through real estate development at an Eastern periphery of global capitalism” (REDURB), funded between 2021-2028 by UEFISCDI’s exploratory research projects, code PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2020-1760. More details one might find here, <https://redurb.ro/>, and in the forthcoming volume “Uneven Real Estate Development in Romania at the Intersection of Deindustrialization and Financialization” edited by Enikő Vincze, Ioana Florea, and Manuel B. Aalbers.



detriment of housing rights but also delegitimize the political commitments centered on these rights.

In light of the above analysis, my major conclusion is that to assure housing rights, state politics should not neglect the financial foundations of housing provision, but needs to cease confusing the latter with the transformation of housing into a site of profit-making and capital accumulation. Therefore, a new housing politics should put a new finance system at its center that prioritizes the fulfillment of housing as a social need and right.

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Credits

1. Archive Transylvanian postcards from the past, Erdélyi képeslapok a múltból, <https://kepeslapok.wordpress.com/2011/10/22/kolozsvar/>.

2. <http://wikimapia.org/29210696/ro/Fostul-Abator#/photo/4703659>

3. Google maps.

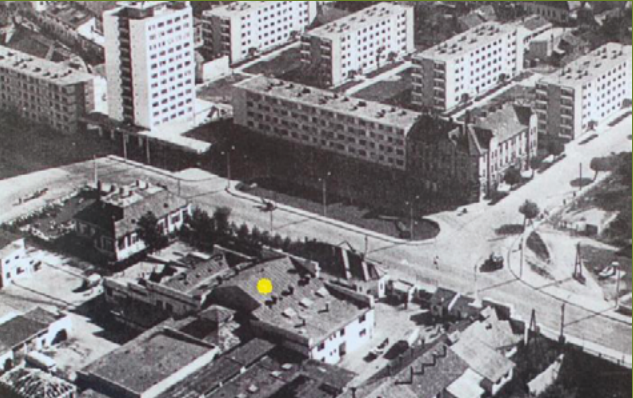
4. : Picture taken by the author on 21st of August 2023.

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A series of pictures reflecting the transformations of Abator square in Cluj-Napoca, related to the cities economic development under different regimes.



1. The Abator slaughter house building on a postcard from the beginning of the 20th century.



2. Abator square during state socialism: the tower block (the first of this kind in the city, made in 1962), the four-storey blocks and the Abator (slaughter house, yellow dot).



3. The Abator square after the demolition of the slaughter house in the early 1990s, with the new Opel Ecomax building on the left. The land was traded for several times afterwards, its first owner being the local businessman Árpád Páskány who received authorization in 2006 for his Riverfront business, retail and residential project (unfulfilled).



4. The new real estate developments on the spot of the former Abator slaughter house: the 23 story-building Maurer Panoramic (on the left: started in 2018, investor Maurer Imobiliare); Oxygen Assemble (on the right: Oxygen Mall and three 16 story-residential buildings, investor Mercurial SRL of a local businessman, with authorization from 2016).

# Who cares for the cross-border care workers?

Anda Iorga on the forgotten essentiality of migrant in-home care workers' labour in Europe

DREPT members at the "Applause is not enough!" protest in Vienna, October 3, 2020.  
Credit: IG24/DREPT



Despite the emotionally and physically demanding work, migrant in-home care workers are often paid below minimum wage, work excessively long hours, and suffer discrimination and abuse.

Economic disparities between core and periphery states in the European Union have been the topic of much discussion over the years, as evidenced by continuous efforts to bridge the gap through structural and investment funds distribution, with higher percentages of funds being earmarked for the periphery. The idea behind these transfer payments is to ensure the privileges of the haves (core countries) will eventually be shared by the have-nots (periphery countries), under the banner of European solidarity. However, availability of funds does not ensure any one state actually becomes the beneficiary of these funds. Arbitrary rules and deadlines established by a mostly disconnected bureaucracy in Brussels and stringent conditions for the disbursement of funds all but guarantees low absorption rates in countries like Romania and Bulgaria, the newest (and poorest) members of the EU.

For many people in Eastern and Southern Europe, the failure in closing this gap, coupled with declining standards of living, the loss of bargaining power and stagnant salaries in their home countries, quickly made migrating to the core for work the only option for a decent wage that can support a family. Well trained and highly skilled workers from the periphery are very much sought after, especially in industries such as agriculture, construction and healthcare in what's commonly referred to as Western Europe.

This is how over 60,000 in-home care workers, predominantly from Eastern Europe (mainly from Romania and Slovakia) came to work in elderly care in Austria alone, as referenced in Amnesty International's 2021 report titled "*We just want some rights!*".<sup>1</sup> Because they are mostly self-employed (through a commercial license), these workers lack basic labour protections generally provided by a Labour Code, making the industry one of the most exploitative, poorly remunerated, and overall dangerous transnational industries in Europe currently.

To address these challenges, in-home care workers and activists have set up IG24 - Interessenvertretung der

24h-Betreuer\_innen, a self-organized association made up of Romanian and Slovakian care workers who are working to tackle the most egregious abuses in the industry by lobbying both national (Austrian, Romanian, Slovakian) and European political decision-makers, and by providing advice to migrant in-home care workers on how to start out in the field of in-home care, best practices to avoid abuse and exploitation in the industry, and how to find support for various particular circumstances. IG24 supports migrant in-home care workers in Austria by providing counselling in multiple languages and demanding industry-wide labour rights and reforms at the national and European level. In their own words, migrant in-home care workers are **deserving of rights equal to those of employees** who are protected under the Labour Codes of any European country, **the right to vacation pay, the right to medical leave, the right to decent wages, fitting of their working conditions, and the right to a decent pension.**

The work of in-home care workers is essential, both for the people they care for, and for the Austrian state. But they too often work in unsafe, unfair and precarious conditions. Despite the emotionally and physically demanding work, migrant in-home care workers are often paid below minimum wage, work excessively long hours, and suffer discrimination and abuse.

Because the vast majority of care workers are self-employed in Austria, they are responsible for finding their own clients. This makes offers from temporary foreign workers' placement agencies hard to resist, thus making the workers reliant on their intermediary services, for which they often pay hefty commissions. This is a first gateway to abuse. IG24 has documented many cases where agencies have presented contracts to care workers solely in German, preventing care workers who lack an excellent command of German from fully understanding all clauses. What's more, often times, care workers are forced to sign these contracts well after they have left their homes, on the road to the client, sometimes under threat to be disembarked at the next gas station if they do not.

1 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/EUR1545262021ENGLISH.pdf>



Aside from the problems that can arise from agreeing to terms not fully understood, the trip to the workplace itself often constitutes a real danger for care workers. Not only are they forced to accept paying for the transportation provided by the intermediary agency (or pay significant costs to do the trip on their own), but the actual trip has proven to be dangerous and even fatal for a number of care workers over the years. Because transportation of migrant workers to-and-fro the temporary workplace is contracted out by intermediary companies to transportation companies that use minibuses (8+1-seaters) almost exclusively, the typical regulatory oversight for commercial transportation (charter buses, trucks, etc.) does not apply, meaning 8+1 seat minibuses do not have to be driven by at least two commercially licensed drivers, they are not subject to tachograph inspections (device recording driving hours, aimed at preventing fatalities by reducing driver fatigue), and receipts are often not issued, making this trip often hazardous for migrant workers.

August 23, 2022 and March 23, 2023 are only the most recent dates when Romanian care workers have lost their lives on the way to or from their patients in Austria, and a

Once they arrive in Austria, in-home care workers are often presented with German-only contracts and asked to sign them right away.

simple google search for “in home care worker + accident Austria” reveals many more victims of collisions, with the most recent one happening just a few weeks back, on August 20. Each such incident sends a shockwave through the migrant care workers’ community, and a renewed determination to continue fighting for safe transportation, as evidenced by social media posts drawing attention to these circumstances and demanding safe transportation options – for care workers, but also for the drivers often forced to work under these exploitative conditions.

Once they arrive in Austria, in-home care workers are often presented with German-only contracts and asked to sign them right away. Aside from being pressured to sign the contracts without ample opportunity for review and clause negotiation, care workers also accuse intermediary agencies of sometimes misrepresenting the details of the case, includ-

If we still stand for the original European Union values of human dignity, equality and rule of law, it is high time for the EU to replace the self-employment regime with employment contracts.

ing the severity of the cared-for persons’ health condition, the food and living arrangements for the care worker, the tasks expected to be performed, breaks and even the pay. In addition, the commissions charged by intermediaries to connect a migrant care worker with a patient/family seeking care (although charged illegally in Romania, for instance) have to be paid well in advance of arriving at the workplace. Having travelled a long way, not being protected by the Austrian Labour Code or their own countries’ representative institutions in Austria, and often not speaking German fluently, all but forces a lot of migrant in-home care workers to accept such demeaning working conditions, for a pay of about EUR 60-80, per day, for 24-hour shifts.

