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### **THE POLITICS OF SEPARATION AND PARTICIPATION: AUTONOMOUS SPACES IN KAUNAS, LITHUANIA**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

For the past four years autonomous spaces that vary in nature but are run by virtually the same group of people have been operating in Kaunas, Lithuania. In the Lithuanian context, they are one of the most prominent recent attempts at continuous radical leftist political infrastructure. In the Central and Eastern European context, they are peculiar for not being connected to public housing struggles. This article draws an outline of their modes of operation and paradigmatic shifts by examining their history as well as theoretical and sociological material and using extensive interviews conducted with participants. Awareness of the complicated relation between meaningful separation and broader participation is suggested as a reflexive means of becoming hubs of political involvement.

**KEYWORDS**

Kaunas, autonomous space, autonomism, squatting, social centre, political participation

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, in Kaunas, Lithuania, there have been continuous collective efforts by a group of left-wing people to open and sustain politicised autonomous spaces. The efforts resulted in the *Žalias Namas* (*Green House*) squat (operative during the first half of 2015), *Warung Makan* infoshop and falafel cafe (autumn 2015-spring 2016), and rented social centre *Emma* (open since December 2016). Situated in the second biggest city of a post-socialist country whose relation to left-wing politics, especially the radical and non-party kind, is complicated and marked by hard historical abruptions and general lack of material and ideological infrastructure, these spaces are noticeable for their (interrupted) continuity and attempts at political sustainability despite their shifting nature. The aim of this paper is to investigate these spaces' further political importance, especially that of *Žalias Namas* and *Emma*, as perceived and experienced by their participants, and the ambiguous relation of their political "inside" and "outside": willing separation and attempts of participation in broader processes.

The author of this paper has actively participated in establishing and running the aforementioned spaces. Both temporally and in terms of purpose, active engagement in them precedes academic interest. Hence, methodologically, this paper is based on "participant observing" rather than "participant observation"<sup>1</sup>. Broader issues of purpose of such research and paper, as well as author's relation to the researched, must be taken into consideration. As noted in many sources, the relationship between social movements (including those running autonomous spaces) and academia is noticeably tense, quite skeptical on both sides, and sometimes openly or strategically hostile<sup>2</sup>. In her paper on the problematics of this relation, Deanna Dadusc sums up the main problem of this relation as dualism, a binary opposition of extraction and inclusion<sup>3</sup>. In the first scenario, the researcher spends enough time to extract enough knowledge from the movement or collective, and leaves right after that. In the second scenario, the contribution is substantial, but the roles of "academic consultant" and "activist" are not reversed or cancelled,

<sup>1</sup> Claudio Cattaneo, "Investigating neorurals and squatters' lifestyles: personal and epistemological insights on participant observation and on the logic of ethnographic investigation," *Athenea digital* 10 (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Georgy Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics* (Oakland, Cal.: AK, 2007); David Croteau, "Which Side Are You On? The Tension between Movement Scholarship and Activism"; in: David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Charlotte Ryan, eds., *Rhyming Hope and History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Deanna Dadusc, "Power, Knowledge and Resistances in the Study of Social Movements," *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest* 1(2) (2014); Luis A. Fernandez, "Being there: thoughts on anarchism and participatory observation"; in: Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, Luis A. Fernandez, Anthony J. Nocella, II, and Deric Shannon, eds., *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Joanna Kostka and Katarzyna Czarnotta, "Modes of knowledge production in the study of radical urban movements," *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 9(1) (2017).

<sup>3</sup> Deanna Dadusc, *supra* note 2.

and the hierarchies are preserved in the very process that aims at challenging hierarchies outside of itself<sup>4</sup>.

Outside of this oppressive binary opposition, there is the relation of collaboration, defined by coinciding aims of the potential for collective political action. Often, the goals of such research are not to produce certain data or new topologies, but the very process of collective reflection<sup>5</sup>. That is, indeed, the main aim of this paper: to inspire, dedicate time, and provide material for collective, collaborative considerations on whether and why separate, autonomous spaces are necessary and effective in striving for our political aims; as well as on how these spaces have been, are, and will be used to organise and make alliances with social groups that are not immediately perceived as “radical”.

