Contested Czech Cities

From Urban Grassroots to Pro-democratic Populism

Michaela Pixová

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"Neo-liberalisation, and resistance to it by urban grass-roots movements, may be a dominant trend everywhere in the world, but each country and city has a particular trajectory about how political protest develops, changes, and is worked through. Michaela Pixová brilliantly looks at a range of such movements in post-socialist Czechia, and has a fascinating set of stories to tell. *Contested Czech Cities* combines sophisticated theoretical interpretation with detailed empirical case studies from four cities, and Pixova produces a thought analyses which has considerable political implications for us all."

—Robert Hollands, *Professor of Urban Sociology, Newcastle University, UK*

"Pixova offers the first encompassing analysis of Czech urban grassroots movement, taking into account the context of global urban change as well as the specificities of the local context. A most welcome contribution!"

—Kerstin Jacobsson, *Professor of Sociology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden*

"*Contested Czech Cities* is essential reading for anyone interested in urban activism in a post-socialist environment. Michaela Pixová investigates urban grassroots movements in Czechia, concentrating on how they frame urban problems, which strategies they employ, and what solutions they offer. Her critical approach towards the often undemocratic nature of Czech urban processes, and their frequent abuse by non-transparent interests, should inspire new activists to emerge and take action."

—Vladimíra Dvořáková, *Professor of the University of Economics in Prague, Czech Republic*

"Michaela Pixová provides an empirically rich analysis of four urban mobilizations in the Czech Republic to critically assess the conditions for, and impact of, grassroots activism in post-communist settings. It is a welcome contribution to the literature on post-communist urban grassroots movements."

—Associate Professor Ondřej Císař, *Charles University, Prague*

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Michaela Pixová
Institute of Sociological Studies
Charles University
Prague, Czech Republic

For Killi, Izzi, Brad, and Máni

Preface

This book is about urban life in contemporary society under the enduring grip of neoliberalism and the accompanying dismantling of democracy and social welfare. It is about the urban struggles of active citizens and grassroots movements against uncommunicative self-interested governments whose only focus is on accommodating the interests of private business and corporations in the city. The exact same interests which have turned the built environment of our cities into wealth-producing machines and storage facilities for the accumulated capital of the rich and into spaces where ordinary life is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible. The situation is particularly bad in countries with a totalitarian past, where the gap between politicians allied with private business and citizens is especially large, further reinforcing top-down rule without public participation, and limiting the ability of citizens to change this vicious cycle.

But neoliberalism is not only present in the physical space of our cities and the way in which it affects our material lives and political participation. This all-encompassing ideology and political economy has had a profoundly destructive effect on many other aspects of our society and the way we operate on a daily basis. Academic and family life

have changed as well. The tremendous struggle I have experienced while writing this book testifies to the fact that young academics in precarious working conditions can hardly combine their career with raising a family unless they enjoy some form of class privilege and have the support of their family. The academic affiliations of young researchers are increasingly project-based, temporary, highly neglectful of their personal situation, and full of insecurity. I realized this when I had my second child in the middle of writing this book. My little baby boy had serious health issues which significantly delayed my work on the project; however, I was not allowed to interrupt my project, because I had already done that once after having my first child. To avoid a negative evaluation from my research funder, I continued to write this book long after I finished receiving wages—often at night, at the cost of my husband's working hours, or while paying for a nanny from my savings—because my country supports neither childcare for children who are less than three years old, nor academics in a difficult life situation. My child is okay now, but my academic career is not. Overwhelmed with unpaid work, I simply did not have the capacity to submit new projects. Nor could I apply for grants from the funder of this book, because the project had not yet finished.

It has thus taken a long time to finish this book. While writing it, a lot has changed, including myself. I have always been an enthusiastic urban geographer and urban activist. I love urban geography, exploring cities, and talking and writing about them. During the production of this book, I realized that neoliberalism is not only destroying our cities and the ability of young academics to combine their research with family life, but what is more, I started to feel deep pain because of the destruction it is doing to our planet. The felonies of the system that runs our lives are wrecking our only home in the entire universe and fating humanity to a dark future. The crisis of the climate and environmental breakdown hit me particularly hard during a long heatwave in summer 2018 and made my writing even harder. I have consequently turned towards climate activism as urban conflicts suddenly seemed rather negligible in the face of the unprecedented threat humanity now confronts.

For a while I struggled to find motivation to finish this book, but after time I realized that my fears about the state of the planet and the prospects of our survival have a lot in common with the urban struggles I am writing about. Both national governments and municipal authorities are illegitimately colluding with private businesses in order to prey upon our limited natural resources, be it the planet—the one and only final object in the universe humans have ever been capable of inhabiting—or urban space, which is also limited, and whose use value must no more be subordinated to the value of exchange in order to become sustainable and just. The very same governments and economic system they are supporting and profiting from are knowingly perpetuating the self-destruction we are currently living through, destroying the future of the young generation, and doing everything they can to make life both in cities and on the Earth impossible. On a warming planet, overheated by the wolfish greed of this highly unjust economic system, cities are and will keep turning into spaces which are both increasingly unaffordable and unliveable for ordinary people.

So finally, here is this book. A book about urban grassroots movements in Czechia, which have simply become fed up with the non-transparent alliances between political and economic elites, whose insatiable desire for profit is stepping on citizens' interest to have a liveable city. This book is based on research which shows that the only way grassroots movements can disentangle their cities from the influence of non-transparent networks between political and economic elites is by imposing citizen control over urban governments. It seems that in the context of a particularly closed structure of political opportunity and democratic deficit, this is the only way citizens can achieve the necessary professionalization and democratization of urban processes that would ensure a liveable city. Perhaps we now need a grassroots movement which will do the same to our national government in order to achieve a liveable country and, conceivably, a liveable planet as well.

At the same time, we are also living in a moment of deep crisis. A crisis of the environment, of our political economy, and of the entire lifestyle to which we have grown accustomed. There are thus many unanswered questions as to where citizen control over national government would actually lead. Are citizens on a mass scale willing to commit

to a more sustainable life and equitable society? Without challenging the current system, would not citizen control just lead to the democratization of the Earth's destruction over which the political and economic elites currently have a monopoly? Could activist governments retain their popular support were they to start imposing unpopular measures which require the degrowth of our economy and the end of consumerist lifestyles? Answers to that rest in a very uncertain and unpredictable future. Perhaps one day, Mother Earth willing, I will find enough motivation to undertake research which tries to explore them.

Prague, Czech Republic   Michaela Pixová

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The biggest thanks go to my family, especially my husband Brad, without whom I would have never been able to accomplish this; my two boys, Killi and Izzi, who did not see much of mummy while finishing this project; and my mum, who often helped with the kids.

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Urban Grassroots Movements in Post-socialist Czechia: Spatial, Social, Cultural, and Political Context

The elevated attention which social sciences have been recently paying to citizens' struggles over urban space is a testament to the central role cities play in contemporary processes of neoliberalization, globalization, and the transforming nature of democratic governments. It is precisely in cities where the expansion of global capital, democratic decline, the crumbling of the welfare state, and the resulting inequalities and injustices are felt and contested the most intensely. This book is dedicated to urban struggles which are fought in the cities of contemporary Czechia, a small country in Central Europe whose citizens abandoned communism in 1989 to join a degenerated version of an idealized Western democracy and prosperity they had spent forty years longing for. In this country, damaged by its totalitarian past and poorly equipped with the basic pillars of democracy, cities were set to become easy prey for the new predatory version of capitalism, especially in the context of the ongoing processes of post-socialist transformation, which further exacerbated and distorted the ramifications of the new regime and undermined the development of already weak state–society relationships. It was only a matter of time before Czech urban populations woke from their initial enchantment with the newly gained freedom and Western-style consumption and overcame

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their previous inexperience with active citizenship, finally rising up against the post-socialist version of the neoliberal assault on cities.

Despite the large body of literature and research dedicated to contemporary urban social movements and urban conflicts (see Purcell 2002; Mayer 2009; Leontidou 2010; Harvey 2012; Novy and Colomb 2012; Jacobsson 2015; Gualini et al. 2015; Hou and Knierbein 2017; Domoradzka 2017), the topic remains rather understudied in Czechia. A few of my own publications represent exceptions (Pixová and Sládek 2016; Pixová 2018), as do publications where urban conflicts constitute the context for the study of other phenomena (Horak 2007; Durnová 2015). The Czech squatters' movement has also received some coverage (Piotrowski 2011; Pixová and Novák 2016). The situation in Czech cities is nonetheless endowed with many distinctive peculiarities which can contribute to the wider debate about urban conflicts and urban social movements and expand our knowledge about the different character of neoliberal restructuring in various local contexts. The Czech case attests to the importance of paying attention to the way grassroots movements in non-Western contexts conceive of and interpret neoliberal restructuring, and to how these frames affect the character of urban conflicts, especially through the rise of pro-democratic populist movements which enter electoral competition.

In this book, I present some of the main conclusions and discoveries from four years of research on Czech urban grassroots movements conducted between 2014 and 2017. I explain why it took almost two decades after the fall of the Iron Curtain for the people of Czechia to start realizing democratic capitalism was not bringing the quality to their cities they had been hoping for, and to start addressing a plethora of urban problems by means of grassroots activism. This awakening corresponded with similar developments in other countries of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe towards the second half of the 2000s. It could be connected to accession to the European Union in 2004 and the 2007–2008 global financial crisis (see Guasti 2016), during which a growing mass of people began to question the previously unchallenged role of the free market and the taken-for-granted path towards democratic consolidation. I also pay attention to the fact that grassroots activists in Czech cities have tended to frame their newly incurred critique of post-socialist urban processes as a domestic problem, detached from the deeper systemic changes on the

international and global scale. From their perspective, a whole plethora of urban problems appear as the outcome of Czech politicians' lack of professional competence and their propensity to abuse power for private gain, which are shortcomings many activists blame on the totalitarian legacies and immaturity of the post-socialist democracy and which also play a role in limiting citizen opportunities to influence urban processes and policymaking outside the formal political realm (see Pixová 2018). I will thus also elaborate on the fact that local interpretations of urban problems have in several cases contributed to the rise of populist movements, which according to Aslanidis (2017) have the potential to determine democratic processes, as well as 'movement parties', in other words, the transition whereby extra-institutional movements become political parties during crises of legitimation in which traditional political elites fail to respond to citizens' grievances (see Caiani and Císař 2018). In doing this, I draw on empirical data from the observation of several Czech urban grassroots movements which joined the partisan electoral competition as a 'last resort' to create opportunities for the democratization of their respective municipalities and local urban processes.

The structure of the book is as follows. The introductory chapter provides a theoretical conceptualization of urban grassroots movements and their role in contemporary cities, particularly in the context of neoliberal urban restructuring. I will also outline the basic characteristics of the political process theory and explain why I chose it as an analytical framework for researching and analysing Czech urban grassroots movements and the frequent tendency of their members to become part of formal politics. In line with this theory, I will also introduce the spatial and sociocultural context of Czech urban grassroots movements. A brief overview of the specifics of Czech cities and their development in recent history will provide the reader with a better understanding of the kind of matrix Czech urban grassroots movements emerged from and react to. An introduction of the character of Czech civil society, its conception of political culture and democratic organization, and the vulnerability of this conception to the reproduction of a democratic deficit will contextualize the emergence of urban grassroots movements in the Czech society and culture. I will then discuss the significance of local perspectives in identifying the main driving forces behind urban conflicts in Czech cities, which will lead us

towards the role of corporate state capture in Czechia and the way in which different forms of power abuse for private profit affect urban processes at the municipal level.

Chapter 2 of the book consists of four case studies featuring different cities whose local conflicts illustrate how the democratic deficit and brokerage of political power at the local state level translate into urban processes and into the grievances of urban grassroots movements and their ability to affect change. The first three case studies are from medium-sized cities in three different regions—Jablonec nad Nisou in North Bohemia, České Budějovice in South Bohemia, and Prostějov in the Haná region of Moravia. The last one is the capital city of Prague, located in Central Bohemia, where I focus in more detail on urban conflicts in three different municipal districts. One such conflict would expand to a second Prague district and, eventually, to the entire city. Each case study will delineate the emergence and development of local urban grassroots movements and the urban conflicts they engage in as well as assess the movements' success in achieving their goals.

In the final chapter of the book, I use the political process theory to analyse the case studies and other empirical data collected during the research (based on more than sixty qualitative interviews, some of which are anonymous in the text) as well as insider experience from the field of urban activism. I will identify how urban grassroots respond to the situation in which the abuse of power affects urban processes, urban space, and urban life. My focus will be on the following questions: What do the grassroots movements demand, what are their goals, and what strategies do they employ to achieve them? Which political opportunities, mobilizing structures, framing processes, and action repertoire affect the movements' ability to achieve their goals? And finally, what were the longer-term effects of their achievements in terms of improving urban processes and tackling the democratic deficit in Czech cities?

