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## **Housing Rent Control at the Micro Level: Perspectives from Southeast and East Central Europe, 1918–1924\***

**Abstract:** This paper presents both statistical and qualitative analyses examining the micro-level repercussions of state intervention, specifically the implementation of rent control systems and requisitioning in the housing rental markets of Southeast- and East-Central European regions in the aftermath of the First World War. The numerical assessment relies on the calculation of the residual postwar purchasing power parity of prewar rents, while the qualitative analysis endeavors to reconstruct the daily dynamics of coexistence among conflicting parties, encompassing instances of extreme intimidation and violence.

**Keywords:** rent control system, inflation, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, interwar period

This paper focuses on the microenvironment of housing relations within the framework of interwar rent control implemented in Southeast- and East-Central European countries.<sup>1</sup> It explores the direct economic implications of state

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1 For an overall long-term analysis of housing rent-control throughout the world between 1910 and 2020, see: Konstantin A. Kholodilin, "Long-term, multicountry perspective on rental market regulations", *Housing Policy Debate* 6/2020, 994–1015. For the implementation of the rent control system in European countries and regions in the interwar period, see:

intervention on the actual purchasing power parity of housing rents, as well as its impact on the everyday relations between landlords and tenants. The primary units of analysis are pairs of countries representing their respective regions: Bulgaria and Yugoslavia standing for Southeast-, and Poland and Czechoslovakia for East-Central Europe.<sup>2</sup> Chronologically, this study spans the years following the immediate aftermath of the First World War, a period distinguished by the most significant postwar state intervention in housing relations. The state policies, directed towards a substantial reduction in pre-war rent purchasing power, consistently provoked dissatisfaction among property owners. Concurrently, tenants, afforded legal protection and supported by state policies, frequently sought to exploit the situation to the detriment of landlords. The protracted engagement of four states in housing relations further exacerbated persistent disagreements that surfaced in the day-to-day interactions between landlords and tenants.

This paper is founded upon numerical data extracted from national statistical sources, alongside the International Labor Office's comparative data series outlining European trends in housing policy. The qualitative analysis of the day-to-day dynamics in the interactions between tenants and landlords is primarily reconstructed based on accounts provided by the newspapers representing the interests of their respective organizations. Surprisingly, this topic has been entirely overlooked within both regional and global scholarly discourse. In a broader legal and societal context, the paper offers insights into the constraints imposed on personal freedom in property disposal and the complications arising from postwar state intervention in housing matters.<sup>3</sup>

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David Englander, *Landlord and Tenant in Urban Britain, 1838-1918*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938); Håkan Forsell, *Property, Tenancy and Urban Growth in Stockholm and Berlin, 1860-1920*, (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2006); Susanna Magri, "Housing", *Capital Cities at War. Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, eds. Jay Winter, Jean-Louis Robert, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 374-418; Aleksandar R. Miletić. "Tenancy vs. Ownership Rights. Housing Rent Control in Southeast and East-Central Europe, 1918–1928", *Mesto a dejiny* 1/2016, 51-74; Александар Р. Милетић, „Нормативно регулисање стамбеног закупа у Европи 1914-1938“, *Токови историје* 3/2013, 109-41; Aurora Iannello, "The Exception that Became the Rule: A History of First-Generation Rent Control in Italy (1915-1978)", *Journal of Urban History* 4/2024 (forthcoming). For the overall assessment of the New York first generation rent-control system, see: Robert Fogelson, *The Great Rent Wars: New York, 1917-1929*, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2013).

2 For the sake of simplicity, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes is herein referred to as Yugoslavia, Bulgaria represents the Kingdom of Bulgaria, while Poland and Czechoslovakia denote respective republics.

3 On the nature and outcomes of price controls and ownership regimes in the aftermath of World War One, see: Gerry R. Rubin, *Private Property, Government Requisition and the Constitution, 1914–1927*, (London: Hambledon Press, 1994); Gerald D. Feldman, *The Great Disorder. Politics, Economics and Society in the German Inflation, 1914–1924*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993); Aleksandar R. Miletić. "From Disorder to 'the Nor-

Furthermore, it provides valuable case studies and novel perspectives on postwar inflation trends and their economic ramifications within the housing sector.

Scholarly assessments of the outcomes of implementation of the so-called first generation of housing rent control in European core countries and the Americas are predominantly negative. Economists have voiced particularly strong criticism of those policies, at times unjustifiably extending it to the second generation of rent control.<sup>4</sup> This paper aims to investigate the applicability of this prevailing attitude, assessing to what extent it holds true for the countries of the European (semi-)periphery in the interwar period. The application of micro-level perspectives in examining the phenomenon offers an additional lens that can contribute to refining broader-scale conclusions. In the field of legal studies, this paper focuses on the specific housing implications within a broader context encompassing diverse price, property, and tenancy regimes in interwar Europe. These regimes are intricately linked to price controls, land reform, and state intervention within the food markets and housing rentals during the specified period under examination.

In addition to this introductory section, the paper comprises four subsequent sections. The first section examines the previously mentioned statistical analysis, specifically addressing the economic repercussions of state intervention in the housing rental market. The second section is dedicated to an in-depth exploration of the daily dynamics characterizing the interactions between the opposing parties. The third section includes vivid instances of the most severe instances of physical violence and property destruction. Within this realm, emphasis is placed on the arguments, disputes, and conflicts that transpire within the framework imposed and upheld by state authorities. The outcomes of the analysis and the derived conclusions are articulated in the fourth section.

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mality': Food Provisioning in Western, Central, and Southeast Europe, 1914–1924", *Hiperboreea* 1/2021, 59–80; Srđan Milošević, "Land Property Regime According to the Vidovdan Constitution and the Agrarian Question in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes", *Tokovi istorije* 3/2021, 11–35.