Because of their self-employment status, migrant in-home care workers become solely responsible for contributions to health insurance, employment insurance and private pensions, a situation which both makes them vulnerable as workers and further diminishes their earnings. To further complicate matters, there is no shortage of situations in which intermediary agencies verbally commit to paying these various social insurance contributions on behalf of care workers, and, in reality, fail to do so, creating significant debt and fines that care workers ultimately become responsible for.

Such is the context in which, in 2020, an initial group of Romanian in-home care workers and activists joined the March 8 protest in Vienna for the first time, with the intent to generate support and raise public awareness of the harsh working conditions, abuses and injustices in the in-home care industry in Austria, giving birth to DREPT – Justice in Care and Personal Assistance. In 2022 they joined forces with Iniciativa24, a Slovakian care workers’ association, and created IG24 - Interest Group of 24/7 Care Workers in Austria to represent the interests of migrant in-home care workers in Austria.

The services offered by IG24, as detailed in the information packages on their website, include information on topics

relevant to the industry (including workshops, trainings, webinars, etc.), individual counseling in German, Romanian and Slovakian, mediation in conflict situations and intervention in crisis situations, support in communication with Austrian institutions, contractual partners or the cared-for person, organizing local community meetings to strengthen care worker networks, media relations and political lobbying, and participating in public events/direct action.

Given the transnational character of the industry, through public letters (including on social media), high-level meetings with members of Cabinet and parliament in their home countries, in Austria and at the EU-level, and through protests, migrant in-home care workers have consistently demanded that the European Union coordinate with member states to regulate the in-home care industry, to no avail so far.

In-home care workers are not the only workers leaving families behind and spending many of their working years away from their children. Seasonal workers in agriculture and food processing and migrant construction workers share many of the risks, exploitative conditions and meagre pay care workers are subject to, meaning that entire billion euros industries in the core of Europe function solely on the work provided by labour migrants next door to the east.

If we still stand for the original European Union values of human dignity, equality and rule of law, it is high time for the EU to replace the self-employment regime with employment contracts, industry-wide and EU-wide, in order to improve salaries, diminish exploitation of workers, and expand and equalize social protections such as pensions, health and unemployment insurance across member states. In addition, the EU must regulate the intermediary worker placement agencies to define a universal scope for what they can do – spell out what services they can/must provide, limit what they can charge commissions for, mandate that all contracts be bilingual and negotiated before the worker leaves the home country, define how agencies can be held accountable in the context of transnational work mobility, and regulate the transportation sector to establish rules for 8+1 seat minibuses, so that not another migrant life is lost on the way to work or on the way home. Lastly, The EU must enforce protections for all migrant workers - no matter the industry, work status or country of origin – starting with the implementation of the European-wide minimum wage and harmonizing collective bargaining rules and opportunities across the entire European market. Labour protection is an essential right, and as such, it must be ensured structurally, transnationally and consistently within the European labor market.

The EU must enforce protections for all migrant workers - no matter the industry, work status or country of origin.

Anda Iorga works as a public policy expert by day, and serves the labour movement, as allowed.

DREPT – Justice in Care and Personal Assistance is a self-organized group of Romanian migrant in-home care workers in Austria, established as a not-for-profit organization in 2020. Their main services include education about the rights and activities of career, but also individual counseling, support and crisis intervention, and political lobbying.



# Decolonising Crimea

A podcast with Luke Cooper and Masha Shynkarenko.

Luke Cooper is an Associate Professorial Research Fellow in International Relations at the LSE and the Director of PeaceRep's Ukraine programme. He is the author of *Authoritarian Contagion* (Bristol University Press) and a co-founder of *Another Europe Is Possible*.

Mariia Shynkarenko is a Research Associate at the Institute for Human Sciences working on the Ukraine in European Dialogue program. She is a political scientist, who specializes on questions of resistance, nationalism, and identity. Specifically, her research focuses on identity and resistance of the Crimean Tatars both historically and contemporary. She is interested in instrumentalization of identities, indigeneity, people's power, and resistance in contexts of occupation and authoritarian regimes.

In the first podcast in our Ukraine and the World series, Luke Cooper talks to Masha Shynkarenko, a Research Associate with the Ukraine in European Dialogue programme at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna and an expert on the Russian colonisation of Crimea and the Crimean Tartar national movement. They discuss the long history of Russian and Soviet imperialism in the Crimean peninsula, life under Russian occupation, and the need for nuance and complexity in discussion of what decolonisation of Crimea should look like in practice. The Ukraine and the World series is an initiative taken in collaboration with Foreign Policy in Focus – Institute for Policy Studies in the USA and our longstanding partner, Another Europe Is Possible.



Crimea.  
Credit: Dmitry Vetrov



Scan the QR code to listen now.

# Assembling Connecting and Organising



# What would a planetary citizens assembly look like?



Between Land and Sea 2022,  
Tunisi - Credits ArtRue

## Niccolo Milanese on putting planetary politics into practice

If I say ‘planetary citizens assembly’, I wonder what image comes to mind? That of ordinary people from all over the world sitting in the United Nations General Assembly Hall and talking together, instead of delegates listening to the speeches of one national leader after another? Or of an occupied square full of people talking about the planet and its future? Or of every square on the planet all occupied having this discussion? Or of a group of people from our planet Earth preparing to enter into contact with another alien civilisation, thinking about how to start the conversation? I want to suggest that in a way all of these images are good ones, and we should invent a whole theatrical genre of such assembly performances.

Planetary politics is best understood as a particular kind of political concern, which goes along with a planetary awareness or planetary political consciousness. My contention and observation is that this kind of political consciousness is growing significantly, as concern over the future liveability of the planet becomes a central and organising node of all political concerns (or ‘all politics becomes climate politics’). These political concerns often, if not always,

1. *Expand the constituency of politics (ie. who counts?), to include people and non-human beings that have typically been considered external to the political community. This*

can include people living in other places, people living in the future, other species, robots, natural objects and features (mountains, rivers, forests...) and ultimately the planet itself. It can even potentially include currently unknown beings such as extra-terrestrial life: the possibility that there may be extra-terrestrial life may put on us the obligation not to pollute space, for example.

2. *Have an existential character:* often planetary concerns are to do with issues that risk extinction, mass destruction or degradation, or radical changes in the meaning of what it means to be human/what it means to be alive. Examples include issues relating to nuclear war, climate change, genome editing, artificial intelligence.

3. *Cannot adequately be addressed by any one political institution or authority:* planetary issues, partly because of their first two features, typically cannot be adequately addressed by any existing political institution acting alone, even those with a global scale such as the United Nations, because they require multi-scalar action across governments and society at large, including significant cultural change.

4. *Have a preoccupation with deep time:* often planetary consciousness is aware of the deep history of the planet, notably that other civilisations and forms of human life have previously existed and that the planet itself has a much older history than humanity, and/or is concerned with the future, including the far future which may be radically different to the present. This consciousness goes along with an accentuated awareness of human impact on the planet, whether or not the idea of the Anthropocene is scientifically to be considered a distinct epoch.

Understood in this way, planetary politics is not best understood as a particular *scale* at which politics happens. It is possible for a small village to have delibera-

*Expand the constituency of politics (ie. who counts?), to include people and non-human beings that have typically been considered external to the political community.*

tion about planetary politics, as much as it is possible for a global body such as the United Nations Assembly: indeed, it may even be more likely in a small village than in a highly formalised and state-driven space like the United Nations. The challenge of planetary politics to politics-as-we-know-it is not as simple as expanding participation in territorial terms: the four features of planetary political consciousness above challenge *who* and *what* participates in politics; *which institutions* are addressed by *which politics*; what the politics of *here, today* can responsibly decide about *elsewhere, tomorrow*; and both raises the stakes of politics (or perhaps put better, acknowledges the real existential stakes of politics), and acknowledges the potentially catastrophic implications of both not-deciding and of deciding. Overall, planetary consciousness can be understood as a recognition of the radical contingency of human life as each one of us knows it and of its future, and of the historically created power imbalances that continue to shape the contexts in which each of us speaks. From such a starting point, the pretension to ‘represent’ humanity or speak on behalf of humanity could only be taken as a rhetorical ploy not a representative claim (ie. an appeal to the humanity of each listener).

Starting with this planetary consciousness in mind, what features of citizens assemblies would be important to address planetary concerns? How would these assemblies sound when they make statements after deliberation? I would suggest they would necessarily sound very different to state-based political institutions that we know: democratising politics beyond the nation-state means also making demotic the lan-



*The condition each time would be that the limitedness of each assembly meeting in each situation is critically highlighted and integrated into the reflection.*

guage of politics, even if a planetary politics may use a language that is *strange* because it attempts to ventriloquise voices of entities that cannot speak, give voice to discourses that have been silenced, or translate the voices of entities that speak in languages we cannot understand. Here are some characteristics of such planetary assemblies that I think might ensure they speak with a different voice of power, power understood as *acting in concert*, as *empowering* and *emancipating*, not *dominating* or *forcing*:

#### **Embedded, translocal, contingent**

Firstly, such an approach surely would start from local, embedded assemblies and weaving together an assembly of assemblies which is able to act as a space of translation between local realities, contexts and concepts. Having removed the attempt to try to be ‘representative’ of a whole, each assembly would need to integrate alterity whilst recognising its necessarily partial claim to speak on behalf of everyone and everything. There are multiple ways this alterity may be brought into an assembly, some of which are simple and could be very cost-effective: through the inclusion of people who may live locally but have come from afar and who are usually excluded; by involving different nationalities and languages; or by adopting imaginative methodologies which encourage participants to give voice to non-human entities, take account of future generations or of people in other contexts. A feature of the embeddedness of these assemblies would be a reflection

on the histories that have created such imbalanced or unjust contexts. The condition each time would be that the limitedness of each assembly meeting in each situation is critically highlighted and integrated into the reflection.