To this end, the chosen research method is based on four extensive (from one-and-a-half hour to two hours each) unstructured interviews with active participants of the aforementioned Kaunas’ autonomous spaces, carried out from summer, 2016, to autumn, 2017. The informants, presented by their initials J., K., N., and O., were in their 20s or early 30s at the time of interviewing and had been actively involved in autonomous spaces in Kaunas and elsewhere for at least two years prior to the interview. To make this paper a collaboration that is a useful tool of reflection not only to academics, but also to the informants and other activists, I look for material and cultural grounds for informants’ claims and convictions. For that purpose, other autonomous space researchers’ findings — mainly from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) — are used, as well as theoretical and historical insights into autonomous space and autonomism, and research on local material and socio-political situation in Lithuania.

## 1. MEANINGFUL SEPARATION WITHOUT HOUSING STRUGGLE

The autonomous spaces of Kaunas do not really fit the CEE (and general) context of similar places closely related to the housing struggle<sup>6</sup>. *Žalias Namas* was the closest case: a century-old wooden house in a central, but not-yet-gentrified area (most inhabitants have been living there for decades) of individual houses and two-story apartment blocks, set for demolition—against the neighbours’ will—to make space for a luxurious apartment building. The cooperative struggle of

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Joanna Kostka and Katarzyna Czarnotta, *supra* note 2.

<sup>5</sup> Deanna Dadusc, *supra* note 2: 54.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Ágnes Gagyi, “The constitution of the ‘political’ in squatting,” *Baltic Worlds*, IX:1–2, (2016); Dominika V. Polanska, “Marginalizing discourses and activists’ strategies in collective identity formation: The case of Polish tenants’ movement”; in: Kerstin Jacobsson and Elżbieta Korolczuk, eds., *Civil Society Revisited: Lessons from Poland* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); Katia Valenzuela-Fuentes, Dominika V. Polanska, and Anne Kaun, “The right to housing in theory and in practice: going beyond the West,” *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 9(1) (2017).

squatters and neighbours against the construction project did not move beyond initial stages of getting acquainted with each other and discussing the issue informally. A couple of informants expressed both regret at the lost opportunity to get involved with the surrounding community and clear reasons why the opportunity was not taken, for example:

Now, in hindsight, everything looks much simpler: we should have communicated with the neighbours more intensely, we should have resisted those plans more eagerly. The worst case scenario would have been a court case, but even that would have been some movement, perhaps a beginning of something, an example to others. I mean, we did communicate somewhat, we had a couple allies from the neighbours, we knew others, too, they helped us connect electricity, some of them came to the infoshop opening. I think what we lacked most was time, because at first we didn't have enough courage, we didn't know the situation well, then other problems piled up, I think if there had been, say, three more months, the things could have caught momentum. (O.)

The other two spaces had/have no actual connection to the housing struggle whatsoever: *Warung Makan* was a temporary solution to the need to have a space for gatherings and cultural events, and *Emma* grew out of the activities of *Gyvenimas Per Brangus (Life Is too Expensive)* workers' solidarity network.

It is hard to tell whether the main reason of the lack of grassroots housing activism in Kaunas is strictly material, but there are signs that at least on the discursive level, the need for such activism is not strongly voiced. A couple of informants stressed, in their opinion, cheaper rent and lower levels of homelessness in Kaunas as compared to other major cities in the CEE and even Vilnius; also, that housing was not among the most pressing or urgent problems for them and their acquaintances, therefore organising around it did not seem to hold the promise of sufficient motivation or ability to mobilise others. Indeed, for the past five years, surveys showed that inhabitants of Lithuania are worried most by rising prices of everyday services and commodities, unemployment, migration, and rising social inequality. Housing was not mentioned among the top reasons of anxiety in any of them: on the contrary, this year's survey showed that dwelling was the element of life about which most inhabitants of Lithuania (78%) feel secure<sup>7</sup>. These claims are supported by the latest EU statistics: Lithuanian households spend the second-to-

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<sup>7</sup> See:

<https://www.delfi.lt/verslas/verslas/tyrimas-lietuviai-labiausiai-nerimauja-del-sveikatos-ir-finansu.d?id=78146679> <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/tyrimas-lietuviai-labiausiai-nerimauja-del-ekonominiu-ir-socialiniu-gresmiu-56-812736>;  
<https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/verslas/776796/tyrimas-del-ko-nerimauja-lietuviai>;  
<http://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/verslas/ekonomika/kodel-lietuviai-visos-es-labiausiai-sunerime-del-kainu-850677> <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/ekonomika/4/25511/del-ko-nerimauja-kas-antras-lietuvis>.

last percentage of their income on housing and utilities (15.6%) and the biggest percentage of their income on food and non-alcoholic beverages (22.2%) in the Union<sup>8</sup>. However, as Jolanta Aidukaitė et al. point out, Lithuania has serious housing issues other than homelessness. Their research found that lack of social or affordable housing for those who do not own real estate, lack of accommodation area per capita, housing poverty, and limited availability of housing to the younger generation are dire even when compared to two other CEE countries, Czech Republic and Estonia<sup>9</sup>. In the end, further comparative research on the material and discursive impact of housing problems on the inhabitants of various countries in the region, and the relation of this impact to the organised housing struggle, is needed in order to answer the question of materiality with certainty.

With publicly active housing struggle in Lithuania practically non-existent, informants mentioned other political reasons for the existence of Kaunas' autonomous spaces that fit into two groups: autonomous space enables experimentation with "different" forms of life; and autonomous space serves as headquarters of radical political organisations. More will be related about the basis and effect of the latter group of reasons further on. Meanwhile, the first group of arguments is based on separation *from* certain elements--both immediately material and present in their effect--of capitalist society in order to broaden the limits of what one can do:

(...) [autonomous space] is where there are no cops or at least there shouldn't be any (...) There are other spaces where, allegedly, there are no cops either, like the parliament or a supermarket, but there, everyone is a cop there (...) [In autonomous space] there is never an understanding that some one person owns the place. Of course there is always the owner, but he is not there. (J.)

In teenage years, basements were also autonomous spaces to me. Autonomous spaces were always to me the ones where there were no bosses, no profit imperatives. Where you could either relax, act, create something or hide from threatening environments. (N.)

I became active in [autonomous spaces] only when I saw the limits of knowing and understanding, some limits of what this traditional neoliberal nationalist thought and space can offer, what this unbridled individualism can offer. All the structures, like family, work, office culture, creative industries, heteronormativity, they have a limited amount of something "new", and they are, at the end of the day, suffocating. (O.)

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<sup>8</sup> See: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Household\\_consumption\\_by\\_purpose](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Household_consumption_by_purpose).

<sup>9</sup> Jolanta Aidukaitė, Anna Lipnevič, Saulius Nefas, Alvieta Narkevičiūtė, and Fausta Anulytė, *Būsto politika ir visuomenės iniciatyvos mieste (Housing policies and social initiatives in the city)* (Vilnius: Lietuvos socialinių tyrimų centras, 2014), 31-34.

Conceptually, such explanations closely resemble the contemporary autonomist definition of autonomy, as illustrated by Georgy Katsiaficas' separation of political concepts of liberty and autonomy: "Liberty is more a function of the situatedness of the subject and the tolerance of power, while autonomy demands self-activity."<sup>10</sup> Liberty is a prerequisite of public spaces, but it is also contingent in respect to the subject, and mostly requires the ability "to be in a right place at a right time" and tolerate one's surroundings ("threatening environments", "cops", "owners", etc.). The autonomy of autonomous spaces, on the other hand, requires additional effort in order to establish and maintain but, in the long run, is expected to enable its participants by removing the need, at least partly, to deal with the aforementioned constraints on daily basis. The need to escape daily power relations, according to some of the interviewees, is a political need that serves as a basis for further political involvement and change of subjective political views.

## 2. WHY IS ISOLATION GERMAN? INNER CRITIQUES OF SEPARATION

Homogeneity is rarely a thing of autonomous spaces. This may be a strange statement to most of the onlookers or, to say it in other words, to "outsiders": to them, groups that run autonomous spaces often appear very tightly-knit and politically unified and can be categorised as one of the "urban tribes"<sup>11</sup>. However, from an insider's perspective, such homogenous picture of "sects" has more to do with the claustrophobic context of contemporary political life where everyone on the same end of the political spectrum is seen as, essentially, "the same". In reality, autonomous space collectives usually prove to be comprised of people of differing political convictions or preferences, from social democracy to anarchism to trotskyism and so on.