1.1 Urban Grassroots Movements and Their Role in Contemporary Cities

In reference to civic activism concerned with urban space and urban life, Castells (1977, 1983) was the first to use the term 'urban social movements'. Jacobsson (2015), on the other hand, described various kinds and scales of civic activism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) which concerned themselves with urban space and urban life through use of the term 'urban grassroots movements', which I personally find more fitting to the situation in the region. Both terms refer to the same kind of socio-spatial phenomenon, that is, citizen activity related to a wide spectrum of urban topics ranging from housing, heritage protection, neighbourhood or community life to 'right to the city' demands (concerning, for example, the right to use, produce, and take decisions about the city; squatting; etc.), access to resources and services, a liveable environment, and many others (see Jacobson 2015). However, as Pickvance (2003) explained, there is a certain level of ambiguity in how the term urban social movements tends to be used. The more restrictive usage of 'urban social movements' refers to citizen action with the highest level of urban and political effect, capable of achieving fundamental changes in power at the urban and societal level. The more generic use sees urban social movements as a system of practices which may not have any immediate effect but have a potential to transform the structure of the urban system through smaller changes instigated during a movement's development (2003). It is exactly that kind of potential, often not immediately visible in the form of large mass protests in public space, which Jacobsson (2015) refers to when introducing urban grassroots movements in post-communist Europe—a region where civil society is still weakened by its previous experience with totalitarian regimes. The attribute 'grassroots' therefore seems more fitting than 'social', as citizen activity in the CEE region often arises from the most basic levels of the society, usually from lone individuals or small groups. But despite the small scale of their activity, their transformative potential in post-socialist countries can be large and sometimes leads to the creation of larger social movements (Fig. 1.1).

Fig. 1.1 Peaceful protest against the demolition of an old corner building in Wenceslas Square (Photo: Martin Mádl)

1.1.1 Mobilizations Against Neoliberal Urban Restructuring

Critical urban scholars have shown that during the past few decades cities and urban life have been undergoing dramatic changes (see Brenner and Theodore 2003; Hou and Knierbein 2017; Merrifield 2014; Smith 1996, 2002; Swyngedouw et al. 2002; Madden and Marcouse 2006). When urban social movements were first described by Castells (1977, 1983), cities in developed European and North American countries had commenced extensive restructuring, which had been triggered by the regression of the Fordist regime of accumulation and the decline of Keynesian government policy (Knox and Pinch 1982; Massey 1984). Beginning in approximately the 1970s, heavy industry and traditional manufacturing started to abandon the cities, leaving them to instead become more reliant on more flexible industries based on the service sector, science, research, new information technologies, etc. Since that time, highly qualified professional workers have been replacing working-class employees and their

neighbourhoods while local development and employment growth have been encouraged by means of urban entrepreneurialism and interurban competition. These changes have led to the emergence of new patterns of urban space development and have given rise to new spatial formations and socio-spatial organization of cities. Harvey (1989b) characterizes contemporary urban space and society as profoundly transformed by globalization, postmodern culture, new urban lifestyles, as well as new types of development, such as 'science parks, gentrification, world trading centres, cultural and entertainment centres, large scale interior shopping malls with postmodern accoutrements, and the like' (Harvey 1989a, p. 11). With the growing role of urbanism in capital production, the imperative of productive capital has increasingly shaped cities (Smith 2002), and urban development thus increasingly takes place solely for the sake of benefiting the top social strata.

Other members of the society have on the other hand seen impoverishment and further degradation in their living conditions. In cities, the new system of accumulation has intensified social and spatial polarization (Harvey 1982, 2005, 2012; Knox and Pinch 1982; Smith 1984) as well as the inequalities in people's ability to actively participate in producing and using urban spaces and in defining the material condition of their own everyday lives (Harvey 2008; Lefebvre 1996 [1967]; Smith 1984). Neoliberal policies, diminishing the role of the state, and global competition are further accentuating and perpetuating these inequalities, providing elites who possess resources for capital investment and accumulation with decisive power in determining the production and use of urban space (Harvey 2008, 2012).

Since the initial stages of this post-industrial urban restructuring, urban issues have been at the forefront of political conflict and have given rise to a growing number of urban grassroots movements which challenge the status quo and call for new socio-spatial relationships. From the perspective of Castells (1983), citizens who actively engage in urban struggles play an important role in defining urban change. Such citizens are not only those facing deprivation from public resources or economic marginalization but come from different social strata or interest groups, aspire to different goals, and use different tactics in order to achieve them (1983).

However, as shown by Purcell (2002, 2003), the liberal model of democratic citizenship has been, today, severely undermined by the increasing power of corporations, whose negotiations with the state have a defining role in the production of space and life in our cities.

The more citizens are excluded from urban processes, the more they call for new forms of citizenship in which people would have the central role in decision-making concerning their living space (ibid.). Across the world, we have seen a whole range of demands for 'the right to the city', a concept which originates from Henri Lefebvre's (1996 [1967]) critique of people's deepening inability to affect urban politics and which has also been a motto for various social movements and different forms of grassroots activism concerned with urban issues, human rights, alter-globalization, etc. Right to the city movements exist worldwide, struggling for their right to secure livelihoods, affordable housing, and access to various resources as well as their right to affect urban politics, production of urban forms, and the broader right to live in a socially and economically just society (Attoh 2011; Harvey 2008; Marcuse 2009; McCann 2002; Mitchell 2003; Purcell 2002, 2003). The 2008 global financial crisis further validated the strengthening opposition of these movements (Brenner et al. 2009).

Cities represent focal points where global and local struggles are combining—glocalizing (Köhler and Wissen 2003) and concentrating issues and institutions which grassroots movements criticize and visualize on both a material and symbolic level. Today, we can find both social movements, which address the direct impacts of economic globalization, austerity, and politics on local communities, and global movements, which oppose the fundamental contradictions within our current socio-economic structure. Given the large variety of different groups and organizations, and their different spatial and sociocultural contexts, the spectrum of different urban grassroots movements across the world, or even within one city or neighbourhood, is very wide.

1.1.2 Czech Urban Grassroots Movements Through the Lens of Political Process Theory

Citizen action against undesirable urban change is a phenomenon which was bound to arise eventually, even in the post-socialist CEE countries, including Czechia. Local populations crushed by forty years of scarcity and repression initially perceived the post-socialist transformations of their urban environments with enthusiasm and eager expectations, but various urban controversies gradually started to trigger protest and civic engagement. Citizen action has nonetheless had many specificities due to the peculiar historic experience under the totalitarian regime and the concurrent neoliberal restructuring and post-socialist transformation. These specificities determine urban grassroots movements in terms of their development, organization, and way of interpreting urban problems and framing their demands, as well as in terms of the way they choose their strategies and goals.

Taking such a wide range of aspects into account in explaining the rise of social movements and in analysing their success is an approach typical of political process theory (Caren 2006), one of the most recent social movement theories widely used to explain social movement mobilization and the different forms these mobilizations take. Unlike previously popular social collective behaviour theories, which predominantly focused on individual motivations and their level of frustration, suffering, or level of irrationality, political process theory sees movements as political phenomena and movement participants 'as rational actors pursuing their interests'. In comparison with some of the previous approaches, Della Porta and Diani (1999) see this approach as more fruitful due to its consideration of the political and institutional context, and its focus on a movement's relationship and interactions with institutional political actors, including 'interactions between new and traditional actors, and between less conventional forms of action and institutionalized systems of interest representation'. Through this focus, political process theory abandons former perspectives which saw social movements as a marginal anti-institutional expression of the system's dysfunction (ibid., p. 17) and instead recognizes them as a full-fledged component of political processes, democracy, and social change.

Political process theory takes into consideration many variables. One of them is the environment in which movements operate, which is conceptualized as a 'political opportunity structure'. McAdam (1999 [1982]) defines political opportunities as circumstances which make the existing political system susceptible to social change, considering them one of the main factors in collective action and the emergence and mobilization of social movements. Empirical research has identified a number of variables in the political opportunity structure, which include electoral instability, conflicts between and within elites and their potential cooperation with movements, the degree of stability or instability of political alignments, the availability and strategic posture of potential allies within the political system, and the degree of state repression (Tarrow 1998; Della Porta and Diani 1999). Opportunities also change over time, and the mobilization of insurgent groups is either facilitated or hampered by them or may differ in terms of the extent to which available opportunities are exploited (Tarrow 1998). In most cases, the mobilization of movements is facilitated by open access to political institutions and participation in political processes. It is not uncommon that these opportunities were created or expanded by older movements or by the movements themselves (Tarrow 1998; Staggenborg and Ramos 2015). Closed opportunities are, on the other hand, assumed to do the opposite and increase the costs of collective action. Caiani and Císař (2018), nonetheless, also mention movements whose mobilization is triggered by a lack of opportunities and facilitated by societal acceptance of their discourses and ideologies. This only confirms that mobilizations and their effect are fundamentally conditioned by their sociocultural context (Staggenborg and Ramos 2015, p. 21). It also helps us to understand the tendency of some grassroots movements to create their own political opportunities by abandoning their position outside of electoral contestation and reincarnating themselves as political parties (see Aslanidis 2017).

Aside from political opportunities, an important role in assessing and explaining a movement's emergence, success, and/or failure is also played by mobilizing structures, framing processes, protest cycles, and contentious repertoires, as well as 'the interaction between movement attributes, such as organizational structure, and the broader economic

and political context' (Caren 2006). The emergence of new social movements depends on people, groups, and communities who are conscious of existing problems. In other words, they have a conscious feeling of deprivation and an awareness of existing injustice or iniquity and who also have the capacity, resources, and leadership to allow them to organize (McAdam 1999 [1982]). It is also not uncommon that social movements arise out of pre-existing organizations (Staggenborg and Ramos 2015). According to Rutland (2012), 'mobilizing structures' available in a given sociocultural context are important factors for collective action, which can be facilitated by '"latent" pre-movement or extra-movement "social networks" through which, for example, information pertaining to movement campaigns and actions can be circulated, movement members may be recruited, and shared practices and values may be developed' (Rutland 2012, p. 5).

Last but not least, political process theory also pays attention to how movements 'frame' various aspects related to their activities. In other words, it takes note of the way movements understand, interpret, and articulate the problems they are reacting to and the movements' own action repertoire and strategic decisions, or how they identify the group affected by the problem they are addressing (McAdam et al. 1996). Framing analysis is a useful tool in analysing a movement's beliefs, ideologies, or the way a movement construes its opposition (Snow and Benford 1988), which is particularly useful in exploring the way Czech urban grassroots movements frame their antagonists in the urban conflicts they are involved in, and consequently, how these frames determine chosen forms of protest and success in achieving their goals.

Political process theory has inspired the conduct of my research and the entire structure of this book in the following ways:

1. It led me to explore the spatial and sociocultural context of Czech urban grassroots movements, which according to political process theory is an essential background for analysing a movements' ability to influence the political process. This spatial and sociocultural context is introduced in Sect. 1.2.
2. Paying attention to the framing processes of Czech urban grassroots movements allowed me to identify previously unconsidered factors

which influence local urban processes, such as high levels of democratic deficit (consisting of a non-participatory culture, a lack of trust, non-transparent governments, and others) and corporate capture of the local state. Both concepts are introduced in more detail further in this chapter.

3. Four researched case studies will be introduced in Chapter 2 of this book, and each one pays attention to the way the urban grassroots movements became mobilized, framed local problems, chose their action repertoire, and how successful they were in achieving their goals.

4. In the last analytical chapter of this book, Chapter 3, I synthetize the framing processes, action repertoires, mobilizing structures, and political opportunities identified in the four case studies. Afterwards, I assess the role these factors play in the ability of different urban grassroots movements to achieve their goals, both in terms of preventing immediate threats in their urban space and in terms of longer-term effects, such as eliminating local non-transparent interests or democratizing and professionalizing local urban processes.

1.2 Spatial and Sociocultural Context of Czech Urban Grassroots Movements

1.2.1 Czech Cities in Times of Turbulent Change

Czech cities are admittedly unique in many aspects. Some of them are hundreds of years old and carry visible traces of the dramatic changes they have undergone in the course of their long histories, especially the political turmoil of the twentieth century. Some cities have medieval city centres and a well-preserved variety of different architectural styles. Altogether, Czechia has forty so-called town monument reserves, out of which some have become intensively touristified, for example, the city centre of Prague (Simpson 1999; Hoffman and Musil 1999) or the much smaller Český Krumlov in South Bohemia and Kutná Hora in Central Bohemia. But aside from their beautiful heritage environment, they also carry legacies

of the past lifestyles, political regimes, etc., during which they have experienced both times of prosperity, sovereignty, and freedom, and stormy times of warfare, bloodshed, dictatorship, and totality. The most defining eras have been those under the leadership of famous Czech kings and dukes in medieval times; the Habsburg and Austro-Hungarian dominance of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries; twenty years of independence and prosperity as the Czechoslovak Republic between 1918 and 1938; and the almost half-century absence of democracy which ensued—six years under Nazi occupation, followed by more than forty years of communist totality.

The way citizens relate to urban environments left by different historic eras is very selective and largely depends on the national self-image they prefer (see Holý 2010). Typically, Czech citizens prefer the built environment which materializes the grander parts of their history, especially during the eras preceding World War II. And vice versa, they tend to disavow or ignore the Czech displacement of the German population after the war in relating to the urban remnants of the German past. Contrarywise, they often have a negative attitude to the environment built during socialism, even if similar modernistic architecture exists in Western countries too. Gradually, however, they have also become increasingly critical of contemporary urban change. As regards this change and the conflicts triggered by it, it is essential to understand some of the effects of neoliberal restructuring in the context of post-socialist transformation (Fig. 1.2).