#### **Embodied, public, mediatic**

Secondly, such a multiplicity of assemblies would be mostly embodied, taking place in public space, unlike government-initiated citizen assemblies, which often take place in closed and controlled spaces. Embodiment is both a primary relation of each of us with the Earth, and in an assembly the presence of other bodies is a reminder of the complex relation of identity and alterity, in a way that is different from the meeting of disembodied speech. There is nothing inherently disembodied about technology as such – it depends on how it is used, and technologically mediated assemblies need to actively use technology to enhance awareness of bodies and their alterity, not abstract from it. (The use of simultaneous interpretation through headphones and translation booths, of the kind used in the UN, European Parliament etc, is also open to critique for leading to the abstraction from the bodies, listening to a disembodied voice – even verbalisation has a bodily condition).

As Judith Butler has reminded us, there is a reason that the right of assembly and the right of free speech are different: assembling in the public space communicates something political but non-verbal in a different way to public speech. Embodiment in a public space is also arguably a precondition of media awareness and coverage, something strikingly lacking from both the Global Assembly and the Citizens Panels of the Conference on the Future of Europe, particularly if these are compared with more spontaneous assemblies taking place in the public space during moments of protest such as the during the Occupy movement, the Indignados movement or the Nuit Debout, let alone Tahrir Square or Gezi Park. Thus far, streaming into virtual platforms like Facebook or Youtube seems much more effective for amplifying individual political voices than conveying collective deliberation and its results, whilst online platforms such as Twitter or Tiktok may play roles for coordinating between (embodied) physical actions.

#### **Eco-systemic, care-based and agonistic**

Thirdly, the assemblies would consciously understand themselves in an eco-systemic set of relations, not only amongst themselves but as depending on and relating to a whole series of other relations, including care relations (in families, for example, or the people who are making sure the room in which they are meeting is well-cared for), relations with the climate, with other species, with institutions of state (health services for example, transport operators which enable getting to the assembly etc), with other parts of civil society. These relations need not always be harmonious or consensual – like ecosystems, and particularly at bordering regions between eco-systems (ecotones), they will also often be agonistic or involving tension, and that may be where they are most creative. The assemblies may refer to each other, refer to other bodies, agencies or organisations in their deliberations, and thereby develop a planetary corpus of deliberations.

#### **Permanent, dynamic and trans-scalar**

Fourthly, the development of a planetary system of assemblies would be understood as a permanent, dynamic, living and trans-scalar collective endeavour. The idea of permanence of citizens assemblies does not point to them meeting all the time, nor of always having the same members – indeed, it is preferable for all the conventional reasons of avoiding vested interests, as well as maximising the number of people who at some point are involved in assemblies, that the members of an assembly change regularly. But permanence points above all to the idea that the assemblies are capable of learning and developing, and are therefore dynamic endeavours. Assemblies may take on different scales and geographies, depending on the issue under consideration and whom it is most pertinent to include, depending on advocacy strategies of which sets of political institutions are most propitious and relevant to seek to influence. They could also take on different temporalities and reference frames, from exploring the alternatives that were implicit but unrealised in history, to considering today’s problems, to exploring alternative futures.

*The development of a planetary system of assemblies would be understood as a permanent, dynamic, living and trans-scalar collective endeavour.*

#### **Performative and Precautionary**

Assemblies with a planetary consciousness will be aware that they are always performative in several senses: a) that in assembling and deliberating one is *acting* b) that there is always another script, another set of characters, even another stage immanently possible to any assembly, and thus each deliberation is unique and contingent; c) that a good planetary assembly will attempt to give voice to, to include, beings which are not currently present, cannot speak, or have been silenced: and this will often require imaginative or theatrical performance. The planetary precautionary principle is intimately linked with this set of methodological considerations: the assemblies will be conscious of their own limits (of knowledge, of context, of inclusion) and so will make recommendations based on the principle of not overstepping these limitations, or a *de-liberated* risk assessment of doing so.

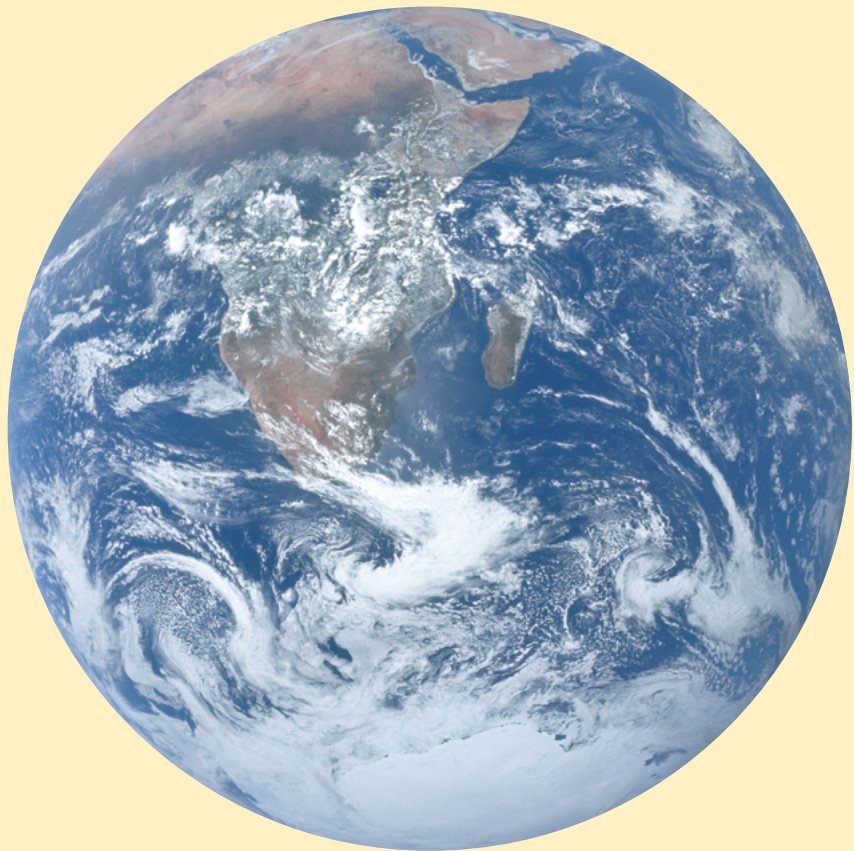
A considerable advantage of this approach to the development of a planetary system of citizens assemblies is, I suggest, that we already have much of it in place. Citizens assemblies of one form or another have developed across the world significantly in recent years: in western countries as government initiated processes to deal with issues politicians do not know how to resolve, or as attempts to restore trust in politics, but also as formats used autonomously by protest groups and others. In Latin America and Africa citizens assemblies and panels have been used to include some of the poorest and most excluded in deliberations about the future of cities and constitutions of countries. Even in author-

itarian China, citizens assemblies have been used for participative budgeting, for considering petitions and for urban planning.

Even more importantly, almost everywhere across the world there are older sets of practices of assembly and of collective deliberation of one form or another. It seems to be important from a planetary point of view not to assume that every assembly must be held using the same methodologies. Most crucially the principle of ‘random selection’ and sortition based on statistical sampling as it tends to be practiced in government initiated citizens panels in the West is more culturally specific, but begins from an easily universalizable recognition of the limited nature of the ‘usual suspects’ involved in deliberation, and the attempt to propose a *neutral, fair* and *legitimate* selection process for who takes part: there seems to be no reason why these objectives cannot be attained in culturally specific ways - and indeed to achieve the local legitimacy of the citizens panel itself, would need to be. Part of the advan-

tage of a dynamic citizens assembly ecosystem would be also to deliberate on these differences in perceptions of legitimacy.

Developed organically from, and in connection with, this translocal tissue of assemblies, a planetary assembly of assemblies could seek to transform the way global decisions are discussed, and ultimately the infrastructure of global governance as we know it. If it did manage to fulfil this role, it would communicate a form of power that is genealogically very different from the centralised statist form, its history of violence and extraction, and the institutions of international relations which has developed alongside this history. As such, planetary democracy may look and sound very different from national or global politics as we currently know it, perhaps much more like how we imagine people might sound in some of the more fantastic images we started with imagining and that alterity would surely be a sign of success.



Credit: Public Domain.