Nevertheless, it can also be said that, genealogically speaking, autonomous spaces, and social centres in particular, stem from the tradition of autonomism, a radical left-wing current prominent mostly in European politics, but existent all around the world, for more than 50 years<sup>12</sup>. Strict borders between autonomism and other leftist currents are even harder to draw these days, as, according to Katsiaficas, autonomy has become "the phenomenal form of contemporary radical activism"<sup>13</sup>. Which means that, in most contemporary leftist currents, when compared to the "old mode" of trade-union and vanguard-party based organising,

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<sup>10</sup> Georgy Katsiaficas, *supra* note 2, 552.

<sup>11</sup> Joanna Kostka and Katarzyna Czarnotta, *supra* note 2: 372.

<sup>12</sup> For a short history of global autonomism and its relation to social centres, see: Linda Martín Alcoff and José Alcoff, "Autonomism in theory and practice," *Science and Society* 79(2) (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Georgy Katsiaficas, *supra* note 2, 9.

more attention is paid to individual desires and limits, political organisation is increasingly based on identity and affiliation rather than sheer economic interest, and activists are concerned less with ideological victories and global revolution and more with betterment of immediate conditions of social groups participating in the struggle. To extend and update Katsiaficas' notion, one could say that methods of the "politics of the first person", catering for polarised identities, and decentralisation, once exclusive to the radical autonomist and anarchist "scene", are nowadays increasingly applied in structure and activity of official non-governmental organisations, trade unions, and political parties.

On the one hand, having in mind the aforementioned difference between autonomy and liberty, such contemporary mode of political "autonomisation" can be seen as a positive thing. One needs only to remember that at its beginning autonomism meant a change in political strategy of working class movements that was needed due to advances in technology, which meant that workers could be replaced more easily, and the traditional means of strike and party organisation were becoming less effective<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, Traditional Communist parties were going into increasingly pacified compromises with the governments; the increase of wages did not catch up with rising prices of living; vast social groups—women, students, migrants, unemployed youths, LGBT and non-white people—found themselves underrepresented in the traditional Communist rhetorics aimed only at "the proletariat" (i.e., white male factory workers) as the only revolutionary class<sup>15</sup>. Movements that formed as response to these shortcomings were based on changes on all levels. Organisationally, they strove for "the class struggle (...) autonomous of the circulation of capital; and the class struggle not led by traditional organisations of the Left (Communists and their trade unions)."<sup>16</sup> On the level of language and reflection, these movements took an "inward turn" towards a "politics of the first person"<sup>17</sup> or what Antonio Negri called "self-valorisation"<sup>18</sup>: instead of talking for and knowing what is best for the whole working class, they talked and acted about themselves and their own groups. The change in tactics was related to political action outside of factories: squatting, self-reduction (one-sidedly refusing to pay the full price for goods and services), living in informal collectivities, etc.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Michael Ryan, (1991) "Introduction II"; in: Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (London: Pluto Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Georgy Katsiaficas, *supra* note 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Micheal Ryan, *supra* note 14.

<sup>19</sup> Georgy Katsiaficas, *supra* note 2.



On the other hand, autonomist methodology of political organising has notable downsides. The inclusion of different social groups and their interests in what is meant to be a common struggle meant that movements had to deal with the plurality of worldviews, take better care of inner dynamics which, paradoxically, lead to a certain degree of isolation from "the general public" due to proliferation of rules not followed outside of the movement's confines. According to an insider of German Autonomen, together with the state's efforts to criminalise and marginalise autonomous movements and commercial culture's efforts to internalise their aesthetics, movements' lack of public relations and good media politics were also responsible for diminishing numbers and subculturalisation or, in his words, "ghettoisation".<sup>20</sup> Critics from academia, such as Don Kalb and David Harvey, also point out that horizontalist organising strategies and tactics abandon effectiveness and long-term visions over inner dynamics, "(...) reject[ing] the obsession in current oppositional politics with horizontalism and its refusal of leadership, formal organisation, and hierarchy [,] point[ing] at horizontalism's failure of coordination and synchronisation, its inability to prefigure and experiment with alternative forms of rule and thus to produce the necessary competent personnel."<sup>21</sup>