1.2.1.1 Cities Under Socialism

In order to understand urban transformation in post-socialist Czechia, we must first outline a basic definition of the socialist city, as many of the consequent changes simply derived from the societal desire to overcome the socialist past and replace it with a new order.

The history of socialist urban development in Czechoslovakia started in the aftermath of the Czechoslovak coup d'état in February 1948, during which the Czechoslovak Communist Party took over the Czechoslovak government. The country then became part of the Soviet Bloc, which meant forty years of totalitarian rule, curtailed freedom and repressions,

Fig. 1.2 Clash of the regimes. Activists protest against the demolition of Hotel Praha, a luxurious hotel built in a brutalist style for the needs of the Communist Party. The sign says, 'vekslák is demolishing Prague', alluding to Petr Kellner, Czechia's richest man and owner of the hotel after the Velvet Revolution. The term 'vekslák' refers to a person who was involved in an illegal business dealing with foreign goods and currency under the former regime (Photo: own archive)

economic and environmental decline, but also vigorous efforts to build an egalitarian society provided with free social and health welfare, job security, affordable housing, etc.

Socialist cities are stereotypically associated with greyness, concrete, and pollution. Urbanization on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain nonetheless reminded of the West. According to Sýkora, socialist cities were similarly shaped by modernity, industrialization, technological progress, and advanced labour division. The way they were governed, planned, and developed on the other hand represented 'a major alternative to capitalist urbanization' (2009, p. 390). One of their main distinguishing features was the central rule of the Communist Party and its revolutionary effort to abolish capitalist mechanisms and socio-economic inequalities, and to replace them with a classless communist society in which individuals are

freed from labour exploitation and poverty. Steps leading towards achieving such a society included the replacement of private economic activities, private natural resources, and private means of production by common, public, or cooperative ownership.

The ideology of the party, driven by socialist principles, and the absence of the free market, were bound to translate into the physical and social planning of cities and thus translate into cities' land use, land rent, residential differentiation, and the overall character of their built environment and functioning. The state administration used ideological principles to determine normative goals, norms, and standards for people's basic needs. In the context of top-down regulations, and the prohibition of private enterprise, cities had little commerce and retail space. Even Prague as a capital city had only two major department stores built during the whole era of socialism (Hoffman and Musil 1999). Major cities did not suburbanize, and a significant share of the residential function was concentrated into concrete high-rise buildings built by the state in high densities on the urban peripheries. Unlike in the West, these housing estates were not designated for the urban poor and were instead socially mixed. The state administration also had a key role in establishing state-regulated prices and redistributing common resources. Housing was centrally allocated and heavily subsidized. The state was also instrumental in providing the public with a set of basic services, including a wide and dense network of interurban and intraurban public transportation. Individual automobile transportation was relatively insignificant in comparison with capitalist societies, and the same held for the service sector. Basic services were nonetheless available even in small countryside villages.

In a centrally planned economy, the practice of urban and regional planning was of especially great importance. As shown by Maier (1998), planning was initially seen as an appealing way of achieving 'better societal order', leading to the ideal socialist society. However, it quickly degenerated into the mere reduction of planning to a technically oriented discipline under strict ideological control, used by political power as a directive tool in the 'value-free' execution of its economic decisions in physical space (Maier 1998, p. 353). Hoffman (1994) described planning in state socialism as hierarchically organized, performed by centrally directed institutes at district, regional, and national levels, as well as by specific industries.

Plans were highly formalized, detailed, and inflexible and were designed and implemented in a top-down manner, with almost no contact with the non-professional public. According to Hoffman, people were formally able to review plans, but in practice 'participation was manipulated by the Party and viewed by the public as propaganda' (Hoffman 1994, p. 692). From the perspective of Maier (1998), planning under state socialism had a paradoxical role. On the one hand, all municipalities and regions had their own statutory development plans, which were rather rigid and had a strong legal position. And at the same time, the position of physical planning as such was only symbolic. Due to its predominantly practical and political orientation, planning as a discipline significantly fell behind the planning trends of Western democracies, and as such remained very underdeveloped (Maier 1998, p. 352).

Another product of central rule was the formation of specific socialist inequalities, which did not result from market logic but from ideological preferences, affecting especially people's access to housing and the demographic spatial redistribution of the population (Sýkora 2009). People could not freely choose a place to live as housing was allocated by the state. People with 'higher societal or Communist Party merits' had easier access to housing and could live in neighbourhoods which inherited their exclusivity from the pre-socialist eras (Sýkora 2009, p. 390). Newly built peripheral housing estates were predominantly aimed at revolutionary working-class citizens, especially young and economically productive families. Older people and the Roma population tended to be concentrated in old and decaying housing stocks. Often they were located in historic centres and former working-class neighbourhoods and were neglected and disinvested due to the state's scarce resources and its focus on building new housing estates.

Ideological inequalities also affected individual regions and cities based on their strategic importance to the regime. Urbanization especially took place in regions with industries regarded as strategic by the Communist Party, particularly those with heavy industries. Some cities in industrial regions were even built completely anew, for example, the city of Most in northern Bohemia. Many cities were therefore heavily polluted and unhealthy to live in but still underwent a significant growth in population because of the benefits these spaces provided the regime. Interestingly, in

the 1980s, the severity of the pollution in socialist cities gave birth to an environmental movement (Císař 2008; Jehlička and Kostelecký 1995) whose criticism of the regime's flaws eventually grew into the popular uprising against the regime, the Velvet Revolution, and the end of the Iron Curtain.

1.2.1.2   Cities in Post-socialism

The era of totalitarian socialism ended with the Velvet Revolution, which took place on 17 November 1989, and was followed by societal transition towards capitalism and democracy. This path appeared as a tendency within Czechoslovak society to oscillate towards the West after abandoning the Soviet bloc and a dominant objective of quickly achieving compatibility with neoliberal accumulation regimes and their prosperity.

In Czech cities, the transition towards a dramatically different political economy was bound to trigger an extensive multilayered process of socio-spatial restructuring, which in the case of Czechia has been particularly radical and time-compressed due to the concurrence of global neoliberal restructuring and post-socialist transformation (Sýkora and Bouzarovski 2012). New areas of urban decline and growth have emerged and have been manifesting through new patterns of built environment and urban life defined by deindustrialization, gentrification, suburbanization, commercialization, brownfield redevelopment, growing socio-spatial disparities, and other processes of change.

According to Sýkora and Bouzarovski (2012), the complexity of post-socialist urban transformation cannot be fully understood without reference to the processes and outcomes of other transitions and transformations within the post-socialist society. Aside from establishing a pluralist democracy and democratic government elections, the strongest determination among politicians during the first year of post-socialism was to institutionalize overall market reform and quickly establish conditions for free trade involving the privatization of previously publicly owned assets, price liberalization, opening the country up to foreign trade, etc. These institutional transformations led to other spontaneous

reforms in the economy, culture, and society, such as 'internationalisation and globalisation, economic-restructuring-induced deindustrialisation, the growth of producer services, increasing social differentiation, new modes of post-modern culture and neo-liberal political practices' (Sýkora and Bouzarovski 2012, pp. 6–7). All of these transformations have also translated into a multilayered process of urban change.

A considerable post-socialist change was also in urban governance and attitude towards planning and regulating cities. Decentralized government enabled cities to appoint their own municipal self-governments, control local development, and manage their own municipal property, formerly owned by the state. Much of the new post-socialist political and economic elite were recruited from people with privileged positions during the previous regime, ready to seek new opportunities under the new circumstances. From the perspective of urban development, the main downside of the post-socialist urban governments was their tendency to prioritize the rapid achievement of economic prosperity instead of making long-term plans and strategies, which they often saw as contradictory to the market. Sýkora (2006) attests that politicians often saw a free unregulated market as the most efficient and just mechanism of resource allocation. Moreover, many of them actively strived to reduce government involvement as much as possible. They strongly resisted the creation of basic rules, long-term plans, strategies, or visions of urban development, instead preferring ad hoc decisions and uncoordinated development (2006).

In the discourse of the first post-socialist governments in Czechia, it was very common to associate planning, long-term strategies, or regulation with the rigidity of the socialist planning apparatus controlled by central government. Many opponents of planning were convinced that private initiative and the logic of the free market should be the sole drivers of development—some authors (Hoffman 1994; Maier 1998) have even described planning in the early 1990s as a profession in crisis. However, local governments eventually recognized land-use plans as useful for controlling local development. The planning practice therefore survived without being subject to any substantial reform, with only a few partial amendments to its legal frameworks and without being adapted to ensure compatibility with the market economy and private initiative. As such,

planning has remained a largely technocratic and rigid discipline that pre-dominantly uses land-use plans for the value-free facilitation of economic development and various private interests (Maier 1998), often serving as the grounds for corruption (see Horak 2007). I will pay more attention to this practice in the section dealing with local state capture.

According to Sýkora, post-socialist urban governments eventually learned 'the main principles of urban governance, policy and planning in a democratic political system and market economy' (2006, p. 136). Horak (2007) has nonetheless shown that in the extremely unstable political envi-ronment of those initial post-socialist transformation years, politicians also made many crucial decisions with long-term impacts and implications, which have been hard to eliminate in the years to come (2007). This ad hoc attitude of the early 1990s more than anything reminded of a shock-doctrine approach—a rapid implementation of neoliberal policies during a time of turbulent change—and it exposed Czech post-socialist cities to many careless and ill-considered decisions, regardless of their negative implications and longer-term effects. This approach was further assisted by architects and other technical professionals, who have traditionally been at the forefront of designing the built environment and land-use plans in Czechia, out of which most lack a formal background in social and environmental science and have a largely technocratic and design-focused attitude towards urban planning and development. What follows is a review of some of the most negative outcomes and implications of the urban reform pursued in post-socialist Czechia.

1.2.1.3 Post-socialist Urban Reform in the Context of the Shock-Doctrine, Instability, Institutional Incoherence, and the Non-transparent Legal Environment

As mentioned above, the strong determination of the first post-socialist politicians to quickly create a free market environment by implementing neoliberal policies aimed at minimizing state ownership and the state's regulatory function often reminded of the shock doctrine, described by Naomi Klein (2007) as a method of imposing free market dominance in

countries destabilized by a shocking event. Destabilization of Czech cities was not caused by a disaster but by the unstable and institutionally incoherent context of post-socialist transformation and a non-transparent legal environment. Many people were also supportive of measures which were falsely presented to them as necessary conditions for achieving prosperity, economic growth, and democratization. Few people were able to identify neoliberal policies—not to mention their implementation by politicians with no previous experience of democratic leadership—as potentially dangerous and leading to negative and unpopular outcomes.

An urban reform pursued in the spirit of this shock-doctrine approach, uninterruptedly continuing in line with the already entrenched tradition of technocratic urban processes, was bound to result in many unwanted problems and negative implications. The expedited privatizations of countless important assets are some of the best examples. Early on in post-socialism, urban governments and various large state-owned enterprises, such as České dráhy (Czech railways), as well as many new owners of restituted and privatized property, were quick to sell their assets and property without their future use, appearance, function, etc. being conditioned or regulated by some kind of comprehensive strategic plan, vision, or guidelines aimed at ensuring harmonic urban development and functioning. Hasty sales affected not only single buildings but also large urban areas, including some highly lucrative and strategic ones in the inner city. This practice, which basically entrusts the future of large urban areas to private actors, typically developers and investors, has led to uncoordinated and unpredictable development, characterized by the unrestrained influx of commercial centres, residential and office development projects, and speculative practices, the latter of which resulted in many older buildings and vacant lots remaining neglected and underused for long periods of time. In the city centre of Prague and a few other popular tourist destinations, particularly Český Krumlov, this approach has also led to massive touristification of the city centres. Quick sales of public property also resulted in the demolition and damage of valuable architecture. This uncritical approach to private interests and private initiative at the same time often resulted in projects of very low architectural value.

Another example of the negative consequences of urban reform driven by neoliberal policies was the process of post-socialist suburbanization,

fuelled by the production of new retail spaces, warehouses, logistic centres, and single-family housing. Uncritically accepting the Western model of a capitalist city, the post-socialist society often supported suburban development without considering its implications for infrastructure, public amenities, traffic congestion caused by commuting (see Sýkora and Ouředníček 2007; Stanilov and Sýkora 2014), or the loss of fertile arable land (see Spilková and Šefrna 2010). Moreover, the simplicity of building around cities was in many cases accompanied by negative countereffects in the cities' central areas. While commercially and touristically attractive city centres often became the subject of gentrification and started to lose their residential function (see Simpson 1999; Hoffman and Musil 1999; Pixová and Sládek 2016), centres of less successful cities would, on the other hand, remain neglected, full of vacant lots and underused buildings, and inhabited mostly by disadvantaged and marginalized populations. A further outcome of these ill-considered and antisocial reforms was the initial attitude to socialist housing estates. Under the assumption that this form of residence would eventually disappear and lose its role in the housing market, authorities initially neglected the physical state of large-scale housing estates. The estates nonetheless retained an important role in housing provision and eventually became subject to extensive revitalization and regeneration programmes (Maier 2003, 2005). They also dealt with increasing pressure on their densification with new, frequently arrogant development projects (see Pixová 2018) (Fig. 1.3).