Niccolo Milanese is a director of European Alternatives, and part of a team across civil society and academia working on developing path-breaking transnational citizens assemblies.

# Transeuropa assemblies: for a transnational bright future

**Ophélie Masson and Georg Bloku on transforming Europe  
through participative democracy.**

The Transeuropa Assemblies cover a vast range of very different topics, from workers rights in Germany to end-of-life decisions in Belgium, but also including civil liberties in Italy or EU gender-rights in Spain. The strength of this initiative precisely comes from the diversity of issues that it covers, paired with its transnational dimension and the involvement of communities across borders.

So what is the commonality between an Amazon unionist in Bremen, Germany and a pro abortion-rights feminist activist in Barcelona, Spain? Well, to put it in a nutshell: the trust in civil society’s power for activating change, with our old and cranky insti-

tutions merely needed for validating new policies that they almost have no choice but to pass through, to avoid a global rebellion. When citizens and residents of France take to the streets to protest against police violence by setting cities on fire, we should try and see beyond the smoke - because the real message is: we know you’re not going to act, so we will. We know you’re not going to listen, so we will scream until your ears bleed. But by doing so, the divide between weakly-elected representatives (weakly as less and less people turn out to the polls, therefore one might wonder how representative they are) and the frustrated population they are meant to represent - who in majority did not vote for them — is getting stronger and stronger.



*The real message is: we know  
you're not going to act, so we will.*

Democracy as it exists, in its core, is to date the best form of political regime we know in order to guarantee individual freedom. Can it be criticised? Of course. Can it be improved? To a certain extent, yes it can. And that is precisely what we are doing with the Transeuropa Assemblies. One assembly after the other, one locality after another space involved, we show that the global aspect of societal struggles necessarily calls for a transnational approach to solving the 21st century's main challenges, be it ensuring global social justice or fighting to limit the effects of climate change.

The Transeuropa Assemblies continue to inspire us, and hopefully you too, as a form of open and participative democracy where anyone has a place and a voice of their own. Below, read about one example of a past Transeuropa Assembly and scan the QR code to watch an interview about how to influence EU policy to transform healthcare, to give you a taste of what innovative democracy can do to create a society that enables its citizens to take effective action for a common bright future.

### Theatre and civic action

The Transnational Assembly of Workers Solidarity: On Ecological Syndicalism was hosted in the creativity-fostering premises of the Theatre of Bremen. The assembly used a futuristic scenario to enable experimental learning and to support participants to experience

the methodology first hand and in an action oriented context.

This methodology of assembly is adapted from the work of Augusto Boal (theatre of the oppressed) and Paulo Friere, mixed with methodologies coming from deliberative democracy, with a view to enabling citizens to think about their own responsibility to act, to be able to step out of their personal circumstances and potentially take on a different role in the future, and to be able to project themselves into the future and plan today what they would want to put in place. This form of assembly is also an experiment in 'futures literacy', which integrates the idea that imagination, anticipation and adaptability are crucial civic competences.

The fictitious scenario displayed the world in 2023, in which as a consequence of the climate crisis a heat wave struck, causing heightened levels of civil unrest. The assembly presented several societal responses to the crisis and the participants were then asked to join into the storyline and find solutions collectively.

*This form of assembly is also an  
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competences.*

Assembled in small groups, the participants deliberated about civic responses on three levels: (a) the personal, (b) the worker's and (c) the community's. Participants were asked to embody and think as humans, workers and citizens - as they all are. European Alternatives facilitated the process and moderators gave shape to the small group discussions, which were aided by textual and visual documentation.

The interlinked and deepening ecological and social crises shape the lives of people throughout Europe in different ways, and so the assembly set a frame and methodology in which people can be empowered to

address these circumstances and collectively claim new rights on a transnational scale, whilst turning resolutely towards the future.

Policy orientations:

- I) promote civil society organisations, unions and activists working together in new formats to collectively address the poly-crisis;
- II) secure and empower the participation of the most marginalised and at risk;
- III) the extension of rights at work and the right to live in a stable climate must go together.

### The decision of a lifetime

Scan the QR Code to watch an interview with Virginia Fiume, Co-President of EUMANS, on how to use citizen's assemblies and transnational democracy to transform healthcare rights across Europe.

Syndicat! An assembly of solidarity on ecological syndicalism organised by European Alternatives at Theater Bremen in Germany.  
Theater Bremen, Jörg Landsberg

Ophélie Masson is a Programme Coordinator at European Alternatives, where she coordinates the programmes that aim at developing and implementing sustainable tools of participative democracy such as citizens assemblies and ECIs. She also co-coordinates the Citizens Take Over Europe coalition.

She focuses on defining new common narratives for citizens and residents of Europe who wish to enhance their political participation through innovative processes. As such, she is deeply involved in expanding European Alternatives partnerships with CSOs and movements that focus on training key individuals who develop and replicate diverse experimental citizens assemblies methodologies.

She has created and led campaigns at EU level, engaging with actors ranging from grassroots organisations to the European institutions. Ophélie is also an LGBTQI activist and co-chair of the Board of IGLYO.

Georg Blokus is the Director of European Alternatives' Berlin Hub, which primarily runs the School of Transnational Organizing - a grassroots school for political activists, civil society organisations, labor organizers, political artists, migrant communities, and social movements seeking for skills and tools to build the next generation of movements and organisations



Scan the QR code to listen now.





# Clean it up!

**Denis Dumitru on how Asociatia Zimbrul Carpatin is working for a better future for the environment.**

In a world where there is an unprecedented environmental disaster, it is becoming more and more clear that something needs to be done. As the effects of our actions spread through the world’s complex ecosystems, it becomes more and more clear that we need to move quickly and as a group. We’re going to talk about the most important environmental problems facing society today, with a focus on the important work done by us called Asociatia Zimbrul Carpatin, an NGO where I volunteered for almost 5 years and which is a great example of how effective grassroots efforts can be.

**Our goal is to be a change agent.**

Asociatia Zimbrul Carpatin, a non-governmental organization (NGO) with a strong commitment to making the world a better place, is at the center of efforts to protect our environment. This group of dedicated volunteers has worked hard for more than five years to help ease the serious effects of climate change and raise awareness across many areas, with a special focus on the younger generation. The people in question have been very determined, which has led to amazing results that not only help their local community but also have a big effect on the wider area and even go beyond its lines.



Mountains in Argeş County.

*People’s determination shows that they know that even small things can help make the world a better place for the next generation.*

**Efforts to clean up the environment in Arges County are part of an effort to protect nature.**

In the face of a worsening environmental crisis, our non-governmental organization has become a strong defender of Argeş County’s natural beauty. Every year, as the seasons change, more than 100 dedicated workers get together to do something that goes beyond just picking up trash. They go on trips into wooded areas, along riverbanks, and into nearby towns with the goal of getting rid of the harmful effects of pollution in these places. People’s determination shows that they know that even small things can help make the world a better place for the next generation.



**Cycling to raise awareness about the environment: A Case Study of ECO Patrol’s Effective Efforts**

Our non-profit group started the “ECO Patrol” project, which has made a big difference in how involved the community is. With a simple but powerful tool, the bicycle, volunteers take on the role of environmental inspectors and keep an eye on places where trash is dumped illegally. The people’s commitment goes beyond just watching. They actively look into cases of dumping, report the people who did it, and teach communities how important it is to throw away trash in the right way. Through these activities, they build a sense of shared responsibility and a real connection between people and their surroundings.

**The importance of “ECO Attitude” and selective waste collection in making communities stronger**

Everyone worked hard to start the campaign “ECO Attitude,” which shows how strongly they believe that getting information is the first step toward change. The goal of the program is to help people in Argeş County learn more about and understand integrated waste management systems by sharing information with them and getting them involved. By doing this, it hopes to give people the tools they need to make choices that put the environment first. The commitment isn’t just about education; it also includes putting in place methods to collect trash in both cities and rural areas. People take an active role in reducing the negative effects of garbage on the earth by turning their knowledge into real actions.

**“Romania Plantează” is a group effort to plant for a sustainable future.**

We are happy to say that they have committed to work with the “Act for Tomorrow” Association on the “Romania Plantează” project. Romania is working on reforestation all over the country, and it is more than just planting trees. It is also a way to bring different towns, organizations, and people together. As regional collaborators, they do a good job of spreading the goals of the program in their own areas, which has a noticeable effect on the local environments.

*Getting information is the first step toward change.*

In the wide range of environmental problems, the story of our non-governmental organization stands out as a sign of hope. The path of our journey is a testament to how effective community mobilization, engagement at the grassroots level, and a strong commitment can be. The different projects that the people are working on, like restoring the environment and teaching, show how communities can change when they work together toward a common goal. Our non-profit, which is called Asociatia Zimbrul Carpatin, focuses on how small steps can have big effects that help create a more environmentally aware and long-lasting future. In this imagined future, people will appreciate, protect, and keep the beautiful parts of nature for the benefit of future generations.