The interviews show that this threat of isolation, ineffectiveness, and contentment in self-sufficiency is taken very seriously by participants of Kaunas' autonomous spaces, and may even be their main concern when it comes to establishing and running such spaces. Informants had their own takes and experiences of isolating separation in various spaces:

I could start from Žeimiai [a manor-artists' residence in Kaunas region] (...) It is a strange autonomous zone (...) At first I didn't want that autonomous zone, but it appeared, this other kind of autonomous zone. I wanted a more integrated autonomous zone, the whole village to be an autonomous zone (...) Now everything is very much separated there. No one grasped any relations with the so-called community of the village (...) Autonomy there is only pure separation from everything that's happening, from all relations, and it's a closed community, a small one, inward-directed. (K.)

This will sound too poetic, but, as Deleuze and Guattari say, when a machine starts spinning around its own axis, it becomes autistic, existing for itself and in itself, it's a nice toy, but it's totally unnecessary (...) Autonomous spaces are the same, perhaps the best example is all the hippy communes, doesn't matter how "different" they are, if they are in no meaningful relation to the outside—either conflict, or cooperation, or recruiting, or presenting a different world—they lose

<sup>20</sup> Paul O'Banion, "Autonomous Antifa: From the Autonomen to Post-Antifa in Germany," *It's Going Down!* (November 20, 2017) // <https://itsgoingdown.org/autonomous-antifa-germany-interview/>

<sup>21</sup> Don Kalb, "Mavericks: Harvey, Graeber, and the reunification of anarchism and Marxism in world anthropology," *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 69 (2014): 116.

their meaning, too (...) to me, if they lose the relation, they are completely not important, unnecessary, and even harmful. (O.)

Interestingly enough, some informants called such mode of comfortable isolated activist existence "German". When asked to elaborate, they said that "German" activists tend to get stuck in the never ending process of examining inner-dynamics of groups instead of struggling against broader socio-political oppressions; that a "German activist" is someone who unashamedly repeats anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist slogans, but has little to no sense of positionality and context, also when in their home country, but especially when abroad; and, reiterating the regional sentiment, that "German" activists come to the CEE as self-appointed "teachers" and "supervisors", thus playing a quasi-colonial role.

It must be said that the version of "German" autonomism that the informants refer to is rather an echo of its former scale and influence, the Autonomen of the 1970s-1980s or, as one of them called it, "during the long period of 1968".<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the fall of the Berlin Wall is also listed by members of the movement among the reasons of its exhaustion and decline, as the event marked the end of polarised capitalist and socialist worlds and sped up the onset of broad neoliberal economic and cultural measures, including recuperation of formerly rebellious practices by the "mainstream", pacifying them in the process. Therefore, the phenomenon that reached the CEE is more appropriately termed as post-autonomous politics<sup>23</sup>. Here, some authors notice the appeal of autonomism and post-autonomism to activists from the CEE, as it is somewhat reminiscent of the libertarian dissident scene in the former Eastern Bloc: "It insists on the right to be different, the right to insist autonomously on one's own perspective and way of life, against the homogenising pressures of neoliberal conformity."<sup>24</sup> As one informant pointed out, it is also hardly surprising that activists from the "East" choose autonomist practices and appearances over straight-forward socialism or communism, when anything "socialist" or "communist" is as demonised in the CEE as it still is.

It is highly plausible that a cultural "German problem", which leads to Kaunas activists' critiques of poor positionality and quasi-colonial behaviour of the German model, exists in reality. Even Katsiaficas, an author who is very sympathetic to the German Autonomen and who spent years with them, felt the need to tackle the problem of peculiar German culture in his *Subversion of Politics*. What he found was that even among German left-wing radicals, who are, of course, anti-nationalist,

<sup>22</sup> Paul O'Banion, *supra* note 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Robinson, "Autonomism: The future of activism?" *Ceasefire* (October 8, 2010) // <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-5-autonomism/>.