- 4 Konstantin A. Kholodilin, Sebastian Kohl, "Do rent controls and other tenancy regulations affect new construction? Some answers from long-run historical evidence", *International Journal of Housing Policy* 2023; Walter Block, "A Critique of the Legal and Philosophical Case for Rent Control", *Journal of Business Ethics* 1/2002, 75–90; Paul Krugman, "Reckonings; A Rent Affair", *New York Times*, 7. 6. 2000, 31; Richard M. Alson, J. R. Kearl, Michael B. Vaughan, "Is There a Consensus Among Economists in the 1990's?", *American Economic Review* 2/1992, 203–204. On the difference between the first and second generation of rent-control systems, see Richard J. Arnott, "Time For Revisionism on Rent Control?", *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 1/1995, 99–120.

### *The cost and benefits of housing policy*

The official journal of the Association of the United Proprietors of Sofia, *Domoprитежател*, provides a compelling perspective on the rental income earned by its highest-ranking functionaries in its issue from December 9, 1918. The enumeration commences with Mr. Manov, proprietor of a Sofia downtown hotel and concurrently the president of the association. As per the article, Mr. Manov's 15-roomed hotel yielded no more than 350 leva in rent—a sum deemed sufficient only to procure a pair of inferior-quality shoes. The association's secretary, Mr. Iakimov, reportedly received 120 leva monthly for a four-room apartment, an amount adequate merely for the purchase of 40 kilograms of potatoes. Similarly, Mr. Čuparov, a board member, was noted to receive 120 leva in rent for a five-roomed apartment—an amount, as elucidated in the article, that could procure a mere 3 kilograms of fat.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the provided data concerning the purchasing power of rents in Sofia aligns with the average prices documented in official Bulgarian statistics for shoes, potatoes, and fat.<sup>6</sup> A parallel instance of substantial devaluation of landlords' incomes is evident in a League of Nations report from Warsaw in 1922, which highlights that the monthly rent for a 5-room apartment equated to merely 2 kilograms of bread.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in Belgrade, in 1921, the ratio for a 3- or 4-room apartment equipped with running water and electricity was approximately 25–30 kilograms of bread.<sup>8</sup> During the early 1920s, accounts from both Polish and Czechoslovak sources depict landlords expressing dismay as they compared the amounts received from their protected tenants with equivalent sums earmarked for monthly expenditures on cigarettes.<sup>9</sup> A more precise quantitative analysis of these biased narratives can be conducted with reference to the official statistics of the four countries in question. Previous research, as delineated in my earlier works, has demonstrated that the stipulated rental prices in all four countries were substantially lower than prevailing market rates. Furthermore, when juxtaposed with pre-war levels, the purchasing power of rent witnessed

5 „По законопроекта за наема на здания през време на войната”, *Домоприитежател*, бр. 2, 9. 12. 1918, 11–12.

6 *Статистически годишник на Българското Царство 1913–22*, (София: Държавна печатница, 1924), 395.

7 International Labour Office, *European Housing Problems*, (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1924), 415.

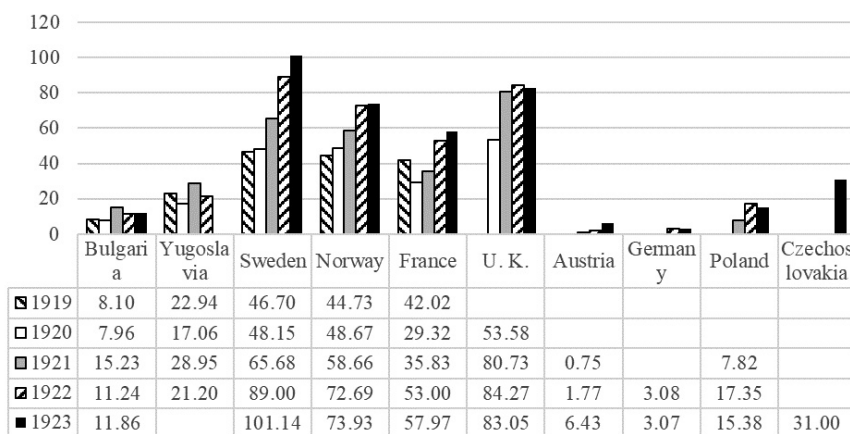
8 See complaints by Dr Kosta Petković, an attorney referring to his downtown apartment in Kraljice Natalije Street, and Mrs. Irena Milovanović landlady of requisitioned house on Kapetan Mišina Street 18, in: „Жалбе и протести чланова удружења”, *Дом*, бр. 4, 25. 2. 1921, 2. They were receiving between 100 and 120 dinars of controlled rent per month when 1 kilogram of bread was around 4-5 dinars.

9 J. C., „Různé zprávy - Proletár”, *Domov*, no. 43, 21. 10. 1922, 2–3; „Sądy w obronie kamieniczników”, *Lokator*, no. 20, November/December 1924, 9.

further diminishment. The available data on respective indices in other European countries, derived from the 1924 International Labour Organization (ILO) publication, are employed to establish an asymmetrical comparative perspective.

A proximate estimation of the percentage change in the pre-war purchasing power of rents can be derived through a calculation based on the official national statistics of the general living cost index (LCI) and fixed rent index (FRI). The resulting ratio (FRI/LCI, 1914=100) provides for residual buying power of the fixed rent in accordance with the legally stipulated increments of rents relative to the pre-war index number. In the case of Yugoslavia, the initial legally sanctioned rent increase in 1919 did not exceed approximately 120 percent of the pre-war level. Concurrently, the prices of all commodities and essential living requisites surged by factors ranging from 4 to 7 times, resulting in a general LCI of 523 in 1919. Considering these developments, the nominal value of fixed rent in 1919 may have only reached approximately 23 percent of its pre-war purchasing power.

Figure 1: Approximation of the residual purchasing power of rent (FRI/General LCI, 1914=100; for Yugoslavia, 1913=100; for Bulgaria, 1908–1912=100)



Sources: ILO, *European Housing Problems*; Đuričić, *Naša narodna privreda*, 25; Czechoslovakian, Polish and Bulgarian national statistics<sup>10</sup> and housing legislations in the four countries.

10 *Статистически годишник на българското Царство 1913–22*, (София: Главна дирекция на статистиката, 1924), 395; *Rocznik statystyki Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, (Warsaw: Główny urząd statystyczny, 1924), 89; *Statistická příručka Republiky československé*, (Prague: Státní úřad statistický 1928), 144.