*The path of our journey is a testament to how effective community mobilization, engagement at the grassroots level, and a strong commitment can be*

Hello there. My name is Denis. As far as I can tell, I am one of the older volunteers from Zimbrul Carpatin. In the past, I was able to participate in a variety of activities to assist the environment, including planting more trees. I am fighting for a better future for our planet, which is why we need everyone’s assistance to be more aware of the climate’s effects and to become agents of change.

# Interview with an activist



Speaking to residents in Pata Rât.  
Credit: Adrian Dohotaru.

**Seema Syeda talks to Adrian Dohotaru about ecological activism in Cluj-Napoca.**

Hi Adrian, could you introduce yourself and tell us a bit more about the organising in Cluj that you’re involved with?

I’m Adrian Dohotaru, an activist researcher from Cluj-Napoca, which is the second largest city in Romania after Bucharest. I’m 40 years old, and I work in an association that I founded called Sustainable Organized Society (SOS). We have alerts around specific issues/emergencies and are active in locations around Cluj, such as SOS East Park and SOS Pata Rât, but we also combine these alerts with a more systemic approach of long-term campaigns.

We also conduct reflection on these campaigns using participatory action research and citizen science methodologies. Most of my research is more or less informal. I do studies and guides, but I’m not as interested in the written format as I am in the action part of the participatory action research that eventually results in public policies. In this sense, at a local level at least, the city hall is now engaging with the campaigns that we started several years ago and is now investing in several green public spaces and blue-green corridors.

We do campaigns mostly in the Cluj Napoca area, but also in larger Transylvania, as well as national campaigns, for example we are in a national network

of 12 cities campaigning for urban protected areas in Romania. We are campaigning for national legislation to recognise a category in between green public spaces and protected areas. As well as campaigning for this category in the national legislation, which is actually going to be implemented, we are campaigning to have all these types of areas to be even more protected. We propose about 20 protected areas in Romania and we are negotiating with the authorities to have a protection status, especially focusing on trying to recuperate areas that have been privatized - which is a big problem. Now in Cluj, this is actually happening through a renaturing project, where 10 million euros out of the budget of 100 million euros for public green space is dedicated to recuperating the privatized areas in East Park.

That said, unfortunately on social issues the city hall is not that open. The social housing and affordable housing campaigns where I cooperated with Eniko Vinze (see Eniko's article on housing in the 'Holding Spaces' section of this journal), and other activists are not necessarily the focus of the city hall - these areas are only receiving very small investment. The related problems in Cluj concerning the segregation of the Roma community, the spikes in rents and the financialisation of living are not being addressed. Even though we run campaigns to address these social issues, which for me is quite important and overlaps with environmental work, the environmental campaigns are more appreciated by the city hall and more successful - for example, the authorities started to invest hundreds of millions of euros in green public infrastructure.

Besides my activist work, I'm a wannabe director. I directed my first film, which hopefully will be shown in some upcoming festivals. It's about a person with whom I collaborated in this larger framework of participatory action research where I developed a technique that I call performative anthropology. I convinced him to shoot the last years of his life until he died, including moments where he was evicted several times. I saw that he had an old semi-digital camera from the early 2000s in his room and I convinced him to make a video journal of his precarious living conditions and that of his neighbours.

At the same time, I'm involved in public policy. I used to be a member of the national parliament be-

tween 2016 and 2020. As an independent MP I proposed laws towards more social justice, for example, to have a living wage in Romania calculated by the National Institute of Statistics. The law proposed that every government increase of the minimum wage should be correlated with this living wage. I think this was one of the most important laws that the parliament voted for but unfortunately, it was not implemented or transposed into public policy. There are several other laws, like a new law for green public spaces, that I also tried to get implemented.

I'm also involved with other NGOs, for example NGOs that are affiliated to the Babeş-Bolyai University, which is the main university in Cluj. I collaborate with other NGOs in other cities trying to promote participatory budgeting in Romania. This is one of the ideas that I popularized 10 years ago with other people from civil society, and actually at this point there are many town halls and city halls in Romania that have participatory budgeting. Unfortunately, this is still at a shallow level, so we are trying to convince the authorities to implement a new design and a new format in order to have more profound, more deliberative participatory budgeting.

*Right now, one of the most important struggles is about the inefficiency of waste management.*



Street protest activism.  
Credit: Adrian Dohotaru.

**What are the key environmental and ecological struggles taking place in Cluj at the moment?**

Right now, one of the most important struggles is about the inefficiency of waste management. We have landfills in a segregated area (the ghetto of Pata Rât) where about 1500-2000 people live, which is a severely polluted area, which from time to time also pollutes Cluj. The smell comes to the city, but, on a daily basis, people that were evicted to the area are most affected by the pollution and the segregation. One of the activist campaigns in the last 15 years in Cluj was to desegregate this ghetto.

Now the city hall is externalizing the responsibility of investment in the sense that the major investments (which are not that big - a few million euros in order to desegregate Pata Rât) are made through Norwegian funds. Local money is usually used for education, transport and so on, but not necessarily for affordable housing.

So most of the money for affordable housing and desegregating the ghetto is coming through these funds. In the last few years, through these Norwegian funds, about 72 families were relocated from Pata Rât, but because Pata Rât is so big, the number of inhabitants in the ghetto are only slightly decreasing.

Another major campaign where I think we have been most successful is to get back privatised public spaces. A lot of public spaces were privatized after 1989. What we tackled in the last years was to get back some of these spaces. To build parks or "blue-green corridors". This transformation is happening right now in Eastern Park, which will be the biggest park in Cluj; 5 times bigger than the actual park which is from the nineteenth century.

We have another campaign concerning green mobility which aims to link the metropolitan area of Cluj together through bike lanes, green areas and pedestrian alleys. We are trying to do this in order to reduce road traffic. At the level of the Cluj County area, the number of cars doubled in the last 9 years. And if in the county area of Cluj the number doubled, in the metropolitan area of Cluj the number of cars actually quadrupled, so it's 4 times bigger than 9 or 10 years ago. This

is a huge problem because most of the cars are second hand cars coming from Western countries and they pollute a lot.

This is why it's important to have pedestrian alleys and bike lanes in order to stop people using cars and at the same time to have a metropolitan area with good public transportation; activist campaigns are currently underway to achieve this. And I think it's good to have this activism not only for mobility purposes, but also to have new places - not only malls where you have to pay your entrance - to have spaces near the river that people have access to for free; public spaces. As I told you before, a lot of these places disappeared in the last 25 years and only after 25 years have we started to recuperate part of them; the level of privatization was dramatic. We had privatized parks, privatized sports bases, privatized courtyards for schools that were only used by people who rented them. We are trying to tackle this problem in an eco-socialist way.

So I would say that campaigns for green public spaces and blue-green corridors are quite significant. The city hall has already invested tens of millions of euros and there are other projects of hundreds of millions of euros in order to have more public spaces. One of our criticisms is that these public spaces are not based on Nature Based Solutions when they are planned. Right now there is too much grey infrastructure for events or gatherings, but we are calling for more natural and permeable surfaces - not necessarily, grey infrastructure and asphalt and so on. So these would be two major campaigns.

*A green left-wing progressive movement would even better tackle the extreme right parties.*



One campaign which is not successful at this point but I think at a certain point will get more attention concerns pollution caused by airplanes circulating the city. The planes are not making a detour around the city as they seek to go faster. In order to do a detour (and most of the planes go to western countries), they should go to the eastern part of Cluj, which would add 45, 50 kilometers of detour to their journey. Since we have so many cheap flights and planes, the pilots are paid more if they save fuel. In order to save more fuel and to be faster they are crossing the entire city, creating a terrible noise especially for people in the eastern part of Cluj Napoca. People are complaining, but at this point with no success. I think that when there will be street protests, the campaign will be far better.

We also have some fights for trees. Quite recently there was a symbolic but important fight to prevent 20 trees from being relocated away from the centre of the city. The campaign actually got a lot of attention because it was on one of the most important streets of Cluj in the center. The trees remained there after some debates, petitions, street protests and after some specialists such as urban planners, ecologists, landscape architects, and biologists came into the debate with alternative viewpoints. So this would be a recent example of an active civil society that convinced authorities not to relocate those trees or to cut them down.

That said, at the same time I would say that there are problems at the local level and especially at the national level. We do not have a coalition of civil society working with green and progressive parties. I think we need this in order to tackle – as the Greens are doing in Germany with the AfD – the extreme right in Romania. I think that a green left-wing progressive movement would even better tackle the extreme right parties.

For a while, everybody said that Romania was quite a peculiar case in that we don't have an extreme right. One of the reasons was that the so-called social democrats are actually social conservatives, and some argue that this warded off the extreme-right. But the growth of the extreme-right is now happening in Romania and we have two extreme right parties. One is called Union of Romanians (AUR) which is now the second largest party in the polls after the so-called social democrats, and they surpassed in certain polls the national liberals.