certain peculiarly German traits persist as a "particular cultural prism" that "distorts autonomous movements".<sup>25</sup> The most noticeable ones are the self-centred sense of German "uniqueness", obsession with rationality, and subconscious puritanism: "One could begin by pointing out that the Autonomen black uniform is the same color as that of the Puritans."<sup>26</sup> However, as one informant pointed out, the critique of separation and isolation of movements that took an "inward turn", including the German Autonomen, is insufficient without an insight into the genealogies that brought them to certain points:

It's reductive to say this big statement of an "inward turn". There were, there are revolutionary impulses of all kinds, structural and everyday life re-thinkings, and we don't mention the repressions and state brutality enough. (...) Because now one may think that revolutionaries themselves are to be blamed for their failure, as if multiple techniques, neoliberalism, cultural industry, consumption, deindustrialisation, and fragmentation never occurred. (N.)

All in all, the question of "German" and other kinds of isolation remains open and could motivate a broad research on the complicated relationship of CEE activists and their Western counterparts. The very figure of speech, as used by participants of autonomous spaces in Kaunas, can be seen as a sarcastic or auto-ironic defense mechanism. It can be safely said, however, that this figure provides a clear tacit agreement, expressed by all informants, of what is not desirable in their activity: separation, however meaningful for an individual, is given a certain window in which it can remain individual, but after a while it must take on a collective character and, while remaining an enabling background, turn into a meaningful participation. In the context where, as mentioned in the previous chapter, housing activism is not an option that was ever seriously pursued, this framework necessarily leads towards experiments with other forms of sociopolitical importance of the autonomous spaces in question.

### 3. ATTEMPTS AT BROADER POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

It cannot be said that there was a clear agenda for how *Žalias Namas* would be important to the city and broader political struggles. In Kaunas, where the last semi-public squat had closed in the 2000s, an attempt to open a squatted social centre at the turn of 2015 was clearly and entirely an experiment. According to one of its initiators, experimenting with appropriating private space for social purposes was the initial ground of its political importance and participative appeal: "(...)not

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<sup>25</sup> Georgy Katsiaficas, *supra* note 2, 181.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

many of us were well-read in political theory, but the squat itself made a political change in people, helped them understand how to open spaces and that they can simply be occupied to cater for a certain need, and that it's OK." (J.) Methodologically speaking, tangibility and materiality of a squatted physical space as something *actually achieved* must be seen as a stimulus for participation, if not for the broader public, at least for participants themselves and their social circles. The informants clearly named this effect, stating that *Žalias Namas* was among the reasons to stay in Kaunas or come back from emigration, or a source of political, social, and individual hope.

Obviously, the well-being of the participants, although important, especially in an environment of a relatively small city defined by them as "politically claustrophobic", is still not a serious achievement in political participation. A nagging lack of feedback to their activity, input from the "outside", and, sometimes, overall political meaning of squatting in Kaunas was soon universally felt:

The thing that we organised, I'd call it scenic, picturesque, at least it was to me. I hadn't squatted before, and I didn't know what to expect, it seemed to me that once we open an infoshop, the whole Kaunas will come and come and come, and there'll be a shortage of books. And then you establish that space and you see that no one's coming, then you rethink things. (J.)

Since we didn't know how these things work in Lithuania and especially in Kaunas, everything was done semi-secretly, almost without any social media, and a bit chaotically, reacting to shifting situations, and to this day we meet people who lived nearby or were interested in squats and similar things and didn't know that [*Žalias Namas*] was there. Plus, we didn't live there (...), so the space was more a matter of duty and desire than of need. And duties and desires require motivation, it's easy to get disappointed in them, to lose strength, etc. (O.)

Later it seemed that we close ourselves in a subcultural niche with the parties, and I never thought squatting should be the main activity. The space is not the goal. That's why it annoyed me a bit, because you're forced to always think about it, (...) about everyday things, about logistics, and it was never fully clear to me, to what purpose (...) I didn't see the urgency, or that we have nowhere to live and we need to live somewhere, and it seemed as if we need to copy some Western model. (K.)