In Bulgaria, as stipulated by Article 2 of the 1917 law, pre-war rent levels for all categories of tenants were prohibited from being raised, and this regulation persisted until May 1920. During this interval, the prices of all commodities and essential living necessities experienced an escalation of 10–20 times, resulting in a general price index of 1885 in 1920 (1914=100). The initial legally sanctioned rent increase in 1920 did not exceed 150 percent of the pre-war level. Accounting for this increment, the rental levels in 1920 could have attained only approximately 8 percent of their pre-war purchasing power. Subsequently, in the ensuing years, these levels advanced to 11 and 15 percent, a magnitude notably lower than the corresponding data for nations such as Great Britain, France, or Scandinavian countries like Norway and Sweden (refer to Figure 1).

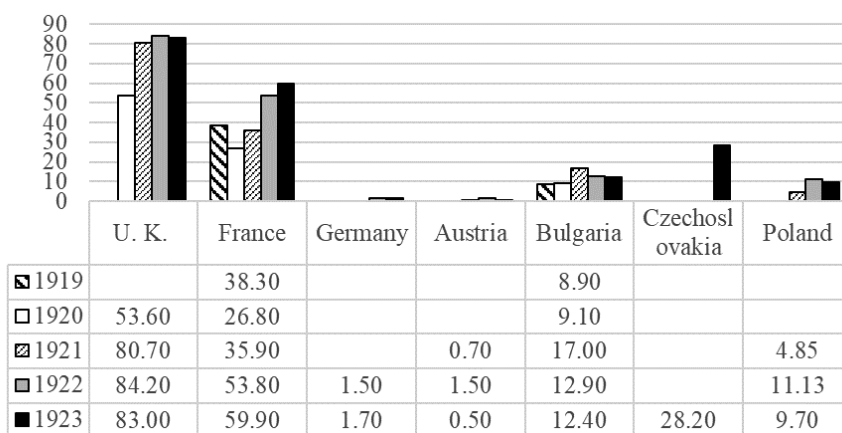
In the Polish and Czechoslovak cases, we relied on official statistical data referring to their capital cities, Warsaw and Prague. In these two cases, index data on rental (Czechoslovakia) and housing costs (Poland) have been used as FRI. Since the Polish housing cost also included payment for water supplies in addition to the rent, the resulting ratios may indicate a somewhat higher rate of rent income. However, even with this small increase, the index indicating residual purchasing power of rents in Warsaw is rather modest. In the period under study, it ranged between 7 and 15 percent of the prewar purchasing parity. Corresponding Czechoslovakian data refers to around 30 percent of residual rental income in 1923.

A notable challenge inherent in employing the FRI/LCI ratio as an approximation of the residual purchasing power of rent stems from the fact that, within available national statistics and ILO data, housing costs have already been integrated and computed as an integral component of the overarching LCI. Given the inherent complexities associated with disentangling housing costs from the LCI, the present analysis opts to utilize available data on the Food Cost Index (FCI) as a more discerning indicator and a more reliable approximation of the postwar percentage change from pre-war levels of rental income. The results presented in Figure 2 exclude data pertaining to Yugoslavia, as its official statistics did not furnish food cost indices for the specified period. For evident reasons, the presented rental income in Figure 2 is marginally lower by several percentage points compared to the calculation depicted in Figure 1. Rental prices were lagging considerably behind the prices of food throughout Europe.

In one way or another, the resultant percentages depicted in Figures 1 and 2 elucidate comparable trends, albeit with distinct dynamics and variations in the magnitude of rent devaluation across diverse European countries and regions. The data reveals that the post-war growth in residual purchasing power

of rents in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Poland significantly trailed behind that of the United Kingdom, France, and Scandinavian countries. Nevertheless, these figures do not portray an excessively unfavorable scenario for property owners when juxtaposed with the analogous data from Germany and Austria, where this purchasing power virtually dissipated. These countries also witnessed the highest level of intensity of application of postwar state intervention in the housing rental sector. Among the four nations under scrutiny, Czechoslovakian landlords experienced a substantially superior pecuniary situation in relation to their rental income and purchasing power. This tendency appears to be due, at least in part, to the strict monetary policy enforced by the aforementioned country's authorities.

Figure 2: Percentage change in pre-war purchasing power of rent (related to the food cost FCI/FRI)



Sources: ILO, *European Housing Problems*; Czechoslovakian, Polish and Bulgarian national statistics and housing legislations in the four countries.

Why did housing rental costs fail to keep pace with the price increases observed in other essential commodities? How is it that, uniquely within this domain, state authorities were capable of enforcing effective price controls? Nikola Manov, a collaborator of Sofia-based *Domopritezatel*, provided a succinct and insightful explanation. Following his enumeration of significantly elevated prices in various essential categories such as food, clothing, shoes, and services,

Manov posed a series of questions: “When all these necessities are freely traded at such elevated prices, in the absence of legal or authoritative constraints, what justifies the application of moderation exclusively to [housing] rents? Is it due to the inherent nature of buildings as a form of possession that cannot be relocated or concealed from public view?”<sup>11</sup> The author delineated the primary challenge confronting state authorities in their attempts to intervene in the market prices of essential foodstuffs and commodities. This scenario, as underlined by the author, would have developed similarly in Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria in the early aftermath of the war. Given the reluctance of merchants to sell below prevailing market prices, the anticipated outcome would have entailed the discreet withdrawal and concealment of the targeted commodities from retail establishments.<sup>12</sup> Rather than undergoing legal transactions, these commodities would likely have entered the realm of the black market. A notable challenge associated with housing facilities was their inherent immobility and inability to be concealed from the purview of state authorities. Throughout the period of examination and subsequently, extending into the 1920s, housing consistently stood as the singular domain subject to effective price control within the countries under consideration.