*If we want a more democratic Europe; a more federal state at a European level; a more social state at the European level, these connections and networks should be even more formalized.*

I have the feeling that many government politicians are now trying to regain ground lost to the extreme right by shifting to a new conservative stance on all kinds of issues. The parties in government, for example, are now attacking the possibility of LGBTQ+ marriage in Romania, which is not in the legal framework but was recognized for a couple that married internationally. The government is now attacking the right to have international marriages recognised.

In order to have a more powerful green civil society I think we should have a party that communicates with civil movements at different levels of power: the local council level, the county council level, the parliamentary level and even the executive level. To bring these kinds of things that are not present even now in Romania. Even though it is quite late, this theme of climate change or climate urgency is now recognized as important. 10 years ago it wasn't a part of the public debate. But, at this point, even though it's still niche, it is sometimes covered in the local and national media. In my hometown in Cluj-Napoca, the median temperature increased by 5 degrees in the last 30 years, which is quite a lot – and people are starting to talk about this change and about public policies to have less cars, to have more public transportation, to have more trees in the city. To have all the communist blocks refurbished in order to tackle climate change.

**You mentioned that one of the aims or one of the ideal ways to tackle each of these issues is to create a green left coalition that is engaged with civil society. So far what approaches and methods have been taken, and are being used by the different activists and organizations to fight on each of these struggles?**

We have several tactics. For example, street protests. We organized several street protests concerning real estate construction in a neighborhood near a forest, where they wanted to build a road inside the forest. So we tackled that issue with hundreds of people that came to the protest and real estate development stopped for a while, and we'll see in time whether it will be stopped for good.

We also have online petitioning and we are auditing meetings at local council and the county level. We are also producing expertise because some of the activists are quite linked with the universities of Cluj and we are producing papers that might be taken into consideration. When the strategies of the Cluj County or the Cluj City Hall are created in a more participative way, we have activists and scientists, people from the universities and NGOs that attend the meetings, present their case and sometimes they are writing parts of these strategies.

So we have this kind of involvement, but at the same time, real estate capital has much more influence. We should see our involvement within this balance of power that it's happening at the local level and which is everywhere. We are quite small when we go to debates, run online petitions, produce media reports, media releases etc, we're trying to compete with real estate developers who are trying to invest billions of euros in the ex-industrial area of Cluj. It's quite difficult to compete with them because even when we raised some public attention, they bought the whole local media and we could see their commercials everywhere. This is why it's an imbalanced fight. But still, we are trying to fight our fight as well as we can and we can influence things.

This is something that gives me energy because it gives me satisfaction that there are so many things that we can do in this so-called "wild east". I see that our work is relevant even though we lose a lot of fights.

**Do you have any cross border links and what kind of transnational support could be helpful?**

Well, I see my activism as being, "glocal" from the famous saying "think globally act locally". This is my inspiration. So too is the online university, but online with, let's say a quotation mark because I steal a lot of books. I read books. I don't pay €100 or 200 euros for them. I cannot afford them. So I steal them. I am listening to Abbie Hoffman. This kind of connection helps me a lot. Another kind of connection that I have for inspiration is to see what other activists are doing in other countries.

I also watch documentaries and have meetings at an international level. For example, through the Transseuropa festival we can meet to see similar fights in a framework which is not parochial.

Most of my research is quite informal. So if I go on a vacation in Budapest I try to meet participatory budgeting actors and activists that are telling me what's happening in Budapest, this is something that I also did in Portugal or Poland or the Czech Republic or in Denmark. I try to connect with activists. Almost everywhere I go I see protests. I go there for hours and talk with the people over there, exchange information and so on.

At the same time, I think we should have more connections like these, besides literature and festivals. Because most of our fights are common fights I think. Especially if we want a more democratic Europe; a more federal state at a European level; a more social state at the European level, these connections and networks should be even more formalized in order to influence institutional Europe. And in this sense, I think, sometimes I'm lacking the expertise and the connections.

**Adrian Dohotaru, is an activist researcher and film director from Cluj-Napoca, founder of SOS and a former member of the Romanian parliament.**

# What about you?

## István Szakáts on the inherent contradictions of NGO 'activism'.

If you are a pilot flying over Pata Rât (a ghetto of 2500 inhabitants near one of Cluj-Napoca's derelict waste dumps, one of the biggest of this kind in Europe) the area may look to you like a bunch of cardboard huts near a mountain of garbage. If you are a person who grew up in Pata Rât, the same place may be the entire world of human relationships and histories you have ever known.

I (a 55-year-old white middle-class male with degrees in computer science and fine arts working for an NGO) have been doing socially engaged cultural work in Pata Rât for over a decade, so I had plenty of chances to wobble between the two perspectives. I've

co-organized over one hundred workshops, dozens of events, and even a festival - building and unbuilding, learning and forgetting day by day. So what kept me busy? The selfish agenda of altruism. The arrogance of humbleness. The ego-trip of solidarity. I don't know.

Since 2013 the AltArt Foundation I work for has spent over 2 million EUR (mostly EU grants) on projects in Pata Rât. When me and my colleagues narrate about our work in the pidgin of EU cultural bureaucracy, we manage to generate the honourably reassuring look of an institution heading somewhere. Then our Pata Rât friends tell us we did nothing right.

*Pata Rât is a sociotope where the maelstroms of structural violence, systemic oppression, racism, and classism blow at their harshest, meet, crash, and mess up your compass.*

I spent my past decade among crippling self-questionings and restarts by newfound conviction.

So what is good? What is right? For example, moral and legal philosopher John Rawls says good is something defined by a/any group of people, then right is defined by the same people as the ways of maximizing good. As long as you don't live in a sociotope heavily burdened by power dynamics, this utilitarian approach might even sound like something you could navigate by. But Pata Rât is a sociotope where the maelstroms of structural violence, systemic oppression, racism, and classism blow at their harshest, meet, crash, and mess up your compass.

How? You negotiate day by day among institutional, group and personal agendas and agencies. Your institution is financially accountable to other institutions, while you are morally accountable to persons. This tension, even in the happier cases of institutions that do represent the interests of your "beneficiaries", can bless you with some cognitive dissonances.

But caught in the midst of an oppressor-oppressed setup of the worst kind in Pata Rât, being financially accountable to the oppressor and morally accountable to the oppressed is, mildly put, schizophrenic. So how do you handle this? You move between the parties the best you can, and try to make some points. In this process you come to four realizations.

First, you'd realize your interactions with the institutions to whom you declare your financial allegiance to show they are not at all Weberian - as in not neutral and even less impersonal. Institutions are made up of people, who - given the institutional oppression breathing down heavily on their necks and fostering oppressive behavior - will feel mildly cringed-to-an-nyed-to-irritated-to-outraged by your popping up at their doors with your cases. So in time, doors start to close. And you'd realize they slowly assimilated you as the avant-poste of the oppressed.

Second, you'd realize you initiated your relationship with the ghetto as a (non-roma) gajo, deploying a (rather uncommon) NGO discourse, legitimized and financed by an (oppressive) superstructure. As a consequence, you'd understand you started your work perceived by the ghetto-dwellers as the avant-poste of the oppressor, then working your way up on the trust-chain ever since, with variable success.

Third, you'd realize there is a very narrow and volatile strip of equilibrium between the sides - if any. Outside this sweet spot, your bargainings aiming for glorious "win-wins" would often turn out to be utopian, while aiming for humbler "minimizations of damage" an honourable option.

Fourth, you'd realize that once you started, the landslide of self-questionings-and-transformations cannot stop. Where does your agency come from? What legitimizes it? This is the real grinder. You might

*Caught in the midst of an oppressor-oppressed setup of the worst kind in Pata Rât, being financially accountable to the oppressor and morally accountable to the oppressed is, mildly put, schizophrenic.*



realize any identity (except the no-identity or the total-identity) would necessarily prove itself untenable, while looking for the next - a self-fulfilling curse. This sounds a bit like the You vs. Nature joke where you cannot win, you cannot strike a draw, and you cannot quit the game.

But *this* game - as in working in Pata Rât, you *can* actually quit. So if you decide you don't, on what grounds do you keep continuing? Some Kantian moral imperative? Too universalist. Humanism? Solidarity? These are just as socially constructed - and therefore historically unstable - as any of our other concepts. Christian brotherly love? That is actually metaphysical, and can be genuinely performed only by a no-identity or total-identity, but both annihilate the object-subject dichotomy so the You (as opposed to the not-You) would disappear in the act.

My current best guess is looking at individual identity as an illusion emerging at the overlap of bigger illusions called collective identities. It helps, but I don't know how long this will last either. And I work in Pata Rât because at the time of this writing, I find I cannot not do it.

**What about you?**

*You'd realize you initiated your relationship with the ghetto as a (non-roma) gajo, deploying a (rather uncommon) NGO discourse, legitimized and financed by an (oppressive) superstructure.*



What about you. Canva.

István Szakáts works as an artist, curator and cultural producer. He is president of the AltArt Foundation in Cluj, Romania. He has been advocating for empowerment through culture, socially engaged art and active citizenship for more than 20 years. As a multimedia artist, István has co-designed and produced a series of works including Pata-Cluj documentary film and Samples - a sequel of mixed reality performances in public space. He has taught various media related disciplines at the Cinema, Media and Television Department of the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca and the Sapientia University from 2006-2016. István holds a university degree in Fine Arts (2003) and Computer Sciences (1992).