Post-socialist urban reform pursued in the spirit of neoliberalism had especially damaging negative implications for housing. Czech post-socialist governments never elaborated a systemic housing reform to ensure the long-term accessibility and affordability of housing for all socio-economic groups. The painful effects of economic transformation were initially softened by privatizing a large part of the former socialist housing stock to the sitting tenants, and in cases where this was not possible, tenants were at least provided with initial rent regulation (Lux and Mikeszova 2012, p. 93). However, even this left many to contend with the predatory practices of new landlords who tried to displace them (see Cooper and Morpeth 1998; Pixová and Sládek 2016). As most former public housing was privatized and the state lacked comprehensive policies ensuring affordable housing, housing was allowed to become inaccessible for most

Fig. 1.3 Protest against proposed cuts in social housing subsidies, which would drive thousands into homelessness, in front of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (Photo: Petr Zewlakk Vrabec)

segments of the population. At first, housing became inaccessible to the lowest social strata, with the Roma population especially becoming subject to extensive residential segregation (see Lux 2004). This gave rise to an expansion of poverty business focused on providing housing to segregated populations, in which many municipalities actively participated by enabling various entrepreneurs to cheaply privatize municipal housing stock and, consequently, accumulate a large amount of wealth through the collection of housing subsidies these marginalized populations receive from the state. This continued absence of social housing reform combined with the consolidating trend of housing financialization during the second half of the 2010s. In larger cities, it has led to housing which is today unaffordable even for middle-class citizens (Orcígr et al. 2018).

The list of urban problems resulting from the post-socialist urban reform, which largely prioritized neoliberal solutions and was surrounded by instability, institutional incoherence, and a non-transparent legal environment, is nonetheless much longer and expands even further, especially if we consider other aspects of the post-socialist society and its transformation. They include, for example, poor quality of public space, visual smog caused by abundant advertising, an insensitive approach to heritage protection, a lack of sense for high-quality architecture, an overabundance of

large-scale retail spaces, traffic pollution and congestion, and a poor state of transport infrastructure—especially bridges. Many problems have also been related to non-transparent and wasteful public expenditures, disadvantageous subcontracting and leases, downgrading the availability and quality of public amenities and services, and various controversial projects of dubious purpose. More problems will also be outlined further in this chapter in connection with the sociocultural context, democratic deficit, corporate capture of the state, and especially with the different forms of power abuse which affect local urban processes.

1.2.2   Civil Society in Post-socialist Czechia

Problems resulting from the urban reform implemented in the non-transparent post-socialist context occasionally triggered disagreement and protests among Czech urban dwellers. Forms of citizen action concerned with urban issues existed soon after the Velvet Revolution—isolated protests of heritage conservationists or environmentalists, individual residents dealing with various issues connected to housing reform, or squatters demanding their right to use abandoned buildings, for instance (Pixová and Sládek 2016). It was not until after the 2008 global financial crisis that Czech urban grassroots movements became more present and gradually spread to cities and municipalities across the country, demanding better urban services, better politics, and better urban environments (Pixová 2018). As mentioned in the introduction, the timing of this awakening and mobilization was in line with other post-socialist societies and their disillusionment with the state of democracy (Guasti 2016) and, specifically, with the state of their cities (Domaradzka 2017). Why did it take so long, and what made this time more favourable to larger public engagement? To answer these questions, we need to explore the development of Czech civil society and the mechanisms of democratic control.

Post-socialist countries are frequently associated with weak civil societies and low citizen participation (Howard 2003; Müller 2005; Ekiert and Foa 2011), mainly due to their long history of oppressive and authoritarian regimes (Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2013). However, environmental movements existed in Czechoslovakia as early as the 1980s (Císař 2008;

Jehlička and Kostelecký 1995; Pickvance 1996). Moreover, the oppressive regimes of the former communist countries were overthrown by local civil societies (Buden 2013; Skovajsa 2008). According to Císař (2008), there were many optimistic expectations about the future prospects of reviving active civic life and political participation in post-socialist countries; however, as soon as the revolutionary stamina vanished, most of the population quickly returned to passivity. With few exceptions, political participation in Czechia during the first two decades following the revolution was low. Aside from the old, materially oriented social movements, consisting mostly of unions, radical activism, and occasional cases of civic self-organization, the prevailing form of political participation took the form of the transactional activism of professional NGOs, out of which the most visible forms were those focused on environmental, feminist, and human rights issues (Císař 2008).

The non-participatory culture in post-socialist Czechia has various explanations. Müller (2005) sees the passivity of Czech citizens as an evolutionary consequence of the local political culture, whose characteristics include a centralist-bureaucratic conception of public interest, a tendency towards étatism, and the paradoxical combination of the citizenry's unrealistic expectations concerning the processes of political decision-making, accompanied by a robust crisis of trust in political institutions and other citizens (ibid.). Skalník (2009) perceives the problems of the political culture in post-socialist Czechia as an outcome of the citizenry's flawed perception of liberal democracy and the overwhelming tendency among Czech citizens to perceive liberal democracy as a panacea to all problems associated with the country's communist past. According to Skalník, many people expected that 'a combination of liberal democracy and an orientation towards Western Europe would function as an automatic springboard to wealth, prosperity, transparency and the rapid development of all branches of society' (Skalník 2009, p. 240). This fallacy implies a fundamental misunderstanding of basic democratic principles by citizens, who suffered from a lack of previous experience with democratic establishments.

The citizenry's misunderstanding of what democracy entails contributed to the creation of a vicious cycle perpetuated by politicians abusing

their power, a lack of transparency, distrust between citizens and politicians, and further passivity or apathy among citizens (see Müller 2005). Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus, further consolidated this vicious cycle, which I am conceptualizing as a democratic deficit, during his leadership between 1992 and 1997. Unlike the first democratic president, Václav Havel, who strongly supported civil society, Klaus and other neoliberals alike openly denied even the existence of civil society (Potůček 2000; Myant 2006). He marginalized many activist groups from the political process, proclaiming their endeavours as dangerous to the country's smooth transition to capitalism (Císař 2008, p. 96), and claimed quadrennial elections to be the only legitimate way of expressing popular opinion. This form of democracy became widely accepted by the general population, and to date, there is a tendency in Czech society to see citizen engagement outside of elections as something less legitimate and appropriate (Skalník 2009; Kňapová 2013). In the following section, we will see how the active undermining of the establishment of a more participatory form of democracy resulted in two contradictory outcomes. On the one hand, it contributed to the creation of a weak institutional environment, a democratic deficit, and associated problems with corporate capture of the state. On the other hand, this development also culminated in citizen disillusionment with the state of post-socialist democratization and the way in which this state affects urban environment and urban life. This legitimacy crisis created a political opportunity for the rise of urban grassroots movements in Czechia and, eventually, for the rise of pro-democratic populist movements and movement parties as well.

1.2.2.1 Urban Grassroots Movements as a Challenge to the Democratic Deficit

Despite many optimist expectations regarding democratization ensuing as a natural consequence of the country abandoning totalitarian socialism, Czechia is negatively affected by a profound democratic deficit, which is a concept that refers to the underdevelopment of democratic institutions or to democratic institutions failing to function in line with democratic principles. Democratic deficit is also an expression pointing to the loss of

legitimacy of the traditional political elites in the eyes of the society. In countries of the CEE region, it has resulted from the failure of the post-socialist democratic development and of the institutional environment to overcome the divide and lack of trust between state institutions and the society (Müller 2005; Skalnik 2009; Guasti 2016). In Czechia, this lack of trust is further fuelled by widespread problems with corruption, clientelism, and other forms of power abuse (Müller 2005; Horak 2007; Innes 2016; Naxera 2015).

A democratic deficit can be observed at all levels of Czech government. At the national level, the first crisis of trust occurred in 1999, during which the civil society unsuccessfully protested against the Opposition Agreement between two major parties, the Civic Democrats (ODS) and Social Democrats (ČSSD), demanding the dissolution of the government (see Dvořáková 2003). As regards the municipal government, Horak (2007) has produced evidence about the various counter-reactions of citizens disillusioned and outraged by politicians' lack of interest in public opinion and the futility of their protest activities against particular decisions and building projects. Using the example of Prague's motorway plan implementation in the 1990s, Horak has shown that activists often encountered an unresponsive and deceptive attitude from democratically elected politicians, which was not dissimilar to the attitude of authorities under the communist regime. He characterized these interactions between Czech authorities and activists in early post-socialism as driven by a 'dynamic of mutual delegitimation'. In other words, opponents mutually rejecting each other not only in terms of the substance of their conflicting visions but also in terms of the very ability of the opposition 'to act as constructive participants in the policymaking process' (2007, p. 122). At this point, some citizens started to realize that protest activities cannot solve urban problems unless urban processes undergo a profound multilayered reform.

Citizen demand for more public openness regarding urban processes nonetheless frequently encountered strong political resistance. Citizen participation became formally more empowered in 2004[1] in the context of

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[1] Formal steps forward in terms of citizen participation came about in 2004 with Czechia's ratification of two important international conventions: the European Landscape Convention and the United Nations' Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters.

Czechia's accession to the European Union, which places strong emphasis on the partnership principle among institutions and citizens (Císař 2008). Even so, most of the first experiments with participatory planning[2] often served superficial and utilitarian purposes. According to Guasti (2016), post-socialist countries' accession to the European Union paradoxically weakened the position of their civil societies due to the loss of EU leverage and the departure of many foreign donors further east. At the same time, taking into consideration that foreign donors often set an agenda for which the local society was unprepared and, vice versa, neglected agenda more relevant to the given context, the departure of foreign donors opened the field to topics which locals perceived as more pressing.

These topics started to reveal themselves during the 2008 global economic crisis and consequent crisis in state–society relationships. The imposition of neoliberal austerity measures (see, e.g., Bělohradský 2010; Mert and Krčál 2014) encompassed a widening range of exposed corruption scandals among the decision-makers (see Kupka and Mochťák 2014; Klíma 2015). The result was a growing legitimation crisis of the Czech national and municipal governments, which translated into multiple voter insurrections in both national (Klíma 2015) and municipal elections (Pixová and Sládek 2016; Pixová 2018) and huge losses for traditional political parties. The accompanying effect was the emergence of unprecedented activity inside civil society, including urban grassroots movements. This development seems to replicate the development in the rest of the CEE region, whose civil society, according to Guasti (2016), responded to stress tests posed by EU accession and the economic crisis by diversifying its activities and developing alternative routes of securing itself.

The increased engagement of various grassroots groups in urban affairs, especially at the end of the 2000s and even more so in the 2010s, can be contextualized as part of this diversification of political participation and active citizenship in post-socialist Europe observed by Guasti (2016). Interestingly, unlike similar contemporary middle-class movements protesting against the ongoing legitimation crisis of democratic

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[2]Some to the first attempts to pursue participatory planning occurred as part of the principles of sustainable development included in the United Nations' Agenda 21 plan, applied in Czechia, for example, by Národní síť zdravých měst (Healthy cities of the Czech Republic).

capitalism in Western countries, the predominant tendency among Czech urban grassroots was to see the local democratic deficit as a domestic problem, separate from similar problems abroad, and they interpret it as a failure of Czech post-socialist society to consolidate its democracy and catch up with more developed countries in the West (Pixová 2018). Disregarding the broader context of the ongoing global crisis of democratic capitalism, and the fact that neoliberalism has been excluding growing masses of people from decision-making and wealth redistribution even in traditional democracies (see Ranciere 1999; Purcell 2003, 2009; Streeck 2011; Swyngedouw 2009, 2011), people involved in Czech urban grassroots movements would frequently see domestic urban problems and controversies rather simply: as rooted in the incompetence, corruptness, and recklessness of certain political leaders; in malfunctioning institutions; and in part, also in the passivity of other citizens. By the same token, they would also regard these problems as something which can be fixed via domestic solutions—pro-democratic reforms of existing urban practices and processes, including changes in legislative, institutional set-up, etc. More and more frequently, countered with the resistance of politicians to such changes, they would also demand changes in political leadership and the personnel working in public institutions.

1.2.2.2 Urban Contests: A Consequence of Neoliberal Restructuring or a Local Problem with Democratic Deficit? The Importance of Incorporating Local Perspectives

When I first decided to study urban grassroots movements in Czechia, I tended to see urban conflicts mainly as a counter-reaction to neoliberal restructuring and the associated changes of urban space and urban governance, which are nowadays affecting cities across the globalized capitalist world (see Harvey 1989b; Swyngedouw et al. 2002; Brenner and Theodore 2005). My presumption was that Czech citizens involved in urban conflicts would be critical of the neoliberal exploitation of urban space and the increasing neglect of public interests. At the same time, I was interested in finding out how their reactions would differ based on the

legacies of their socialist past and their lack of previous experience with capitalism.

In my research, I discovered Czech citizens and activists rarely criticize the new global form of political economy and tend to blame controversial cases of urban change on domestic problems without contextualizing them within the contemporary system of global neoliberal restructuring (Pixová 2018). Among the large group of people interviewed for the purpose of this research, most people seemed to perceive global capitalism as a neutral circumstance, some sort of 'natural law' which cannot be avoided without returning to socialism or other forms of totalitarian rule and oppression. Instead, they frequently see urban problems and controversies as a local problem, anomalies in an otherwise well-functioning system which can be blamed on domestic urban processes, ill-advised decisions, institutional weaknesses, failed democratic consolidation, or failures and incompetencies of politicians, cases where power is abused, clientelism, etc. Citizens engaging in urban protests therefore often conceive of urban problems as something rooted in the underdeveloped, inferior, and non-democratic nature of urban processes in comparison with countries with a longer democratic tradition, perceived of as more experienced and effective in terms of balancing out public and private interests (see Pixová 2018).