Moreover, landlords’ rental income bore the weight of elevated state and communal taxation rates. In Czechoslovakia, officials of the landlords’ association estimated that a substantial proportion, ranging between 60 and 80 percent, of rental income was allocated to taxes. Ironically, one of the articles addressing this issue was titled after a renowned quotation from the founder of the Czechoslovakian Republic and its inaugural president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk: “Not to fear and not to steal.”<sup>13</sup> However, within the context shaped by housing requisitions and the RCS, landlords found themselves under the impression that they were uniquely subjected to repression. In stark contrast to the renowned quotation, these landlords experienced intimidation, perceiving their property as stolen by Czechoslovakian politicians. In Yugoslavia, landlords voiced grievances regarding taxes, which, in numerous instances, approached or even exceeded the sums constituting annual rental returns.<sup>14</sup> As an illustration, Luko Bećir from the municipality of Pločice south of Dubrovnik received an annual rental income of 1200 dinars under the provisions of the RCS. However,

11 Никола Манов, „Особно мнение“, *Домоприитежател*, бр. 3, 26. 12. 1918, 21–23.

12 On attempts to control food prices in the Kingdom of SCS see in: Aleksandar R. Miletić, „Unutrašnja trgovina u Kraljevini SHS 1919“, *Tokovi istorije* 3-4/2003, 7–20.

13 „Nebát se a nekrást“, *Domov*, no. 20, 13. 4. 1922, 4; „Manifestační schůze a protesty“, *Domov*, 24. 6. 1922.

14 „Израда закона“, *Дом*, бр. 4, 3. 2. 1924.



he was obligated to remit taxes amounting to 1632 dinars. A missive authored by Bećir and addressed to the *Dom* concludes with an expression of resignation: “If only Providence were to allow the house to be consumed by fire, then at least I would not be subjected to such financial loss.”<sup>15</sup> Due to high rates of taxation in 1923–1924, a landlord Andrija Dodić from Split, received monthly around 5 dinars, or the equivalent of 1 kilogram of bread, or 0.10 dinars of rental income for two downtown apartments.<sup>16</sup>

It is certain that the hardships of the time for a huge portion of urban populations were alleviated by the housing policies. On the other hand, the question remains: are the proprietors to be considered solely as the losers of these policies? On this issue, the account is not as simple as it might seem; according to Figures 1.11 and 1.12, high rates of inflation could often almost completely wipe out the liabilities on capital invested in housing infrastructure. This was especially true in countries that experienced high rates of inflation during the war and in the post-war period, including the four countries under review. Proprietors in these countries, although deprived of attainable rental income, profited immensely from inflation.<sup>17</sup> Håkan Forsell wrote on this issue with regard to the Berlin landlords’ income and the effects of German inflation on their mortgage schemes.<sup>18</sup>

### *Daily disputes and conflicts*

In both tenants’ and landlords’ sources, one finds accounts on the “good old days” of housing tenancy before the war. Mose Klein, a landlord hailing from the Croatian town of Osijek, wrote in 1924 with evident pride concerning the social prestige and significance of his social group during that era. He referenced a widely recognized phrase of the period: “from time to time, even a landlord would die.” In the pre-war milieu, landlords were regarded as virtually immortal in the eyes of ordinary people; however, during and after the war, a landlord’s status was diminished to that of “a building superintendent and even a servant to his tenants.”<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, quite a similar expression denoting the status of landlords can be identified in the famous novel penned by James Joyce during the First World War.<sup>20</sup>

15 „Vesti iz Dubrovnika”, *Дом*, бр. 24, 22. 6. 1924.

16 „Vesti iz Splita”, *Дом*, бр. 8, 2. 3. 1924, 3.

17 Michael Harloe, *The People’s Home! Social Rented Housing in Europe & America*, (Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 81, 116, 126.

18 Forsell, *Property, Tenancy and Urban Growth*, 244.

19 „Kućevlasnik nekad i danas”, *Дом*, бр. 35, 7. 9. 1924, 2.

20 “Landlord never dies they say”, James Joyce, *Ulysses*, (London: Penguin, 2000), 208.

However, the sense of pride in their former status was not exclusive to landlords; it extended to tenants as well, particularly in their interactions with subtenants. The tenants' association, based in Warsaw, expounded on the purported harmony prevailing between tenants and subtenants before the war. Reportedly, during that period, subtenancy functioned as a beneficial institution, allowing a tenant facing financial challenges to obtain temporary assistance. According to this idealized depiction, conflicts between tenants and subtenants were exceedingly rare:

Interpersonal relationships were characterized by friendliness, culminating more frequently in lasting friendship or marriage than in legal disputes brought before the district court. [...] However, it is imperative to note that during that era, tenant protection measures were not in place. Consequently, in instances of insolvency or untoward behavior, an individual would promptly receive notice, and efforts would be made to find a new and suitable occupant. In contemporary times, however, the occupant of a residence, i.e., the tenant, is compelled to endure various disturbances, including musical performances on diverse instruments, familial disputes, children's clamor, odors emanating from household appliances and cooking, as well as disagreeable scents from uncleaned lavatories and refuse discarded in the apartment's corridor. Moreover, incidents involving the spillage of water and wastewater into the tenant's living space are commonplace. The tenant, regrettably, remains silent, gritting their teeth, as any protest provokes derision, invectiveness, and, on occasion, even physical assault.<sup>21</sup>

The Bulgarian landlords' publication, *Domoprитежател*, underscored that during the period preceding state intervention, housing relations were devoid of mutual antagonism, conflicts, corruption, and depravity. Consequently, the identified problem was exogenous in nature, originating "from top below".<sup>22</sup> The upheaval in conventional rules of housing tenancy thus went hand in hand with the profound changes at the social and personal level. This subsection focuses on direct confrontations between proprietors and tenants. It sheds light on common features of their everyday disagreements, and conflicts within the state-imposed restrictions on the housing market. The landlords' inability to lease property on a market basis was again the heart of the problem. Due to the tremendous shortage of housing and enormous demand, the pecuniary aspect of their troubles becomes even more comprehensible.

21 „Lokatorzy przeciw sublokatorom”, *Lokator*, no. 15, June 1924, 12–23.