**Borders**

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Beyond  
Borders**



# REACTOR

**Local to global: reflections on building a common language through theatre.**



Performance of (In)correct  
Photo by: Doru Vataşvul

Reactor – a space for creative experiments is an independent theatre venue and an artistic collective active in Cluj-Napoca from 2014, producing over 50 original theatre pieces, all focused on the nearby reality and reflecting on social contexts and issues in an attempt to create space for change and ‘a step forward’.

The artistic collective is composed of a small nuclear team, as well as of a larger number of collaborating artists, most of them from Romania, who bring new approaches or new angles to the work processes. Being strongly connected to its local contexts, the venue has also built over time a community of audience members, who become in many cases partners of dialogue.

**“It sometimes seems that, during these frames of meeting and interacting, both artists and audience members build together a *common language*.”**

It sometimes seems that, during these frames of meeting and interacting, both artists and audience members build together a common language, a common point of view that integrates all the specificities of a middle-sized-city on an upward slope of development. There are moments where we appear to share a common understanding of the frames around us, and in those moments, the idea of community becomes more than an abstract concept written in project applications.

During the last few years, Reactor has tried to open up to international perspectives and frames, in search of collaborations and opportunities that could help the team and the venue grow, but also motivated by the curiosity to see how and if their work is relevant to other contexts.

Each international interaction poses a challenge to find new common language with partners in dialogue, not only in terms of vocabulary, but also regarding common references, understanding of concepts, specificities,

generalities; understanding of certain processes and identifying the current phases of those processes. Are we at the same place? Is there a gap between us? Can we both understand the content of the gap? What gets lost in this conversation? How do we work with what we don’t understand about each other?

After so many years of producing work from a local perspective, it is interesting to observe what changes for a collective such as ours when it focuses on producing internationally. Do we work with the same tools or do we need to change some of them? Do we address the local audience in a new manner? Is there a leap in the dialogue or does the conversation with the local audience follow its organic course? Is there a change in the common language? Do we address a new ‘international’ audience? Who is this generic international audience and what are the things that we share? Is a generic dialogue a real dialogue? Who do we want to reach?

We realised after a short time of internationally focused work that we need to rethink some of our tools, while making sure that we keep our local audience connected. We need to think about the “international” audience as specifically as we can, by giving more time to understand the new contexts and to find new references in this dialogue with them.

This rethinking and self-interrogation takes us back to the initial motivation for international work and stirs up things until we find the right answer. It is a self-reflexive process, after all.

**“Each international interaction poses a challenge to find new common language with partners in dialogue.”**

As much as we can anticipate some interactions, there are always things that come as a surprise or as a ‘blur’, an uncertainty that we take in.

Each time we present work internationally, we are surprised by what reaches out and what doesn’t, sometimes coming up against some big differences



between what we receive from home and the feedback we get in foreign contexts. The relationship with the language itself is always a challenge, as we are using a foreign language which we all control on different levels. Sometimes, in these translations, we lose the specifics that come with the original words. Or we are limited by the knowledge of that language. In conversations, we might find ourselves projecting an understanding of words or contexts that we don't fully understand, or we might be misunderstood.

Either way, there is a gap. In this gap, perhaps we should leave an empty space for the things that we cannot reach, for the things that are lost in translation. A non-projection that adds no judgement or meaning, that just admits the gap as something that will occur in between people, cultures, conversations. Outside this gap, we find support in what we recognize as a common language, even if it might take more time and more patience to get to the same meaning of the words.

**“Perhaps we should leave an empty space for the things that we cannot reach, for the things that are lost in translation.”**



Performance of Gliese 445  
Photo by: Mihai Păcurar



Performance of Part 1. Love  
Photo by Vlad Braga

Reactor - a space for creative experiments  
is an independent theatre collective  
active in Cluj-Napoca from 2014. Find out  
more at [reactor-cluj.com](http://reactor-cluj.com)



Performance of 'Interior - light'  
Photo by Bogdan Botaș





**Portrait of Sara, Romania, 2023.**

Portraits staged by the children themselves, inspired by pictures from the history of photography.

“Sara says she likes books, to improve her vocabulary. She has four books at home and in one of them, the story is about a giant and a little girl. She says if she would ever write a book herself, it would be about mathematics. She says that sometimes, she puts makeup on: blush, lipstick and mascara. Her aunt taught her.”

**Marion Colard on co-creating art with the youth of Pata-Rât.**

Marion Colard is a self-taught visual artist, and has been working with Roma communities for eight years.

All photos are by Marion Colard unless otherwise stated.

# Série Pata



\*\* The term "Roma" is used in this article as a generic term and does not cover the diversity of communities on the field.

1. With the collaboration of Antonia, Ale, Alexia, Cassandra, Delia, Elis, Gabi Sabo, Gabi G., Iasmina, Jessica, Lucas, Manu, Marcu, Modar, Nicolas, Rubi, Samir, Samira, Sara, Tania, Titu and Radio Pata. Radio Pata is a community radio with 24/7 streaming - co-created by the communities of Pata Rât, Stephenson, and

Meșterul Manole. Through co-decision processes, community members determine the radio's schedule, information on community self-organization and public services provided by the city.

The PATA serie<sup>1</sup> (2023) is made from artistic workshops carried out in co-creation with "Roma\*\*" children from the Coastei community who live in Pata-Rât. Pata-rât is a slum located in Cluj (Romania) where hundreds of Roma families have been forcibly evicted for generations. Between March and April 2023, I've worked with about fifteen children aged between 6 and 13 to create new ways of representing Roma children through visual creations.

*You won't see the slums, poverty, dirt and dump.  
You won't see despair and dust.  
You won't see weariness and anger.  
All these things exist, in Pata-rât and probably already in your imagination.*

*You will then see a raw and intense poetry, a creative force.  
You will see these children reclaiming their images, their faces, their representations.  
You will see their likes and dislikes, their locations and their colors.  
All these things also exist, in Pata-rât and I hope now, in your imagination.*

Through co-creation workshops, I try to sublimate the stories of people designated as "on the margins of society". I seek to bring out the beauty and strength of those who are forced to build themselves apart. The systemic discrimination, called "antiziganism" faced by Roma communities is so tenacious that it seems to prevent any other form of narrative. Even if you have never met one before, if I tell you "Roma child living in a slum", an image comes to your mind. My wish is to tell another story and create, with the people concerned, other images. Behind every word, every stereotype, is a person with their own story, dreams and complex questions that form and grow beyond the living conditions imposed by systemic discrimination.

During the workshops, different techniques were proposed such as monotype, painting, writing or photography. We expressed what was important for them in their environment, what they liked and didn't like in their neighbourhood. With photography and colour paint we reinterpreted the art of portrait, embracing self-representation.

Installation of the results of the workshop led during two months by Marion Colard with children living in Coastei, Romania. Celebration of 8th of April, International Roma rights Day.

photo credit: Andrei Furnea



**Landscape of Coastei, Romania 2023**

Photography and handwriting on scotch tape, Romania, 2023

*What I like about the neighborhood:  
Playing football, higher on the hill / The playstation, online / Playing outside, with the other children / Laptenis sport / Books and learning / Mathematics and Romanian lessons / Activities where we talk about interesting things.  
What I don't like about the neighborhood:  
Garbage, garbage, the wind that brings it back / The dogs. They run, they bite, they go through the trash cans / The insults, the swear words / The ugliness of the landscape / The misery, the disorder / The big ones who annoy the little ones / The hill, the jungle.*



**Titu, Romania 2023**  
Painting on photography



**Samira & Antonia, Romania, 2023**  
Painting on photography



**Portrait of Tania, Romania, 2023.**



**Samir, Romania, 2023**  
Painting on photography





**Yellow planes in Pata-Rât,  
Romania 2023**

*She draws a house, a fence, flowers/  
She draws birds all over the sky, with  
faces / He draws three yellow planes /  
He draws everything in black and white,  
to have more contrasts. / She draws  
cheese, because that's what she likes  
best. Then erase them because she  
doesn't want to remember them. / She  
redesigned the football field, the posts.  
Clouds in the sky and a few crows. /He  
writes S+K but it's a secret.*



**Portrait of A., Romania 2022**  
Drawings of the kids on photography.

*"He says he loves the moon and the  
smoke that comes out of the house. He  
hates wild pigs and French clowns that  
eats raw onions."*

# Theatre of Transformation

**Péter Tasnádi-Sáhy on (re)learning how to  
act and contemplate the possible**





1. Boal, Augusto, Theatre of the Oppressed, Pluto Press, London, 2008, p.1.

2. Ibid.

According to Augusto Boal, theatre is ‘considered to always present a vision of the world in transformation and therefore is inevitably political in so far as it shows the means of carrying out that transformation or of delaying it.’<sup>1</sup>

In the countries I work in, Romania and Hungary, most theatres are state-financed. It means the ruling regime interested in the status quo maintains the institutions that should be the mean of changing it. No wonder the transformation project is not in focus in these theatres.