In the beginning of my research, I challenged citizens involved in Czech urban conflicts for not understanding the deeper systemic causes of urban change and for being overly optimistic in regard to the potential achievements of domestic solutions. Adopting such an attitude meant succumbing to the ideology of Eastness: the double-sided tendency to perceive non-Western societies as less civilized, orderly, and just (Zarycki 2014) and, therefore, in need of catching up to nations with a longer tradition of democratic capitalism (see Buden 2013).

This tendency to assess non-Western societies, including the CEE region, in reference to Western categories, comparing the two with a strong bias towards Western contexts, is also widespread among scholars studying social movements. According to Gagyi (2015), scholars with this bias often have false expectations regarding the direction of the development of post-socialist movements and tend to see their current state as underdeveloped and lagging behind their Western counterparts. She also points out that condemning social movements in the CEE region as immature

and interpreting their form of grassroots engagement as backwards and underdeveloped would result in omitting and not considering the actual role of these movements in their societies. Avoiding such bias in the case of Czech urban grassroots movements requires paying attention to the framing processes which they choose to employ in a given context. By doing so, we can learn much about various issues which go beyond the usual focus of urban geography, such as post-socialist problems with democratic consolidation, institutional weakness, and other accompanying problems like non-transparent decision-making, power abuse, corruption, etc. Giving bigger relevance to local perspectives can thus inform us about the relevance of these problems and about the way they influence local urban processes, policymaking, and the local political arena. And, ultimately, this can also enlighten us about the emergence, character, and action of urban grassroots movements and the urban conflicts they engage in.

1.2.2.3 The Undemocratic Nature of Urban Processes in the West and Beyond

In the current neoliberal era, the interests of big capital almost always take precedence over those of the public. Politicians operate in the spirit of urban entrepreneurialism as intermediaries for big capital (Harvey 1989b). The CEE region nonetheless exhibits some distinct features in how urban governments operate (Jacobsson 2015). Czech activists and urban professionals frequently describe urban processes in Czech cities as unprofessional, ad hoc, arrogant, producing undesirable urban environments, and largely motivated by non-transparent interests. They often contrast them to urban processes in countries with a longer democratic tradition and stronger institutional environment, which they perceive as more professional and democratic, producing better urban environments.

Although more strongly regulated states with consolidated democracies often use participatory planning as a tool for evading or pacifying the protests of their citizens (Gualini 2015; Purcell 2003), most institutional actors in Czech urban processes seem to have little interest in public involvement and try to avoid it (Sýkora 2006; Horak 2007; Durnová 2015; Pixová 2018). As Durnová (2015) showed in her case study of a conflict

over the construction of a train station in Brno, institutional actors tend to avoid participatory tools even in cases of contentious urban interventions with a high propensity to trigger public outrage, and where they might actually benefit from the pacifying effect of participation. The Brno case study shows that the absence of participatory tools leads to uncultivated and unregulated conflicts, which are driven by the dynamic of mutual delegitimation described by Horak (2007), and further widens the gap between the opposed sides.

My research reveals that unregulated conflicts reinforce suspicion among citizens that politicians avoid public oversight in order to hide various ulterior motives. This suspicion is further supported by the fact that Czech municipal politicians rarely try to counterweigh private interests with the interests of the public, for example, in the form of negotiating compromises or arranging at least modest offerings to the citizenry. They could, for instance, condition new development by creating aesthetically attractive urban environments, endowing local communities with public amenities and infrastructure, or other small compromises. Such an approach is much more entrenched in the comprehensive planning practice of Western democracies, whereas the Czech planning experience shows frequent examples which are the complete reverse. For example, politicians actively defend and promote plans and projects with decidedly negative effects on urban environments, urban budgets, the quality of public services, etc. Moreover, decision-makers in such situations often actively strive to prevent the public from gaining access to relevant information and processes, further reinforcing suspicions regarding possible power abuse.

The experience of Czech urban activists implies that the undemocratic nature of urban processes in Czech cities is comparatively more blatant than in the West, which affects the way activists make sense of undesirable urban interventions and the kind of claims they make in their efforts to change them. Through their frames, they frequently address the failure of Czech post-socialist political elites to open urban processes to public participation, mainly due to the tendency of politicians to abuse their power and urban processes for their own private profit or corporate interests. These frames redirected the attention of this research towards the corporate

state capture and its consequences for urban processes and the urban environment. They also constitute important analytical data, explaining the emergence of populist urban movements. According to Aslanidis (2017), 'populist mobilizations have been commonly criticized as undermining important pillars of liberal democracy', but their grassroots versions can exhibit important democratizing effects (Aslanidis 2017, p. 2). In the following section, I will explore corporate state capture both as a concept and as an outcome of the Czech post-socialist transformation. Then, I will show how corporate capture affects the local state and local urban processes.

1.3   Corporate Capture of the Czech State

Traditional democracies have developed a whole range of mechanisms through which they are able to hold democratically elected politicians accountable, be it horizontally through oversight agencies; vertically by voters, civil society, and the press; or societally via various watchdog organizations. Using the example of Latin America, Mainwaring (2003) shows that unaccountable governments can produce terrible policy results. Without risking punishment, they engage in corruption, improper use of public resources, various cases of power abuse, and many others. According to Kaufmann and Vicente (2011), these problems are typical for countries whose economies are undergoing major transition and where politicians are not under sufficient oversight by citizens. This lack of oversight is further reinforced by the underdeveloped state of local institutions, whose ability to hold politicians accountable and restrain their discretion is deliberately hampered by politicians whose interest is to avoid oversight. Similar situations may consequently lead to an entrenchment of various forms of legal corruption and to serious problems with state capture, an elaborate system of state exploitation by ruling political parties.

According to Innes (2013, 2016), Czechia (formerly Czechoslovakia) has been especially affected by corporate state capture, which Hellman et al. (2000) characterize as a system in which various non-transparent alliances between ruling political parties and private businesses not only sponge on public resources but also secretly influence decision-making

processes, state institutions, public companies and companies with public shareholders, the law, the judiciary, etc., for the purpose of their own profit.

In Czechia's case, the establishment of corporate state capture was enabled by the turbulent processes of post-socialist transformation, coupled with the significant unpreparedness of the local society and institutions to subject political elites to sufficient control and incentive to respond to popular demands. The cause of this situation consists in and is further reinforced by the citizenry's lack of previous experience with active engagement in public affairs, as well as by the aforementioned nature of Czech political culture, which is characterized by the paradoxical tendency of citizens to distrust politicians and political institutions, on the one hand, while having unrealistic expectations of government on the other hand. Citizens, therefore, trusted that the steps taken by the first post-communist governments were done in the interest of the country's prosperity, freedom, and democratization.

From the very beginning of democratization in the 1990s, the nature of Czech political culture complicated the country's transition towards participatory democracy, contributing to the creation of an environment vulnerable to the capture of the state. Hadjiisky (2001) refers to the significant role of Václav Klaus, the country's former prime minister and the leader of ODS, in enabling the failure of participatory democracy and reinforcing the privileged position of the Civic Democratic Party. According to Hadjiisky, Klaus was instrumental in promoting the representative and majoritarian form of democratic rule, which in practice took the form of 'party democracy', which entitled his party to all the power and main responsibilities. ODS claimed exclusive know-how as regards institutionalizing measures necessary for democratization, which according to Klaus was going to automatically ensue from the deregulated market economy (Innes 2013). In this way, ODS managed to gain the legitimacy to operate outside popular and institutional control. Innes (2013, 2016) has shown how political elites entrusted with extensive powers and responsibilities abused the fluid and chaotic conditions of the state's early transformation. In this context of insufficiently institutionalized party systems, the political parties soon realized that processes of mass privatization and ongoing institutional changes provided them with vast opportunities, and they

quickly arrived at a situation where their main motivation to compete for power became the ability to get access to private gain as brokers redistributing state resources. This was typically done in a non-transparent way and catered mainly to businesses closely linked to political parties. During the early post-socialist transformation, the main source of brokerage business was the extensive privatization market, which nonetheless started to shrink towards the turn of the millennium and was later replaced by political elites refocusing on the 'wider and more continuously available state-based opportunities', such as public procurement, control of remaining public utilities, outsourcing public services, EU funds, etc. (Innes 2016, p. 33).

In pursuing these activities, leading political parties responsible for the processes of post-socialist transformation not only took advantage of the lack of public oversight and the insufficiently robust institutions, neither of which had the adequate powers necessary to hold them accountable, but they also actively engaged in fortifying the defective system which allowed them to predate on public resources and restrain institutional reforms which could have hampered their activities and practices. Since the early post-socialist transformation was mostly in the hands of the neoliberal Civic Democratic Party, the incompetence/reluctance to design and implement efficient measures and regulations which would have increased political accountability was frequently and quite ironically portrayed under the guise of a neoliberal rational of minimizing the state and its regulatory functions (Innes 2013, 2016).

Several authors have also brought forth evidence that political parties gained control over policymaking institutions by engaging in patronage practices, and consequently creating sham legislation, rules, and initiatives seemingly aimed at regulating the state's porosity to private business interests (Dvořáková 2012; Klíma 2015; Innes 2016). Most of these formal precautions were rather ineffective and hard to implement in practice. Examples include ineffective laws dealing with bribery and conflict of interest, non-existent protection for whistle-blowers, unregulated lobbying, and generally weak attempts (or even refusal) to implement anti-corruption measures or comply with various international obligations, such as the repeatedly postponed and poorly designed Service Act, whose purpose was to depoliticize the civil service. In 2016, a new Act on the

Register of Contracts came in force, which obligates public entities to disclose their contracts with private individuals; the Act, however, has been criticized for its inefficiency.

1.3.1 Captured Local State

The Czech post-socialist institutional transformation also involved changes in the redistribution of state power across different scales. Shortly after the regime change, the state abolished regional governments and centralized power but, at the same time, empowered municipalities with their own autonomous self-governments. New regions were established after the turn of the millennium, and state power started to shift from the central government to the regional level, leading to increasing power among regional politicians at the cost of the central government. Corporate capture of the state followed suit and broke into the regions as well. In connection with this decentralization, Klíma (2015) mentions the role played by the so-called regional bosses (or regional 'godfathers'), which he defines as entrepreneurs with parasitic features who established themselves and their elite positions during the mass privatizations of the 1990s. In some regions, these bosses gained special privileges, political influence, and access to public resources and public procurement through their role in bribing people en masse to become members of the ruling political parties and then vote for the leadership of the party in a particular way. They would later become important behind-the-scene figures in many local and regional business deals and development projects. Regional clientelistic networks have also become notorious in connection with extensive abuse of European subventions.

So far, there has been no research which focuses specifically on how corporate state capture operates in Czech regions and municipalities, but the empirical material this book is based on serves as evidence that the modus operandi based on the brokerage of decision-making power gradually affected many Czech cities, and the practice spread from ODS to other political parties as well (see Klíma 2015; Innes 2016). The way control over local institutions provides urban governments with private profits was also

documented and analysed by Horak (2007) in his study of the democratization of Prague's institutions in the 1990s. As a Czech capital, Prague has always faced the largest investor interest and development pressures. For a long time, it was the main metropolitan bastion of ODS, and the spatial implications of abusing power at the local level became tangible soon after the regime change. Horak (2007) showed how politicians responsible for development in Prague's historic core made an active effort to retain their ad hoc closed-door approach to decision-making and resisted the development of comprehensive strategies and systematic policymaking with respect to real estate in the city centre. According to Horak, the 'unstable and institutionally incoherent context' discouraged enough of Prague's political representatives from pursuing longer-term strategies and instead motivated them to 'chose opportunities for private gain' (2007, p. 198).

In an institutionally incoherent post-socialist environment, a comprehensive strategy with coordinated, legally supported steps for tackling urban problems was missing even at the nationwide level (Sýkora 2006, p. 136), and it remains absent to date. Tendencies like those described by Horak (2007) in Prague have therefore been affecting cities across Czechia. This situation has been further exacerbated by the absence of sustained efforts among Czech planners and policymakers to reform the planning practice and elaborate a new ethically and theoretically supported planning doctrine which responds to the challenges of the market-driven environment and the requirements of a democratic society (Maier 1998). The objective of achieving sustainable development, balanced relationships, and the 'harmony of public and private priorities in relation to the development of the area' is currently only vaguely defined in the Czech Building Act 183/2006 Coll. However, without a sound planning doctrine suitable for the contemporary political and economic system, and without a coordinated common strategy addressing contemporary urban issues from the level of the state, these vague stipulations are not legally binding and, in practice, hardly enforceable. Instead, planners and politicians in individual municipalities are free to interpret 'sustainable development' and 'harmonious relationships in an area' rather arbitrarily and in line with their own beliefs, opinions, values, and needs. For the post-1989 political representatives of local governments, it has been quite common to understand harmony and sustainability in mainly economic terms and in step with

the principles of the free market, deregulation, and the instigation of economic growth. As a result, urban development, policy, and planning have been highly prone to being treated as 'value-free' economic instruments which typically serve the short-term financial goals of local political and business elites and, therefore, tend to conflict with longer-term strategies and visions, or social and environmental sustainability.