22 Николай Митаков, „Поквара от горе“, *Домоприитежател*, бр. 9, 15. 3. 1919, 68–70; Иван Н. Янчевъ, „Жилищният въпрос“, *Домоприитежател*, бр. 5, 15. 1. 1919, 34.

While in Czechoslovakia and Poland significant restrictions existed on all rentals, in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia these applied only to the so-called old tenants, i.e., the tenants who had already enjoyed tenancy status at the time of the introduction of the RCS. Under this limitation, leasing out flats or rooms was the most lucrative business in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, immediately after the war. Belgrade daily *Politika* reported in 1919 on a citizen who complained about his salary when compared with the business schemes of his mother-in-law. A graduate of two faculties, his salary totaled only 18 dinars a day. His mother-in-law had no education, but she had one room with three beds, from which she could earn about 36 dinars a day.<sup>23</sup> Yet, this kind of business was possible only in unoccupied housing facilities rented out after the enforcement of the moratorium and housing legislation of April 1919.<sup>24</sup> All previous leases came under the provisions of the rent-control system imposed by this and subsequent legislation.

In the initial years following the war, the established rental amounts in the four scrutinized countries dwindled to no more than 5 to 33 percent of their pre-war purchasing power. Consequently, it is unsurprising that landlords were profoundly apprehensive about and embittered by housing regulations. Under conditions of a free-market rent determination, they stood to garner three or four times the financial return than that provided under state-facilitated provisions. They tried, therefore, by all possible means to get rid of unwanted tenants, or at least to make their lives more difficult. This often resulted in conflicts, acts of violence, and other incidents, but it also spurred inventive tactics on the part of landlords seeking to reclaim control over their properties. In 1919, the Belgrade newspaper *Politika* documented an incident involving a desperate landlord resorting to vampire rituals in an attempt to intimidate an elderly tenant and compel her to vacate his apartment. Despite the theatrical nature of this endeavor, it did not yield the desired outcome. Another account, originating from Sarajevo, recounted a landlady's actions in removing tiles from the roof of her own residence with the aim of coercing tenants to vacate a rented apartment therein. Ultimately, this effort proved futile, as the tenants chose to remain in the dwelling despite the adverse circumstances. Additionally, the landlady faced legal repercussions when the tenants took her to court after their furniture suffered damage due to exposure to the elements following the

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23 „Шта се говори“, *Политика*, бр. 4160, 2. 9. 1919, 1.

24 „Закон о изменама и допунама у закону о мораторијуму из 1914. године“, *Службене новине Краљевине СХС*, бр. 34, 19. 4. 1919.

removal of the roof tiles.<sup>25</sup> The identical intention, specifically to dismantle the roof of his own dwelling, was articulated by a representative of landlords hailing from the Croatian town of Bjelovar, as disclosed during the deliberations of the Yugoslav Congress of Property Ownership in Belgrade in 1924.<sup>26</sup>

*Lokator* wrote on the complications faced by tenants who wanted to make some necessary construction work or repairs to the homes they occupied. The problems came from the Warsaw municipal authorities' firm attitude that only a property owner could decide on repairs on his or her property. Since the landlords were utterly disinclined to make any improvements to housing conditions, no construction activities could have been carried out. In the Polish context, there was an additional, straightforward rationale underpinning this destructive and economically counterproductive approach to one's own property.<sup>27</sup> Under Polish legislation, tenants under protection could be legally evicted from a dwelling if it was determined to be at a specified level of dilapidation or ruin. Anticipating such a legal provision, or perhaps prompted by a moment of uncontrolled anger, Stanisław Wzorek, a landlord of a house in the Warsaw suburb of Mokotów (29 Sielecka Street), deliberately damaged his own property. He ascended to the attic and systematically dismantled the ceilings in the rooms and corridors of the house. Reports indicate that such actions were not uncommon among landlords in Warsaw, and Wzorek's case could indeed be regarded as a "pattern"; in Polish, "wzorek" translates to pattern or model.<sup>28</sup>

According to *Kirajdžija*, the publication of the Belgrade Tenants' Association, a comparable model operated in the Yugoslav capital. It appears that the sole viable method for tenant eviction in Belgrade was ostensibly based on the premise of reconstructing severely damaged dwellings. Landlords employed various strategies to either portray their properties as meeting such criteria or actively contribute to rendering them as such. This narrative was reiterated no fewer than five times across five articles within the sole available issue of the journal.<sup>29</sup> However, a notable distinction existed between the situations in Warsaw and Belgrade. According to Yugoslav legislation, newly constructed buildings were not only exempt from taxation but also from rent-control provisions. This served as an additional incentive for Belgrade property

25 „Међу нама“, *Политика*, бр. 4210, 22. 10. 1919, 2–3; „Међу нама“, *Политика*, бр. 4218, 30. 10. 1919, 2.

26 „Конгрес својине – Свечана седница“, *Дом*, бр. 15, 20. 4. 1924, 1–4.

27 „Magistrat m. st. Warszawy broni prawa własności“, *Lokator*, no. 6, July 1923, 4–6.

28 „Kamienicznik niszczy własny dom“, *Lokator*, no. 16, July 1924, 16.

29 „Позив на збор“, *Кирајџија*, бр. 2, 30. 4. 1922; „Наши хитни захтеви“, *Ibid.*; „Рушење Београда“, *Ibid.*; „Питање станова“, *Ibid.*

owners to pursue tenant eviction, not merely for the sake of eviction, but also in consideration of substantial business prospects.