**“In ancient times, the main aim of the ritual activity was to create or recreate the unity in the universe.”**

In ancient times, the main aim of the ritual activity was to create or recreate the unity in the universe, to sustain the connection between human beings and their physical and metaphysical environment, or to make a wished outcome possible. Hunters danced around the fire to connect to the game, to ensure the success of the hunt; the ritual empowered the hunters to act.

**“Ancient Greek theatre was not ritual because it was not about connection and creation.”**

To that extent, ancient Greek theatre was not ritual because it was not about connection and creation but for the ‘elimination of the “bad” or illegal tendencies of the audience.’<sup>2</sup> It showed (and it shows nowadays as well) what the people in power – the maintainers of institutional theatre – expected (expect) the masses to do. This kind of institutional theatre prevents action. It doesn’t help transformation; on the contrary, rather than empowering, it intimidates.

I regard forum theatre and any other kind of genuine community theatre as a modern ritual bringing the possibilities into play and helping to study their pros and cons without getting hurt.

Boal called the participants of forum theatre events spect-actors, which means everybody can be a spectator and actor by choice not by force, and can change position at any time.

**“Everybody can be a spectator and actor by choice not by force.”**

Forum-theatre is a space where we can (re)learn how to act and contemplate about the possible outcomes for our own sake; it opens up a wide range of opportunities to find the best solution, and teaches us to become a conscious actor on the stage of society.

Péter Tasnádi-Sáhy runs forum-theatre workshops for Ukrainian refugees at Dévai Inn (Budapest) and several other places. He holds a Master’s diploma in theatre directing from the University of Art Targu Mures and is currently a DLA candidate at BBU.

# MÈMA MÈ FAL (Mamma Perdonami)

**Genny Petrotta introduces Kumeta, a video installation about torture and state repression in a short-lived peasant republic in Italy, programmed for the Transeuropa Festival.**

*Trigger warning: this article contains graphic descriptions of torture.*





“A group of rebels led by Giacomo Petrotta proclaimed the Repubblica Popolare Contadina.”

In the winter of 1944, uprisings broke out in various Sicilian villages against the mismanagement of agricultural crops by an alliance of big landowners and fascist elites, who remained in the government and left the population starving. On 31 December in Piana Degli Albanesi, a town with a strong and unique cultural and linguistic identity founded by Arbëreshë people at the end of the fifteenth century, a group of rebels led by Giacomo Petrotta proclaimed the Repubblica Popolare Contadina.

Almost 80 years later, the Sicilian visual artist Genny Petrotta, grand-niece of the leader at the time, revisited the long-silenced historical episode of her hometown, searching for traces of what happened during the 50 days of the autonomous republic, which existed until it was crushed by the police. The video installation Kumeta is the first act of the project MĚMA MĚ FAL (Mamma Perdonami).

“Our truth was followed by beatings and torture”

On a cold and rainy night on 19-20 February 1945, a massive mob of about 2,000 men set out to surround a town ravaged by war and famine. 120 elderly and young people were arrested, including Giacomo Petrotta. He was tortured for 10 days, placed in agony in a lying position in a box measuring 1 metre by 80 – a so-called “torture box”.

In an artistic intervention about torture and state repression, Genny Petrotta invited the two sculptors, Francesco Albano and Simone Zanaglia, to polish and smooth a rectangular portion of the rock facade of the marble quarry that overlooks the village. The polished surface has the same dimensions as the box where prisoners were kept during torture after having been arrested. The red marbles evoke human flesh, and the smoothing becomes a gesture of caressing a sore body. The north-facing wall of “Mount Kumeta” where the intervention takes place, is also the scene of a massacre on May 1st, 1947, in Portella della Ginestra. The sculptural intervention of smoothing and polishing has been filmed for the Kumeta project.

“The red marbles evoke human flesh, and the smoothing becomes a gesture of caressing a sore body.”

The following text is a testimony of Giacomo Petrotta.

*In total, the arrests rose to about 120 elderly and young people. In the afternoon, a room on the second floor was used for interrogation and torture. All who were crammed into this room were subjected to the first interrogations. They wanted to know at any cost where our machine guns, hand grenades, and especially Molotov cocktails were hidden, which of us had destroyed the telegraph poles, and anything else their imaginations suggested. But what weapons could we have if not a few pistols, which they seized from us on arrest? Our truth was followed by beatings and torture. The traditional “cassetta” appeared, with which it is difficult to resist saying nothing, extracting false stories that never happened from the mouths of the tortured. With this torture, the interrogated person was placed supine on a box measuring one metre by eight metres; the hands and feet left dangling were tied tightly with thin metal ropes to the respective sides of the box.*

*The unfortunate person was sprinkled with water and salt and whipped with an oxen’s backbone and high-tension steel wires. Depending on the treatments that were used, the position of the unfortunate man was changed. An improvised team of the most evil and sadistic carabinieri began the torture. At first, I was subjected to the same torture as the others, but then when the others were left they continued with the most evil and brutal torture on me.*

*As I have already said, each one of us who happened to be tied up in the box was sprinkled with salt and water, so that the blows would be more scorching and at the same time the marks would not be visible... and then whipped with the ox-barrel and steel wire. The room was transformed into a complete quagmire, for the shrieking screams seemed like infernal bedlam. In the room we found ourselves in a group of 20 and 30, young and old, all naked and giving each other endless beatings.*

*They insisted on knowing where the others who had had a chance to escape were hiding and where those weapons, and ammunition, suggested by Constable Bevacqua were; they insisted above all that we should tell them the name of the person who was in charge of ringing the bells to sound the alarm in case the police came.*

*Those who tasted the blows the first time were never touched again, but I had a different fate. For another 10 days they continued their ravages on my body, more and more systematic and methodical, so that they were more provoking and painful, but to me they seemed milder because my body was already reduced to a rag of cloth.*

“The traditional “cassetta” appeared, with which it is difficult to resist saying nothing, extracting false stories that never happened...”

*After long days, the torture finally ceased. Taking me like a rag, they threw me into the security cell. I was swollen from the lashings to look like a pachyderm. Infections were beginning to set in, part of my fingernails had been torn out; my genitals were swollen and sore from the constant manipulation.*

*From ‘Testimonies from a Peasant Republic’, edited by Angela Lanza.*



Video installation by Genny Petrotta KUMETA, the first act of the project “MĚMA MĚ FAL (Mamma Perdonami)” in the former prison of Piana degli Albanesi (Palermo) in the context of the Between Land and Sea Festival 2023. Curated and produced by Fondazione Studio Rizoma and Genia Lab Art (@genialabart), with the support of the Municipality of Piana degli Albanesi. The project is the winner of the twelfth edition of the Italian Council.

Photo Credits: Roberto Boccaccino.

Genny Petrotta (1990) is an Italian artist who lives and works in Palermo. Her artistic practice, guided by poetry and through video installation, seeks the sublimation of a wide range of interests and influences, from anthropological and philosophical to historical. Since 2016 she has been part of Il Pavone, an artistic collective with which she has exhibited in festivals and exhibition spaces including Manifesta12 Collateral, Spazio Y Rome, Adiacenze Bologna, Festival Effetto48, Cassata Drone Palermo, Festival Main off Palermo. Since 2017 he has been working with the artistic duo MASBEDO as assistant director and also covering other roles. In 2022 she directed the production of the video installation “U scantu” by Elisa Giardina Papa presented at the 59th Venice Biennale and coordinated the production of “Alkestys” by Beatrice Gibson and Nick Gordon presented at the British Art Show.





# Holding Space: meet the mediators

An Artsformation podcast from the series  
*Resistance: Decolonising the Internet.*



Scan the QR code to listen now.



Artsformation received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870726.

How can we hold space in a decolonial artist residency? Decolonising is a difficult, long process. The digital transformation poses a unique challenge to those who want to deconstruct systemic injustice. Artsformation brought together artists and practitioners to a residency in Lesvos to imagine creative ways to engage with the topic of decolonising the digital transformation. Building trust was a prerequisite: in our second podcast in the series *Resistance: decolonising the internet*, we meet residency facilitators Clare Sivier and Tian Glasgow, in conversation with Ségolène Pruvot and Seema Syeda (European Alternatives), to discuss how they held space in the residency. Scan the QR code to listen to the podcast on Spotify.

Claire Sivier is a researcher, producer, facilitator and artist focusing on decolonial practices. She is a co-director of tialt // there is an alternative.

Tian Glasgow is a theatre director and arts producer working in community engagement. He also works at social justice charity Arts Emergency.

Ségolène Pruvot is a Director of European Alternatives. Trained as a political scientist and urban planner in France, the UK, and Germany, she has developed extensive experience in designing and implementing transnational participative artistic and cultural programmes." "Seema Syeda is Communications Officer at European Alternatives.

European Alternatives is a partner of Artsformation, a research project exploring the intersection between arts, society and technology.