*Žalias Namas* was a short experiment that lasted only a bit more than six months, with its eviction being almost non-conflictual and sparking nothing but an

article in the local press.<sup>27</sup> According to the informants, its short lifespan was one of the main reasons for its insignificant contribution to local political participation. The last couple months, when participants had already gained more courage to develop various more public cultural activities and more local inhabitants got to know about the squat's existence, are remembered as hopeful times, during which bigger plans encompassing a larger portion of local population were considered. However, although untimely, eviction was not feared and silver-linings were to be found. What some informants emphasized regarding the topic of autonomy is that it is also defined by its temporal and unstable nature, that of a process that can and should never be completed and is constantly performed anew. A paradoxical safeguard against "getting too comfortable" and subsequent isolation is repression: eviction is its purest form.

*Emma* started as a somewhat different undertaking, with its clear initial purpose and a rent contract. Autonomous space as headquarters of an informal or even formal political organisation is a relatively new thing in Kaunas, with *Emma* being the first space with an expressed affiliation to a political organisation, namely the *Gyvenimas per brangus* movement and workers' solidarity network. *Gyvenimas per brangus* started as a series of protests against the rising living prices and then against the new Labour Code in Kaunas and in Vilnius in spring-summer 2016, and, after the protests dissipated, evolved into a workers' solidarity network. At first, the solidarity network meetings were held in a local university, but then the premises of *Emma* were found and rented in the late autumn of 2016. Whether the move was actually an immediate necessity for the solidarity network is still debatable, but, according to one informant, "[w]hen we were meeting in [the university], we felt that there is a need for a space, that it's quite legitimate to look for it and that something can happen (...) I don't know whether, if we hadn't found it, things would have continued as they have." (K.)

The decision to rent a social centre, and not to squat one, was made consciously and collectively. Informants named several reasons for that: the aforementioned lack of housing activism that rendered squatting somewhat politically insignificant in any other sense but that of urban fabric; the "capitalist relation of rent" allowing for broader legitimization and therefore better access to publicizing the social centre's activities; since the members of the collective are likely to migrate abroad at any point in time, rented space is safer as it does not need to be taken care of on a daily basis; finally, psychological accessibility of

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<sup>27</sup> "Kauno skvoteriai. 'Žaliojo Namo' gyvenimas ir mirtis" (Kaunas squatters. Life and death of 'Žalias Namas'), *Kauno Žinios* (July 19, 2015) // [https://kaunozinios.lt/miestas/kauno-skvoteriai-zaliojo-namo-gyvenimas-bei-mirtis\\_88463.html](https://kaunozinios.lt/miestas/kauno-skvoteriai-zaliojo-namo-gyvenimas-bei-mirtis_88463.html)

legally used space to people unacquainted with the full set of political ideas of activists, e.g., "customers" of the solidarity network who would want to drop by. For the latter reason, an explicit and later implicit agreement on limiting the amount of paraphernalia of the protest culture (stickers, posters, zines, patches, etc.) in the space was made.

Quite soon, solidarity network meetings were supplemented by other activities: film screenings, presentations and discussions, materialist feminist reading group and radical psychology study group, video game nights, concerts, semi-public and spontaneous parties, etc. *Emma* became an important part of the leftist political infrastructure of Kaunas and Lithuania, gathering different initiatives under one umbrella of autonomous space. However, although participation in different events and activities increased, almost all participants belong to a student demographic and most of them only take part in particular events, as opposed to getting involved in the inner doings of the collective or continuous active participation in different strands of leftist politics. This peculiar participation, close to a service relation that relies on unpaid voluntary labour of the collective members, is seen as ambiguous by informants:

I'm not sure if we can call it a "social" centre, at least now, as it's more on the cultural level, but even then I wouldn't say it's a bad thing to expand those cultural circles, as it actually happened. To me, the cultural and the social work the best when they coincide and you can't distinguish one from the other (...) Otherwise, because new people don't come to change us and we won't be able to do everything at the same time for much longer, it will have to change again, either into a cafe, or into a library, or into a workspace, take up even more of a useful service to simply survive as something meaningful. (J.)

(...) [t]his service relation is not a simple service relation, anyway. It's similar to a service relation you get from a trade union: you need a service and you take part in a process to get it, and you reevaluate your relationship with your colleagues, your boss, people around you (...) I want to believe that it changes worldviews. It's not the same as buying an abstract service (...) Labels and cliches can never be fully avoided, so I say fine, if there's a place where parties and events happen, and it's a "communist" space. But it's not party headquarters, it's something different, and then it's good that labels like "communist concert" stick to it. (K.)