Especially towards the end of the 2000s and in the 2010s, the combination of democratic deficit, power abuse, and insufficiently professionalized undemocratic urban processes started to be increasingly criticized by citizens, who had become more aware, educated, and knowledgeable in regard to these areas; a similar trend was also observed by Domoradzka (2017) in Polish cities. Urban professionals—especially architects, social scientists, lawyers, historians, and environmentalists, for example—started to shed light on the growing divide between the municipal approach to urban processes and the latest know-how and best practices inspired by research and foreign experience in the area of city planning and other related fields. Citizens also became more confident in demanding better governmental and institutional performance in relation to urban processes and policies. Architects have particularly focused on demanding higher quality in the architectural design of buildings and public space while historians have been calling for the improved protection of historic heritage and development sensitive to the historical surroundings. Social scientists have often challenged the negative socio-economic implications of laissez-faire development and called for more public involvement in urban processes and housing reform which secures affordable housing. Lawyers have typically fought against unjust and non-transparent government actions and practices and defended people affected by negative urban change. At the same time, it is characteristic of common citizens to simply fight for liveable and just urban environments, functional utilities and services, and the proper use of public resources.

1.3.2 Corporate Capture of Urban Processes

The suspicion that state capture and corporate interests have had a profound effect on urban processes is well substantiated by the fact that the

powers of the Supreme Audit Office in the Czech Republic do not apply to municipal property. To date, all attempts to expand the power of the Office in this direction have failed, leaving the country without an audit institution which could pursue comprehensive oversight of all public resources. As a result, many projects which are co-funded with municipal money cannot be audited. This weakness in the Czech institutional environment thus makes municipalities and local urban processes highly susceptible to all kinds of unlawful practices and non-transparent abuse of power for private profit.

It did not take long for Czech urban grassroots movements to realize that urban processes are not only affected by politicians' lack of professional competences but by their involvement in non-transparent interests particularly. They also realized that the professionalization and democratization of urban processes are hardly achievable without overcoming the democratic deficit and eliminating frequent cases of power abuse at the local level. According to Innes (2016), power brokerage especially takes advantage of privatization, regulation, public procurement, and EU subventions. While some of these forms of power abuse may be on the verge of crime, many also appear as completely legal due to the ability of politicians to take advantage of various legal and institutional loopholes or to find ways around existing legislation. In the following subsections, we will outline how the four main areas of brokerage business affect local urban processes and the urban environment. Some of these practices will consequently appear in the empirical data presented in Chapter 2 of the book.

1.3.2.1   Privatization

As shown in the introductory chapter, the privatization market was the main source of brokerage between political and business elites particularly during the early post-socialist transformation, although privatizations to some extent continue to date. Both current and past forms of privatization vastly impact urban processes and the life of Czech citizens. In the context of post-socialist transformation, the brokerage business has not been the

only incentive to privatize municipal assets, and in fact, there are many reasons for doing so.

The first reason is ideological—especially in the first decade following the regime change. Most politicians saw privatization as a desirable and necessary condition of the country's post-socialist transformation. The general belief was in line with neoliberalism and assumed that private owners would take better care of their property than the state. Czech citizens also widely accepted the transfer of public assets into private hands, as many of them benefited from the ability to cheaply privatize their own dwellings, and, for some, property restitutions as well. As a result, the general society rarely challenged larger-scale privatizations.

Another large incentive has been a combination of budgetary constraints and a lack of planning and policymaking competence among politicians. In the 1990s, municipalities became responsible for their own assets and budgets, which provided local governments with the obligation to administer their own property but also the municipal budget. As subsidies allocated to municipalities from the national budget started to diminish due to the decentralization of state power, local governments often used privatization as a solution to budgetary constraints and fiscal austerity, in addition to offloading their responsibility for neglected municipal property.

Such an approach to privatizations has been nonsystemic and short-sighted, as well as ill-considered in terms of the municipality's ability to remain operational. Municipal governments in many cities sold even valuable assets and strategic land without considering or conditioning their future use and the longer-term needs of the municipality, including its ability to use and control some strategic municipal assets. In some instances, municipalities were forced to buy their property back, such as for the purpose of infrastructure building, in which case the purchasing costs often exceeded the costs paid by the privatizers. Through thoughtless privatizations, municipalities would also limit their ability to ensure social cohesion in their communities. Especially in structurally disadvantaged regions, municipal housing privatizations frequently resulted in the creation of socially segregated areas and ghettos, as many of these homes were purchased by entrepreneurs specializing in housing provision for low-income recipients of state housing subsidies.

The brokerage business is yet another principle reason for privatization. Especially in the 1990s, transferring state-owned or municipally owned assets into private hands provided immense opportunities for people with good political and economic connections. Klíma (2015) describes the important role of the so-called godfathers or regional bosses—he defines them as 'political entrepreneurs with parasitic features'—who used their exclusive access to the privatization processes to secure their own wealth and political influence, and to secure significant influence over local and regional decision-making, including decisions concerning further redistribution of public assets. In this way, a special elite class, interconnected via confidential relations, was able to gain access to lucrative properties and crucial enterprises, including public utilities, services, etc., typically for exceptionally low prices. Privatization 'bargains' have often ended up in the hands of people with political links, including friends and family members.

The peculiar and sometimes non-transparent ownership structure in some municipalities would frequently lead to the establishment of various historic contracts, deals, and arrangements with a negative effect on local budgets, on planning and development processes, and, ultimately, also on the efficiency of citizen action. Using the example of the Liberec privatization of its heating system, Bouzarovski et al. (2016) conceptualized similar situations as a sociotechnical 'lock-in', which comes into existence as a 'socially, economically, and environmentally detrimental result of ill-conceived policies of marketization, municipalization, and privatization', due to which citizens may, for example, stay trapped in disadvantageous contracts, etc. (ibid., p. 1).

Another negative case of ill-advised, privatization-affected housing has been the transfer in ownership of former state enterprises in several Czech cities, especially apartments for the employees of the energy and coal mining industries. A famous case is the controversial privatization of the North Moravian coal mining company OKD, which also included the privatization of thousands of apartments in the Ostrava region formerly owned by state enterprises. Tenants in these apartments were promised the opportunity to buy their apartments from the company, which never happened. Instead, their apartments were sold several times to different international investment real estate companies. Tenants thus faced rising

rents and badly maintained apartments. A similar case happened in Prague, where apartments of a former state-owned energy enterprise in Prague 12's Písnice were included in the privatization of the enterprise. Their ownership was transferred to the ČEZ Group, the country's largest energy company, whose majority shareholder is the Czech state. Based on their agreement with ČEZ, tenants created a cooperative which was supposed to redeem the apartments for an advantageous price. However, in the end, ČEZ sold the whole housing estate for a market price to a real estate investment company. Both controversies spurred conflicts and lawsuits in which tenants found themselves helpless in the face of large capital.

1.3.2.2   Regulation

Regulations have a vast impact on urban processes and urban environments. At the municipal level, they play an important role in planning, development, and policymaking and determine many aspects of the society's functioning, including, for example, possible avenues of communication and cooperation between citizens and decision-makers. Innes (2016) nonetheless reminds us that regulations may also have a key role in the 'brokerage business'. They can be easily manipulated, abused, or neglected and ignored depending on the situation. The brokerage business can be connected to regulation, deregulation, or nonregulation.

As we saw in the introduction to post-socialist cities, politicians in the 1990s frequently questioned the usefulness of planning and the role of the state in regulating urban development (Hoffman 1994; Maier 1998; Sýkora 2006). In line with this neoliberal logic, the general tendency was towards deregulation. Ignoring negative experience from abroad, actors in Czech urban development prioritized the 'value-free', laissez-faire approach, whose main driving force is the 'rationality' of the free market (Maier 1998). This negative attitude towards planning regulations hindered the post-socialist reform of its planning doctrine and rules and hampered systematic efforts to achieve clearly set developmental goals, strategies, and overarching visions (ibid.). A similar attitude was also recorded by Horak (2007) in relation to reforms of the institutional environment in 1990s Prague, where politicians tended to resist the introduction of new

regulatory policies, guidelines, and other administrative processes adapted to the new regime. According to Horak (2007), politicians actively prevented steps, such as the adoption of systematic principles concerning development and preservation in the city's historic core, which would constrain their discretionary power in relation to development there as well as their ability to act as brokers of this power and protect various vested interests. This kind of attitude also initially affected the introduction of strategic planning into Czech policymaking. Today, strategic plans have become quite widespread and are used in many municipalities, but the general tendency has been to use them in a limited way, only as a formal document which is required for the purpose of applying for external funding (typically EU funds). In most Czech cities, strategic plans are disconnected from land-use plans, are not legally binding, and therefore rarely result in their practical implementation or an improvement in the overall situation within Czech cities.

Despite the political resistance to new regulations, planning and development in Czechia have remained highly regulated, as they retain the unreformed rigid technocratic regulatory function inherited from the former regime, which lacks a more qualitative dimension. Some politicians quickly realized that they can also profit from the brokerage of their decision-making power over the existing regulatory framework. Activists interviewed as part of this research in different cities declared that decision-making power over rigid technocratic regulations in urban planning and development may be a rich source for administrative corruption, larger-scale bribery, and various behind-the-scene deals between politicians and private actors. Extra income is typically extracted by awarding various exemptions to planning and building regulations or by making arbitrary changes to the rigid mandatory planning documentation, including major changes to legally binding land-use plans. Individual activists, legal advisors, and various civic associations and professional NGOs monitor controversial changes, make them public, and react to them. For example, the NGOs Arnika in Prague and Nesehnutí in Brno both engage in this consistent monitoring, and they advocate for systemic changes in the undemocratic practices of politicians. In 2013, Arnika recorded more than two thousand changes of the land-use plan, and twelve hundred proposed adjustments were discussed by Prague's municipal governments following

the authorization of the last land-use plan in 1999. According to Arnika, changes of the land-use plan are discussed by law at council meetings which are accessible to the public. Adjustments are, on the other hand, mostly discussed behind closed doors. These adjustments can nonetheless significantly affect urban environments. They may, for example, change the proportion of greenery or the intensity of development. Between 1999 and 2013, 854 adjustments in Prague were authorized, and many of them had a negative impact on the neighbourhoods and lives of local residents.

Formally, political power over the urban environment is subject to several control mechanisms, such as the expert opinion of architects who design statutory plans, conservationists, and construction administration officials, who are formally part of the state administration that authorizes building activities independently of the municipal government. The professional standard of planning and building administration in Czechia is nonetheless relatively low (see Maier 1998), and workers in these positions are often severely underpaid. As shown by Horak (2007), the area of heritage protection especially is highly prone to pervasive administrative corruption. Aside from that, politicians often find ways of ensuring the loyalty of 'independent experts'. It is common that workers in planning and building administration are politically appointed and akin to the vested interests protected by local politicians. Moreover, politicians can commission custom-made statutory plans from similar planners and architects whose 'value-free' attitude towards planning goes hand in hand with the insufficiently reformed planning doctrine at the state level (see Maier 1998, p. 355) and, as such, favours private interests over sustainable development. Such planners tend to conform to the needs and vested interests of their client, the local government, to ensure its patronage and future contracts.

Interestingly, the regulatory function of land-use planning became subject to an extensive public and professional debate during this research. The debate was initiated in 2012 by Tomáš Hudeček, a member of the party TOP 09,[3] who first worked in the city's government as a councillor responsible for urban development and, consequently, became Prague's

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[3]The name TOP 09 stands for 'Tradice, Odpovědnost, Prosperita' (Tradition, responsibility, prosperity).

mayor. Outside of the public selection procedure, Hudeček appointed a controversial architect Roman Koucký to propose a completely new approach to planning regulation which would eliminate politicians' discretionary power over land-use planning and the associated corruption. In his *Metropolitan Plan*, Roman Koucký reduces regulations to an essentially artistic design of the physical size of the built environment in different parts of the city and proposes only four categories of functional use (as opposed to the current more than thirty functional categories and additional subcategories). In other words, Koucký essentially replaced previous rigid technocratic regulations with deregulation, which would provide less opportunities for political corruption but also much wider freedom to the developers themselves. Moreover, a much larger responsibility would be entrusted to the building administration which issues building permits and which has been notorious for its low professional standard. As a result, preparations of the *Metropolitan Plan* resulted in a heated debate between two ideologically different planning doctrines. Opponents, especially various civic associations and NGOs, have criticized the plan for lacking a qualitative and comprehensive approach to the city, whereas proponents—mostly private architects—see qualitative regulations as freedom restricting 'social engineering', a relic of the rampant state of the pre-1989 era, and an obstacle to local business activities and economic development.

Finally, we should mention here that politicians can also apply regulations in the form of a firewall which protects their interests from citizens, especially in terms of limiting citizens' ability to become involved in urban processes, be part of decision-making processes, access information, documents, etc. This practice was especially widespread during the first decade after the country's democratization, during which politicians simply continued to employ practices inherited from the previous regime and citizens remained detached from politics. As shown by Horak (2007), politicians at that time enjoyed a large amount of discretion and were able to make important decisions behind the closed doors. As shown by Císař (2008), cooperation and partnership between institutions and citizens were not formally empowered until after access to the European Union demanded it. In the context of EU pressure, the Czech government passed various laws empowering citizen participation and encouraging transparent governance. Those included the Act on Free Access to Information and

the Act on Conflict of Interests. Despite this fact, in many places citizens' access to information or active participation continue to be limited and difficult, and sometimes even unlawfully restricted. Examples include unlawful restrictions on public input during council meetings, the practice of holding council meetings at inconvenient times for citizens—for example, in the morning or making controversial decisions during summer holidays—or filling public meetings to capacity with government employees to restrict access to the public.