In the domain of rent-restricted schemes, such business prospects were unimaginable. Even in cases where the landlords themselves wanted to do some repairs or regular maintenance, it was not possible due to the inadequate income collected from the rent. The Bulgarian landlords' organ commented on this state of affairs with a bit of nice sarcasm: "Since the law does not approve rent increases, we are to wait for the law itself to maintain the buildings."<sup>30</sup> In Yugoslavia, the problems with building maintenance were particularly apparent in Sarajevo due to the prevailing traditional Balkan type of house built from fragile construction materials. According to the landlords' sources, during the course of 1923, only four new buildings were constructed, while 30 collapsed in this town.<sup>31</sup> Allegedly, in Sarajevo, more buildings became ruined in first five post-war years than in previous thirty years.<sup>32</sup>

Accounts of landlords' absenteeism, neglect, and even a deliberate demolition of property by landlords themselves are one of the common themes among the critics of the rent-control schemes. According to the Swedish economist Assar Lindbeck, "next to bombing, rent control seems in many cases to be the most efficient technique so far known for destroying cities."<sup>33</sup> The topic is particularly stressed by Walter Block, a notorious opponent of RCS. He explained that the RCS in practice creates special kinds of entrepreneurial skills, with their norms completely reversed to those ruling in a free market system: "Landlords are no longer rewarded for providing a better service [. . .]. Instead, the system now rewards them for an entirely different set of activities: for *decreasing* services, not increasing them; for *allowing* rodent infestations, not curing them; for *destroying* property (and/or standing idly by while tenants also do so), not protecting it; for *evicting* tenants (in order to raise rents), not attracting them; for *burning* residential complexes (to collect insurance money), not building them."<sup>34</sup>

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30 „За държавните и общинските здания в София“, *Домоприитежател*, бр. 6, 30. 1. 1919, 46.

31 „Друштво власника кућа и других непокретнина у Сарајеву“, *Дом*, бр. 10, 16. 3. 1924, 3.

32 „Из Босне и Херцеговине“, *Дом*, бр. 10, 16. 3. 1924, 1–2.

33 *Rent control, myths & realities. International Evidence of the Effects of Rent Control in Six Countries*, eds. Walter Block, Edgar Olsen, (Vancouver, B.K., Canada: The Fraser Institute, 1981), 320.

34 Walter Block, "Postscript: A Reply to the Critics", *Rent control, myths & realities. International Evidence of the Effects of Rent Control in Six Countries*, 299.

### *Intimidation and physical violence*

Both sources, tenants and landlords, disclose instances of severe violence associated with prolonged disputes between the conflicting parties. Among the four countries examined, only in the case of Czechoslovakia do available sources not indicate such occurrences. The Polish *Lokator* reproduced an article from the Warsaw-based newspaper *Przegląd Wieczorny*, which extensively documented various forms of intimidation and violence perpetrated by landlord Stanisław Zajkowski against his tenant and the tenant's family members in 1924. This distressing incident transpired within a residence situated in Zielonka, on the outskirts of Warsaw. As reported by the aforementioned source, Zajkowski engaged in egregious actions such as sealing the chimney from above, demolishing the house's veranda, barricading the family inside by hammering nails into the entrance door, intimidating the children, and hurling coal with a shovel at the tenant's wife. Subsequently, he opportunistically invaded their living quarters in their absence. Ultimately, the culmination of these malevolent actions resulted in Zajkowski's own eviction; a court decree mandated his departure from the property.<sup>35</sup>

At times, these confrontations culminated in instances of extreme violence. In the city of Łódź, a tenant named Bolesław Skorczyński, a father of five, met a tragic end as he was murdered by his landlord following a dispute over rent. The officially stipulated rent amounted to approximately 40,000 Polish marks, whereas the landlord insisted on an exorbitant sum of 500,000. Given Skorczyński's refusal to make any concessions, the landlord resorted to violent means. In a premeditated act, he ambushed Skorczyński one morning as he left home for work, fatally assaulting him with a metal stick. Prompt intervention by law enforcement officials prevented the immediate lynching of the landlord by an agitated crowd.<sup>36</sup>

The same article reports a heinous assault involving the use of an axe against a 45-year-old woman, Józefia Błaszczkowska, who resided as a subtenant in an apartment situated in the Warsaw district of Woła (9 Leszno Street). Notably, the assailant in this instance was not the property owner but the tenant who subleased a portion of the apartment. As a result of this brutal attack, Józefia Błaszczkowska sustained severe injuries and required hospitalization.<sup>37</sup> This case exemplifies that a confrontation was not solely

35 "Eksmisja kamienicznika", *Lokator*, no. 19, October 1924, 14–15.

36 „Błędne koło. Kamienicznicy mordują lokatorów – Lokatorzy mordują sublokatorów”, *Lokator*, no. 8, September 1923, 7–8.

37 *Ibid.*

taking place between landlords and protected tenants, but it also included interactions between tenants and subtenants enjoying similar protections. Namely, all parties involved were subject to the regulations and constraints on ownership and tenancy rights prescribed by the RCS.

The Yugoslav landlords' organization *Dom* offers numerous accounts detailing instances of physical violence purportedly committed by tenants. As per this source, in the Croatian town of Karlovac, a female tenant engaged in a physical altercation with her landlord, a Catholic priest named Franjo Prolnik, throwing a dish of poultry at him. This incident followed an extended period of persistent arguments and disputes concerning tenancy matters. Subsequently, in the ensuing days, the tenant's intimate companion physically assaulted the priest on the street, utilizing brass knuckles, and issued subsequent threats, including one of gouging out the priest's eye and, on another occasion, threatening to take his life.<sup>38</sup> According to the same source, in Belgrade, a tenant named Stevan Marinković inflicted severe harm upon his 80-year-old landlady, Sofija Petrović, as a consequence of an unresolved tenancy dispute arising from the RCS and protracted disagreements between them. Marinković, in a violent act, caused a fracture to Petrović's arm, resulting in his imposition of a fine and a subsequent three-month prison sentence. Despite these legal consequences, the housing authorities did not grant approval for Sofija Petrović's petition for Marinković's eviction. Following the completion of his prison term, both parties continued to inhabit the same residence. Marinković persisted in his intimidation tactics, consistently threatening to cause harm to Petrović, who, in response to her fear, resorted to carrying an axe when leaving her apartment.<sup>39</sup>

Bulgarian sources disclose equally dramatic narratives, encompassing instances of intimidation and episodes of violence.<sup>40</sup> In this context, an intriguing account is found within the memoirs authored by the renowned Bulgarian jurist Petko Venedikov. According to the source, his uncle, a member of a much-respected Bulgarian upper middle-class family, army colonel Dimităr Venedikov, used nothing less than a rifle against two poor girls placed in one of the rooms of his apartment by the housing commission in 1920. The frightened girls left the apartment after Venedikov loaded the gun. Equally frightened were members of the commission who came to "enforce" the housing regulations. They knocked on Venedikov's door using a stick while standing

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38 „Pismo iz Karlovca”, *Dom*, no. 6, 16. 2. 1924.