I used to be very sceptical of the service relation, but the longer we do this the better I see how the beautiful voluntarism either doesn't work or only works for those who can afford it, and excludes those with less money, those who constantly need money. So a way out is to create a free service and to use it ourselves, too. Of course it's not the same participation that we used to cherish a couple years ago, where there is no financial relation and we all do everything

for ourselves, but we tried and we can't hide it anymore: the financial relation exists. Then, it's better to be a meaningful place of services - food, events, concerts, lectures, a form of trade union - that can include older or poorer people, than to live in a dream of instant equality. (O.)

One can see a minor paradigm shift in a couple of years from *Žalias Namas's* chaotic voluntarism and focus on space to *Emma's* more consistent negotiation with the service relation and focus on the function of space. Changing spaces change together with political strategy and tactics, and remain, as one can clearly see in the example of Kaunas, in a state of political experimentation and a certain quest for the political participation of the "outsiders". While this is never fully achieved to satisfaction of the participants of the spaces in questions, the space here can be seen not only as a point of political methodology, but also as a facilitator of political education by doing: with the aim remaining the same and always in scope, participants change spaces and adapt them to suit their new tactics in informed hope of meaningful public political participation.

## CONCLUSIONS

Political agenda and outcomes of autonomous spaces are not easy to trace, due to their peculiar nature. They are always somewhat chaotic and based partly on a desire that does not give in to being explained away; decisions and activities here are most often collective, and therefore somewhat unstable and amorphous. However, in the case of Kaunas' autonomous spaces, just as any others, some tendencies can be singled out and used for broader political (auto)examination of such "projects".

The first tendency and peculiarity of *Žalias Namas*, *Warung Makan*, and *Emma* as compared to many other examples in the CEE is the lack of relation to a public collective housing struggle. The fact that the latter is practically non-existent in Lithuania partly explains why participants did not choose this obvious strategy of political participation and involvement. What is clear is that while housing issues may pose some actual material urgency to inhabitants of Lithuania, it did not pose a material need urgent enough *for the participants of autonomous spaces* and that, discursively, housing shortage is a non-problem in Lithuania. Whether the lack of housing-struggle related autonomous spaces can be explained this way is questionable, but this remains a probable hypothesis.

Hence, the initial aim of autonomous spaces in question was meaningful separation from oppressive environments and daily constraints in order to expand one's individual and collective capacities of thinking and doing. It can be seen as an issue of individual well-being, but explaining the desire and the practice by this only

would be reductive, especially when it is clear that at least ephemeral or experimental plans of broader participation and inclusion of social groups other than themselves have been with the participants from the very beginning and became clearer over time. The plans were also amended according to experience of past experiments and changing social and political circumstances, which shows a political consciousness that goes outside the limits of one's individual well-being.

Serious concern with the problems of isolation and alienation are one of the ways this consciousness demonstrates itself. While both are to certain extent inevitable in this kind of spaces, auto-ironic and sarcastic guard is not let down and disdain of what is termed the "German model" is a constant feature. The term itself, although politically and historically grounded, can be and is contested by the participants, arguing for deeper analysis of the political and historical reasons of "German" isolation, i.e., the development of German autonomism into post-autonomist politics.

In the sense of political participation, two out of three spaces in question deserve broader analysis, as *Warung Makan* was a somewhat insignificant temporary solution. *Žalias Namas* started as an experiment of appropriating private space for social purposes without a clear plan in the beginning, mostly as a material and tangible political object that was a motivating and unifying factor. Its impact outside of the activist and punk community(s) was low: its short lifespan and lack of political urgency are mentioned as the reasons of this failure by its initiators. *Emma*, on the other hand, can be seen as a paradigm shift, as its appearance responded to the urgency of political organisation's *Gyvenimas per brangus* need for space. Retaining some elements of the aforementioned untraceability, randomness, and amorphousness, its adaptation to aims of openness and content-based organising is quite sophisticated. However, it is thought among the informants that the adaptation is not over, and further steps are needed to open the space up to different age, economic, and social groups, and to expand on the social aspect of the social centre, instead of remaining mostly cultural.

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