1.3.2.3 Public Procurement

Along with controlling the remaining public utilities, outsourcing public services, drawing EU funds, etc., public procurement has been the main selling article of the Czech governments' 'brokerage business' since the second half of the 2000s due to the dwindling sources of privatization (Innes 2016). The NGO Oživení states that there are about 600 billion CZK (about 24 billion EUR) spent nationwide through public procurement every year. According to the data on public procurement compiled by zIndex (2011) at the Institute of Economics, Charles University, public procurement in Czechia is frequently awarded outside traceable official channels. Public entities also frequently evade their legal obligation to publish their contracts in the Register of Contracts, an information system of the Czech public administration which was launched in 2016.

Extracting money through public procurement is especially commonplace at the municipal level. Access provides politicians with a relatively long-term opportunity for brokerage business, as well as other associated businesses. For many politicians, public procurement is one of the main motivations to compete for power in local government. It is not uncommon for local politicians to co/own or otherwise be connected to companies which work for the municipality as subcontractors, public service providers, and so the like.

The conflict of interest is often solved in various creative ways, such as through the ownership of private businesses by family members. In some cases, politicians may even own or hold shares in local media and exert other forms of influence over it—through a guarantee of employment

and financial support, for instance—this gives them an important tool in confounding the public as regards the 'brokerage business' in the city. Former politicians or people with good political connections are also often appointed to administrative and supervisory boards of joint-stock companies with municipal shares of ownership, such as transportation providers and other major providers of municipal services, where they can extract private profit or cooperate in various background deals.

Governments involved in pursuing brokerage business through public procurement also often have a non-transparent system of awarding public tenders. Relevant information and awarded contracts are typically not publicly displayed on local authorities' websites, and tenders are frequently manipulated and designed to suit only one particular company. In some cases, new companies may even be arbitrarily founded only for the purpose of participating in public procurement.

The fact that local governments have suspicious associations with companies which are awarded contracts through public procurement is often supported by defensiveness and protectionism on the part of politicians when it comes to defending various projects that are controversial and have a clearly negative impact on local citizens but which benefit local companies. Other instances of politicians defending contested projects stem from various historical contracts and deals, so-called lock-ins, which were mentioned in the privatization section, as many of these were established in the times of rampant privatization. Bouzarovski, Sýkora, and Matoušek (2016) have demonstrated such a case in the example of new private owners of privatized utilities in Liberec who profit from the long-term provision of substandard services to the municipality, i.e. local citizens.

Another problem is the fact that non-transparently awarded public tenders are usually also awarded outside of competitions overseen by the Czech Chamber of Architects. Without such professional supervision, non-transparently contracted building projects tend to allow access only to a limited number of architects allied with developers, investors, or politicians and often have a low quality of architecture, which is the most frequent matter of concern, especially for architects, historians, and other urban professionals.

1.3.2.4   EU Subventions

Another rich source for extracting public funds is EU subventions, which can be drawn for particular projects which fall into the key priorities defined by the European Union. Although money can be also diverted from subventions allocated by region or state, EU subventions are the most affected. Through EU subventions, municipalities can gain large sums of money while at the same time taking advantage of the relative obscurity of the Czech environment for EU supervision. The abuse of such funds is a serious problem in its own right; however, the focus here is on how EU funds affect local urban processes.

A significant drawback of EU subventions is their top-down management, which is detached from the micro-scale perspective of local needs. Ideally, local needs should be identified by local decision-makers, whose task is to ensure the efficient use of EU funds for local projects and tackling local problems. In the context of a deficient democracy and a captured local state, however, this is not always the case. Especially, in the smaller and medium-sized municipalities of Czechia, municipal decision-makers often tend to see EU subventions merely as an opportunity to receive external funding, which they can use for subcontracting local businesses and for private gain. They propose projects designed to fall into the key priorities the European Union supports, disregarding their actual usefulness for the local community. In some cases, EU-sponsored projects can be the sole determinants of local development. This practice was especially common during the 2007–2013 programming period,[4] which overlapped with the global financial crisis and associated crisis in the building industry. EU-sponsored projects provided a rare opportunity for public procurement and access to large sums of money and were therefore often abused by networks of local decision-makers, companies, and various intermediaries, such as project consultants. Scenarios that divert money from EU funds are manifold. One widespread practice is, for example, to propose overpriced budgets and distribute extra income among the stakeholders involved in the project.

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[4]A programming period is a seven-year cycle for implementing regional and structural politics in the European Union, and it comes with a defined budget, goals, and priorities.

The way in which projects aimed at abusing EU funds affect the urban environment is also manifold. One of the experts interviewed for the purpose of this project mentioned a wave of projects focused on building insulation, which ended with several cases of architecturally valuable buildings being insulated with aesthetically unappealing polystyrene materials. Other examples include various sports centres and ecological centres which are later privatized or redeveloped for a different purpose, or where a municipality cut down trees in order to replace them with new ones—sponsored by the EU. Particularly large sums of public money can also be diverted through traffic infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and bypasses. Traffic infrastructure is expensive and public awareness regarding its actual costs is quite low, which makes such expenditures hard for the public to supervise. Contrarywise, useful projects sometimes do not get realized if governments cannot receive external funding or if their implementation involves increased supervision from the European Union, as is the case when developing sewerage works.

The availability of EU subventions also makes it easier for local politicians to avoid making longer-term plans and strategic investments. Instead of identifying the needs of the municipality, they simply realize projects for which funding schemes are currently available. Projects co-funded by the European Union not only provide them with an opportunity to enrich themselves and associated businesses but also allow them to manipulate public opinion by boasting about partial improvements to the city and their ability to instigate development without indebting the municipal budget. The EU fund's 2014–2020 programming period has brought a positive change in requiring municipalities to submit their project proposals along with a strategic local development plan; however, strategic plans can be custom-made to suit funding schemes, and in practice, they are not legally enforceable. As a result, some cities invest in projects of smaller priority, while more pressing issues remain underfunded and neglected.

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zIndex. (2011). Press Release, Prague 26 January (ZIndex, the public procurement monitoring project, is led by John Chvalkovská, Petr Jansky and Goerge Skuhrovec, based at the Institute of Economics, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Czech Republic) (Innes 2013).

2

Four Case Studies: Jablonec nad Nisou, České Budějovice, Prostějov, and Prague

The case studies will be analysed and compared in the third and final chapter, where I will consider the role of political opportunities, mobilizing structures, activist framing processes, action repertoire, and achieved successes and failures in urban grassroots' efforts to democratize and professionalize local urban processes and free the local state from its corporate capture.

2.1   Case: The Struggle for Sustainable Planning and Development in Jablonec nad Nisou

Jablonec nad Nisou is a 44,000-inhabitant city in North Bohemia located in close vicinity to the Czech-Polish border in the northern part of the Sudetenland, a Czech peripheral area which was dominated by ethnic Germans until the end of the World War II. The city is surrounded by the Jizera Mountains and is a popular gateway to nearby winter resorts

and other sites of this protected landscape area. As regards local industry, Jablonec nad Nisou is famous for its jewellery and glass production, although both industries have been in decline as part of the post-socialist deindustrialization.

Jablonec nad Nisou is closely connected to the regional 102,000-inhabitant metropolis of Liberec, including physical connections via a tramway line which operates between them, but also through common business and developmental plans. Their shared Integrated Development Plan allows the two cities to mutually coordinate their plans and strategies. It probably comes as no surprise then that the western and north-western area of the Jablonec nad Nisou jurisdiction, which has direct borders with the area administrated by Liberec, has been subject to residential development pressures since the late 2000s and especially since the 2010s. The two cities might thus become connected by a strip of built-up land, which would destroy a valuable mountainous landscape between the two cities.

2.1.1   The Bastion of ODS

Even just quick glance at the news from the Liberec region during the first two democratic decades reveals the fact that both cities used to be a long-time bastion of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and its dense network of non-transparent ties to local businesses, economic elites, various lobby groups, and important stakeholders in urban development. In Liberec, cases of corruption, scandalous development projects, manipulated procurement, and the diversion of public funds are most famously connected with the building company Syner, which has earned the city the nickname of Synerov (Synerville). The company was personally connected to the local government, especially under the leadership of the mayor Jiří Kittner in 1999–2010, during which it worked as a subcontractor on a number of municipal procurements. This included works connected with the scandalous 2009 Nordic Skiing World Championship, whose organization was publicly financed by more than 2 billion CZK and left the city in massive debt. Syner and its subsidiaries are also associated with the insensitive commercial redevelopment of the city centre, which involved the massive development of several shopping malls and entertainment centres

in the historic core, and the controversial demolition of the department store Ještěd, valued for its brutalist architecture but also associated with communism by many. Other scandals in the city relate to the high costs of heat in the city—a result of the controversial privatization of the local heating company (see Bouzarovski et al. 2016).

In neighbouring Jablonec nad Nisou, overpriced heat, contentious urban development, and manipulated public procurement have also been relatively common problems. But while scandals in Liberec eventually led to ODS losing its dominant position beginning with the 2010 municipal elections, in Jablonec nad Nisou, the party has managed to retain a strong position even after the state-wide crisis of traditional parties in 2010. It lost its position as the single dominant party in the local government, but with the support of other ruling political parties, it has continued to influence local politics and urban processes and take advantage of local brokerage opportunities. Evidence for this is also found in the data on public procurement compiled by zIndex, which presents the municipality of Jablonec nad Nisou, along with Blansko, as Czechia's worst case of procurement law avoidance. According to the data, less than 10% of the total procurable costs in Jablonec nad Nisou are spent through traceable channels, meaning over 90% of procurable costs are spent through contracts which are awarded without competition or 'in private'. The authors of zIndex attribute this to a 'strong financial dependency on historical contracts or very creative procurement management' (zIndex 2011). In practice, this usually means companies working as subcontractors or service providers for the city are personally connected with members of the local government.

2.1.2 Pelta's City

Links between private business and local politicians in Jablonec nad Nisou are especially obvious in connection with Miroslav Pelta, a long-term ODS member who has repeatedly held office in the city council and belongs to some of the region's most influential entrepreneurs, especially in the area of property development. Between the years 2011 and 2017, Pelta was also president of the Football Association of the Czech Republic,

and infamously, he is suspected of corruption and connections with the football crime network. At the time of this writing, the so-called football boss had been prosecuted for abusing his powers in connection with the state's sports subsidies.[1] The NGO Oživení monitors other cases in which Pelta is suspected of abusing public procurement and subsidies.

Due to his dense network of non-transparent ties with private business, local politics, and various public institutions, Pelta has a large influence over the happenings in Jablonec nad Nisou and in Liberec, and his activities affect local urban processes and development. One of the local activists described Pelta's role inside the two cities as follows:

> I think that he controls everything. He controls both Jablonec, as well as the entire region. All those years he has been with ODS, you see… Everybody probably likes him because he knows how to get subsidies, he knows his way around the ministries, he contributes to the city and the city accommodates him in reciprocity. Stadiums, football…

In exchange for bringing public money and attracting investment opportunities to the city, local activists believe the municipal government of Jablonec nad Nisou has been quite accommodating to Pelta's private business activities. His municipally supported business plans have thus translated into speculative development pressures in the hillsides between Jablonec nad Nisou and Liberec. Pelta managed to acquire a large amount of municipally owned agricultural land in the area, known as Horní Proseč, which is surrounded by richly forested hillsides with beautiful mountainous panoramas, including a view of the 1012-metre-high Mount Ještěd, with its iconic Ještěd Tower. According to information from activists, in the 2000s, Pelta was able to gradually purchase pieces of property in this lucrative area at the unbelievably low cost of 110 CZK/m^2 (about 4 EUR/m^2), which is just a fraction of the conventional market price. This would not have been surprising in the early 1990s during the era of rampant privatization, but the purchase of this highly valuable land surrounded by

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[1] https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/fotbalova-asociace-miroslav-pelta-korupce-stihani-kauza-facr.A181112_205225_domaci_lesa; https://sport.aktualne.cz/fotbal/ct-pelta-a-fotbalova-asociace-jsou-nove-stihani-i-za-korupci/r~14e54e54e6b511e8bf040cc47ab5f122/.

pristine nature happened almost two decades after the Velvet Revolution, raising a lot of suspicion and displeasure among local citizens.

2.1.3 'Local Mobilizations'

The radical transformation of the city's forested, hilly hinterlands was bound to spur protest among inhabitants living in the vicinity of the intended development. Local activists frame Pelta's purchase of agricultural land in Horní Proseč as a well-calculated plan between him and local political leaders. From their perspective, this form of cooperation seems obvious from the city's new land-use plan, which was authorized by the city's government in 2017 and which transforms Pelta's farmland into land for development. The same plan also includes the construction of a bypass, the so-called Western Tangent, which connects the western part of Jablonec nad Nisou, along with Horní Proseč, to the road connecting Jablonec nad Nisou with the highway between Liberec and Prague, as well as with other destinations east of Jablonec nad Nisou. The bypass is likely to increase the value and overall attractivity of the new residential development in Horní Proseč and is likely part of the same plan to develop the land between the two cities.