39 „Удружењу власника зграда и земљишта”, *Дом*, бр. 29, 27. 7. 1924.

40 „Писма от града”, *Домопритежател*, бр. 11, 15. 4. 1919, 87-8.

in a safe distance behind a wall. The girls never returned to the apartment.<sup>41</sup> The boldness of one man in this case could ridicule a huge legislative effort by the state aimed at protecting the disadvantaged.

In many cases, the conflicts and incidents were provoked by unavoidable daily contact of the confronted parties. When it was not the case, i.e., when they did not live in the same building or apartment, the disagreements and incidents might not occur as often, or perhaps could have been completely avoided. In order to reduce the opportunity for incidents to happen, the Polish and Yugoslav authorities envisaged the possibility for rent payments to be transferred via state institutions serving as intermediaries. In Yugoslavia, the scheme was facilitated through the municipal authorities from 1923 onwards, while in Poland, according to 1924 housing legislation, the money could have been deposited in special accounts in branches of the national postal system.<sup>42</sup> Apart from its role in preventing arguments over rent levels, the scheme was helpful in situations where landlords intentionally refused to accept the prescribed amount of rent. In Poland, such tactics could bring about the judicial eviction of a tenant who could not prove that he was actually paying rent to the landlord. Moreover, as we find out from *Lokator*, throughout 1923 and during the first months of 1924, in a sort of reversed rent-strike model, a significant number of landlords did not accept any payments whatsoever.<sup>43</sup> The schemes of payments via state agencies hindered landlords from carrying out such subversive activities against state policy. The rent was paid and a tenant could then provide a receipt proving that it was deposited with the designated institution. In this way, in a significant number of cases in Poland and Yugoslavia, state involvement became omnipresent in all important domains of housing tenancy. With this provision, there was no need for any kind of direct contact or communication between a landlord and a tenant any more, of course only if they did not share the same dwelling; now, all domains of contractual relations were created, controlled, and facilitated by the state.

Both the tenants' and landlords' associations complained about housing arbitration. Yet, there were significant differences in their prospects. While tenants only wanted to improve the system and to enforce the prescriptions of tenant protection, the aspiration of landlords was to abolish it altogether. No

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41 Петко Венедиков, *Спомени*, (София: Петко Венедиков, 2003), 131–132.

42 „Грађанска листа“, *Наш дом*, 21. I. 1923.

43 „Sądy w obronie kamieniczników“, *Lokator*, no. 20, November/December 1924.



matter how critical they were towards the legislation and its implementation in reality, tenants were aware that the return to the free market principles would be much worse. This attitude was underlined in the Polish tenants' manifesto published in the first issue of the association's organ: "The legal system for the protection of tenants should be preserved at any cost, no matter that its present form gives many possibilities for abuse and evasion of the regulations."<sup>44</sup>

As this subsection deals with the conflict and violence that accompanied state-imposed housing provisions, some description of the procedures and outcomes of requisitioning is needed. Requisitioning was occasioned by the most grievous institutional violence against property ownership and the transgression of the privacy of the home experienced by proprietors, in the four countries under study. Apart from an initial encounter with state officials, the greatest problems occurred, as in a regular RCS, in situations when forcibly installed tenants lived together with the proprietors' families. Particularly in Yugoslav and Bulgarian sources, owners protested against providing such accommodation to individuals who were sick with tuberculosis and other infectious diseases.<sup>45</sup> Bulgarian landlords' organ *Sobstvenik* mentioned the troubles of proprietors who were forced to share their living space (flats, and sometimes even the rooms and toilets) with people infected with syphilis, tuberculosis, and scarlet fever, along with people of low culture and personal hygiene.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusions

In addition to the leximetric evaluation of legal provisions constraining landlords' property disposal rights, a comparative assessment of the degree of state intervention among countries can be conducted by analyzing the percentage of residual purchasing power (RPP) of pre-war rents in the post-war period. This particularly holds true with the first-generation RCS which implied significant reductions of controlled rent. These numerical indicators (i.e. leximetric and RPP), when combined, offer a more comprehensive understanding of the actual intensity of state intervention. According to the six-stage developmental typology utilized in my leximetric analysis, all four states under examination achieved stage 5 during the study period,

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44 „Z czem idziemi”, *Lokator*, no. 1, 1. 5. 1923.

45 „Нов протест на управнителното тело”, *Собственик*, бр. 6, 15. 5. 1922, 4–5; „Жалбе и протести чланова удружења”, *Дом*, бр. 4, 25. 2. 1921, 2.

46 „Ново изменение на закона за О. Н. Ж.”, *Собственик*, бр. 3, 15. 3. 1922, 2–5.

indicating the implementation of legal provisions for the RCS combined with requisitioning practices.<sup>47</sup> However, considering residual purchasing power parity, Czechoslovakian landlords enjoyed a significantly more favorable financial situation. This outcome can be attributed to monetary factors outside the realm of the country's housing policy, although, in terms of application, it resulted in comparatively less violence associated with the daily coexistence of conflicting parties, as evidenced by this study.

Within a broader European context, the four countries, including Czechoslovakia and Central European nations, exhibited the highest levels of rent reduction. Post-war data on the growth of residual purchasing power of rents in these countries lagged considerably behind those of the United Kingdom, France, and Scandinavian countries. Nevertheless, the situation for proprietors in these four countries appears relatively less dire when compared with Germany and Austria, where inflation rates led to the virtual disappearance of residual purchasing power.

In summary, state intervention in the realm of housing tenancy mitigated the challenges of the wartime and immediate post-war periods throughout Europe. While there was a significant need for and social benefit from state-sponsored housing measures amid wartime turmoil, the prolonged application of these measures resulted in anomalies and deviations from proclaimed policy principles. Over time, these deviations became increasingly evident in the day-to-day operations of housing authorities and in the communication and relationships between landlords, tenants, and subtenants. On a micro level, conflicting parties, often residing as flatmates or neighbors in the same building, negotiated their relationships with varying degrees of institutional assistance provided by the state.

The analyses and illustrative examples presented in preceding sections affirm a generally unfavorable assessment of the first-generation Residential Tenancy Acts (RCS). Not only did they fail to favor the economically weak and discriminate against the economically strong, but they also contributed to the gradual deterioration of housing infrastructure and caused significant social disruptions at the local level.

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47 Miletic. "Tenancy vs. Ownership Rights", 57-66. For elaborate overview of application of leximetric analysis in the studies of housing policy, see: Konstantin A. Kholodilin, "Quantifying a century of state intervention in rental housing in Germany", *Urban Research & Practice* 3/2017, 1–62.

## Summary

The article focuses on the micro-context of relations between landlords and tenants during the interwar period in countries in Southeast and East Central Europe. The analysis delves into the immediate economic consequences of the rent control system (RCS), which manifested in the reduced purchasing power of rents, as well as the impact of disrupted price relations on daily interactions between landlords and tenants. The primary units of examination comprise pairs of countries representing respective European regions: Bulgaria and Yugoslavia for Southeastern Europe, and Poland and Czechoslovakia for East Central Europe. Chronologically, this research spans the period immediately following the end of the First World War, a time marked by significant state intervention in housing relations across interwar Europe. The study is grounded in available data from national statistical publications of the interwar period as well as a comparative dataset from the International Labor Organization from 1924. Qualitative analysis of the daily dynamics of interactions between tenants and landlords is primarily based on reports provided by newspapers representing the viewpoints of their interest groups. State intervention, aimed at significantly reducing the pre-war purchasing power of rents, consistently fueled dissatisfaction among property owners. The prolonged duration of emergency measures in housing relations further exacerbated the already strained relationships between tenants and building or apartment owners. Disagreements between them escalated over time into open conflicts and physical altercations, with documented cases of murder. In the short term, state intervention in the rental housing sector undoubtedly alleviated social hardships and challenges associated with wartime and immediate post-war circumstances across Europe. However, the prolonged implementation of these measures during the 1920s and 1930s led to anomalies, abuses, and deviations from prescribed policy principles. Both qualitative and numerical analyses of housing policy and the illustrative examples presented in the preceding sections confirm the negative assessment of the economic effects of the first-generation RCS application. This prevailing view applies to countries in both Southeast and East Central Europe. Not only was state intervention not always in favor of the economically disadvantaged, but it also contributed in the long term to the deterioration of housing infrastructure and deepening social disturbances at the local level.

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## РЕЗИМЕ

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### СИСТЕМ КОНТРОЛИСАНЕ СТАНАРИНЕ НА МИКРО-НИВОУ: ПЕРСПЕКТИВЕ ИЗ ЈУГОИСТОЧНЕ И ИСТОЧНЕ СРЕДЊЕ ЕВРОПЕ 1918–1924.

**Апстракт:** Чланак пружа статистичку и квалитативну анализу последица државне интервенције у домену стамбених односа, посебно примене система контролисаних станарина и реквизиције. Фокус посматрања појаве је на микро-нивоу стамбених односа у Југоисточној и Источној Средњој Европи у периоду непосредно након Првог светског рата. Статистичка анализа се ослања на обрачун резидуалне (тј. преостале) послератне куповне моћи предратних станарина, док квалитативна анализа настоји да реконструише свакодневну динамику међусобних односа станодаваца и подстанара, укључујући екстремне случајеве застрашивања, насиља и убистава.

**Кључне речи:** систем контролисаних станарина, инфлација, Бугарска, Југославија, Чехословачка, Пољска, међуратни период

Чланак је концентрисан на микро-контекст односа између станодаваца и станара у међуратном периоду у земљама Југоисточне и Источне Средње Европе. Предмет анализе су непосредне економске последице система контролисаних станарина (СКС) које су се одразиле на куповну моћ станарина, као и утицај поремећених ценовних релација на свакодневне односе између станодаваца и подстанара. Основне јединице испитивања су парови земаља који репрезентују одговарајуће европске регионе: Бугарска и Југославија за Југоисточну, а Пољска и Чехословачка за Источну Средњу Европу. Хронолошки, ово истраживање обухвата период непосредно по окончању Првог светског рата, током кога су забележене најзначајније државне интервенције у стамбеним односима у међуратној Европи. Рад је заснован на расположивим подацима из националних статистичких публикација из међуратног периода, као и на компаративној серији података Међународног бироа за рад из 1924. Квалитативна анализа свакодневне динамике интеракција између станара и станодаваца реконструисана је, у првом реду, на основу новинских извештаја које је објављивала штампа наклоњена ставовима њихових интересних гру-

па. Државна интервенција, усмерена ка значајном редуковању куповне моћи коју су станарине имале пре рата, изазивала је константно незадовољство међу власницима непокретности. Продужен период трајања ванредних мера у стамбеним односима додатно је погоршавао већ нарушене односе између закупаца и власника зграда и станова. Несугласице између њих прерастале су током времена у отворене сукобе и физичка разрачунавања, а забележени су и случајеви убистава. Краткорочно узев, државна интервенција у области изнајмљивања станова је несумњиво ублажила социјалне недаће и изазове који су били скопчани са ратним и непосредним послератним околностима широм Европе. Продужена примена ових мера током двадесетих и тридесетих година 20. столећа, међутим, доводила је до аномалија, злоупотреба и одступања од прописаних принципа политике. Квалитативна и нумеричка анализа стамбене политике и илустративни примери представљени у претходним одељцима потврђују негативну оцену економских ефеката примене СКС прве генерације. Тај преовлађујући став се, дакле, односи и на земље Југоисточне и Источне Средње Европе. Не само што државна интервенција није увек била на страни економски слабих, већ је дугорочно доприносила уништавању стамбене инфраструктуре и продубљивању друштвених поремећаја на локалном нивоу.