As early as 2008, protests emerged in response to Pelta's original plan, which controversially envisaged creating a whole new settlement for approximately seven thousand inhabitants, roughly 17% of the entire population in Jablonec nad Nisou. Public pressure against changes to the existing land-use plan required by such a development eventually led to the project scaling down to eight hundred inhabitants. This might seem like a great achievement, but it can be also seen as a half-hearted victory in light of the common practice of developers to make overrated initial proposals with a high propensity to provoke public protest and which they can consequently easily scale down. In this way, developers can still achieve considerable results (often envisaged from the very beginning as the realistic achievable maximum) while at the same time gaining an important leverage tool to rebuff any further protests by pointing to their previous willingness to step down from their original plans (Figs. 2.1 and 2.2).

Fig. 2.1 A beautiful mountainous landscape between Liberec and Jablonec nad Nisou with a view of the 1012-metre-high Mount Ještěd and its iconic Ještěd Tower (Photo: Own archive)

In the case of Horní Proseč, however, locals were not willing to give up their control over the future appearance of their surroundings so easily. Driven by doubts and fears regarding the final size and design of the planned residential units and regarding the effect of the new settlement on the natural landscape, panoramas, etc., they started to organize, cooperate, and lobby for a more sensitive approach to this valuable location. Some of them even made an active effort to put the land on the list of protected areas. Grassroots efforts were eventually joined by other citizens and associations, including one founded by citizens living in one of the earlier development projects in Horní Proseč, who became apprehensive about the decreasing value and quality of the quiet living they had purchased in order to escape the hustle and bustle of the city. About two kilometres across the hill from Horní Proseč, mobilizations also occurred among inhabitants of the locality known as Srnčí Důl, which was now threatened by the intended construction of the Western Tangent.

Fig. 2.2   Earlier development projects in Horní Proseč, whose inhabitants became apprehensive about the possibility of further development (Photo: Own archive)

Initially, grassroots initiatives scattered across the western side of Jablonec nad Nisou operated separately, struggling against seemingly fragmented development projects in the vicinity of their homes. Most of the mobilized citizens tended to act in the spirit of nimbyism, targeting residential development in Horní Proseč and the construction of the Western Tangent as potential threats to their quality of life. Some of them, however, framed their critique of the projects' negative impacts more universally and comprehensively, pointing to the project's environmental impacts and emphasizing the sought after accountability and responsibility of local decision-makers. However, all their strategies—petitions, information campaigns, demonstrations, council meetings attendance, requests for dialogue between politicians, planners, and citizens about possible alternatives to the intended development—in the end proved rather futile in the face of various non-transparent interests behind the intended development.

In terms of action repertoire, activists from the Srnčí Důl association at first considered claiming their demands through legal proceedings. In this

case, a decisive role was played by the existing mobilizing structures—activists consulted an established professional organization Frank Bold, which provides legal advice to citizens. After consulting an expert recommended to them by the organization, they opted for standard strategies of civic protest, hoping their critique of the road would incentivize the decision-makers to succumb to the interests of the public. Activists framed the Western Tangent leading through the valley underneath their homes as inutile, expensive, and technically complicated; they also argued that the road would induce more traffic. They demanded the authorities organize a public information meeting, which would shed light on the many shortcomings of the road. In the end, politicians used the meeting as an opportunity to manipulate citizen opinion about the necessity of the road's construction, claiming that the proposed solution was the only possible alternative. One of the members of the Srnčí Důl association framed the government's unwillingness to hear out local citizens' concerns in the following way:

> It is tax money. And if the construction costs this much, and they charge for this much, nobody will know. It is really specific; a lot of money can be sunk that way without anybody noticing. Even if they do the cheapest option, it will still cost lots of money.

This framing points to activists' suspicion that local politicians were pushing the road's construction due to various behind-the-scenes incentives. High costs and the complexity of publicly funded infrastructure allegedly discourage public control and make infrastructure projects a tempting opportunity to divert public money into private hands.

On the other side of the hill, associations in Horní Proseč continued to fight their struggle against the new residential development. They framed the development as negatively affecting local environmental and social sustainability as it would dramatically increase the local population and damage the locality's natural values, especially the mountainous panoramas and local wildlife. Just like activists in Srnčí Důl, they consulted a professional organization to ask for advice. The Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic suggested taking advantage of the location's significance for birdlife, specifically the EU protected endangered

species of corncrake. Activists organized several guided tours to the threat-ened localities, which were also attended by a few councillors, including Pelta. The municipality commissioned other surveys which confirmed the occurrence of corncrake, but it downplayed the significance of the local-ity in the bird's habitat. Activists decided to report the existence of the endangered bird species to the authorities and gain more time for further negotiations by initiating an administrative reassessment of the locality's suitability for development. As we can see in the following quote of a local activist, this strategy ended in a sequence of bureaucratic appeals against individual administrative decisions and did not bring longer-term success in terms of hindering development:

> Pelta had to apply for an exemption at the regional authority. The regional authority licensed the exemption. So, again, we had to appeal to the Min-istry of the Environment, which said that the region made a bad assessment and withdrew the exemption. So Pelta had to deliver additional materials, declaring that it was in the societal interest to have those houses there. And so, we will see. We are now waiting for the reaction of the regional authori-ties. I suppose that the regional authorities will license the exemption again.

The interviewed activist's account shows that stakeholders in develop-ment perceive similar administrative struggles as an unpleasant obstruc-tion; however, thanks to providing short-term economic incentives to local decision-makers, they usually win the case. This often happens particu-larly in smaller cities, where the pressure from civil society tends to be comparatively smaller.

2.1.4 Activist Architects

The disconnected efforts of different grassroots associations eventually started to synchronize as some of their members kept meeting during various meetings of the municipal council and local community boards, for example. Local mobilizing structures became unified thanks to the engagement of several architects, who started to criticize local urban pro-cesses. They were either members of the local movement party Změna

pro Jablonec (Change for Jablonec),[2] running as candidates for municipal elections in 2014 and 2018, or of the local professional association Platform for Landscape, Architecture and Culture (PLAC). Formally, PLAC was founded in 2013, but its members had pursued activities aimed at improving the city's urban, natural, and cultural environment since 2011. In 2018, one of the founding members of PLAC gained a mandate in the local government as an independent candidate of the local Pirate Party.

These *activist architects* started to engage in local public affairs when they returned to their hometown after having completed their university degrees and gaining professional experience abroad. Disillusioned by the ill state of urban planning and development in Jablonec nad Nisou, they identified local authorities' practices, processes, and overall attitude to the city as unsustainable, non-strategic, and oblivious to public interests. In comparison with other activists, they framed their critique in a more universal and professional way. One of the activist architects described the wake-up call that initiated their engagement in the following way:

> While working on a private contract, we came across a building project outside of the city which we found unwarranted, in a landscape which we considered highly valuable. We started to ask why this locality was supposed to be developed, and we did not receive a satisfactory response. At the same time, we witnessed the city council decline authorisation of the sale of a vacant building lot in the inner city to a person interested in buying it. We figured that this attitude was not sustainable in the long term, and it was necessary to ask consistently for the reasons for these steps, which we, as architects, do not comprehend.

In framing their critique of local urban processes, the activist architects were able to use their professional knowledge and address certain problems through the perspective of basic sustainable development rules. For example, they pointed to the fact that suburbanization leads to further depopulation of the city centre and vice versa. They were the first citizens in Jablonec and Nisou to address the neglected state of the city centre,

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[2]Změna pro Jablonec is a local branch of the movement party called Změna (Change), which was founded in 2012 in Liberec as a reaction to the corporate capture of the traditional parties in the city, especially ODS.

which features many vacant lots due to previous house demolitions and a high concentration of lower-income residents. Instead, they demanded Jablonec nad Nisou become a compact city of short distances which prioritizes development in the inner city over urban sprawl.

An interesting political opportunity appeared when the Změna pro Jablonec movement gained four local city council mandates in the 2014 elections. The activist architects associated with the movement were able to participate in the local governments' auditing and advisory body in the area of urban planning and development and in the working groups dealing with urbanism and strategic planning. From these positions, they demanded the city professionalize its approach to planning and development. They also gained first-hand access to information regarding local urban processes due to which they were able to respond in coordinated activity along with other local urban activists.

Through their involvement in these bodies, the activist architects were able to witness the government's complete lack of a coordinated conceptual approach to the city's planning and development, embodying instead an unprofessional and arbitrary approach. They pointed out several different shortcomings, such as the city not owning any data reflecting building capacities in the inner city or the number of uninhabited houses. Instead, they saw that local planning and development were driven solely by the requirements of local property owners and investors, which they manifested by pointing to the local decision-makers' tendency to encourage development on privately owned peripheral lots by deliberately hindering development in the city centre:

A few essential lots on the periphery are owned by people with political links. Land in Horní Proseč is owned by Pelta, ODS, land in Dolina by David Bartel, ČSSD, and there are links between land in Lukášov and real estate agencies. These peripheral lots are interlinked with the city's miniscule effort to look for a use for the existing reserves in the inner city. This can be illustrated by a situation which took place shortly before the elections, when an investor showed interest in buying a vacant lot in the city centre. But the board, upon which David Bartel, who owns the lots on the periphery, is also a member, did not recommend this request. The situation arrived to a point where the politician Soňa Paukrtová, at that time the

chair of the urban planning board, suggested withdrawing the vacant lot from developable localities.

Moreover, the activist architects pointed to the fact that urban plans, projects, and decisions of poor quality are typically backed by various experts and architects who work as subcontractors for the municipality. The activist architects identified these professionals as potentially biased and involved in the decision-makers' vested interests—or simply afraid to lose their contract with the city. From the perspective of the members of local grassroots initiatives, the involvement of activist architects on the government bodies was an important step in disrupting the hitherto undisturbed political agenda centred around conforming local development to ad hoc economic incentives and various private interests.

> The way it works here is that… you always know in advance how things are going to get decided. Everything gets done so that their vision succeeds. That is what I feel. Which is why I think that it was a good thing that they [activist architects] got involved as professionals. Their expert perspective makes everybody's mouth hang open. Suddenly the cards they [people defending non-transparent interests] have played are falling apart. I really like it, how they gained respect within such a short time. They respect them now, but it disturbs their plans.

Framing local urban processes as unprofessional was nonetheless bound to meet strong resistance and animosity from the existing stakeholders in local urban processes. Decision-makers resisted the idea of innovating their practices and occasionally treated their opponents with bald animosity and rudeness. At the same time, they attempted to abuse the good reputation of the activist architects by placing their names among the authors of planning documents and decisions which the activist architects had refused to authorize, associating them with the legitimation of the city's controversial policy decisions.

2.1.5   Struggling Against a 'Captured' Urban Plan

As we saw above, the discussed controversies in Jablonec nad Nisou materialized in the preparation of the city's new land-use plan. The plan extensively expanded available building land beyond the boundaries of the compact city and incorporated the contested road in Srnčí Důl. It also did not bring any innovations in terms of making local development more sustainable, strategic, and respectful towards the needs of the public. As early as 2012, grassroots associations and activist architects organized a demonstration in the main square and framed their protest as a disagreement with the concept of the city's new land-use plan, putting special emphasis on their arguments against the road in Srnčí Důl, further development on the surrounding fields, and the depopulation of the city centre. Approximately two hundred people attended the demonstration, which is a huge achievement in a medium-sized town (Fig. 2.3).

Local grassroots associations and activist architects again made another effort to change the land-use plan shortly prior to its authorization. They

Fig. 2.3   Demonstration against the land-use plan on the main square in Jablonec nad Nisou (Photo: Jan Vokurka, www.srnci-dul.cz)

joined together in order to object to it in a formal way prescribed by the Building Act 183/2006 Coll. This act allows activists to utilize a 'representative of the public' institute, which allows natural persons and legal entities backed by a minimum of two hundred inhabitants of the appropriate municipality to apply so-called materially consenting remarks to the plan. Activists elaborated their remarks and gathered the needed signatures.

The remarks targeted the plan for the absence of a detailed regulatory regime and planning studies in important locations destined for intensive development. It was demanded that the plan ensures sequential and logical development, where each phase is based on comprehensive and up-to-date urban data and their analyses and on reassessing previous phases. It was also demanded that development in new development areas be conditioned by the building of public infrastructure and amenities, by a peer review of the existing demographic analysis (suspected of being purpose-built in order to substantiate extensive residential development), and by updating the city's existing housing conception. The remarks also included various smaller-scale demands, such as the plan determining and preserving particular elements in the landscape—alleys, zones of uncultivated land, viewpoints, etc. One of the remarks also demanded an alternative route location of the Western Tangent which would not be as damaging for the quality of life in Srnčí Důl.

The fact that activists used a participatory tool provided by law was an important step in initiating their formalized cooperation with local authorities. As architects from PLAC later posted on their website, this cooperation nonetheless ended in a fiasco, as the government's auditing body for urban development and planning consulted the applied remarks without inviting grassroots representatives. Overall communication of the local decision-makers and experts with activists showed evidence of the government's endeavour to expedite its unpleasant obligation to deal with the publicly enfranchised activists while, at the same time, retaining the plan in a unchanged form. In the end, the plan was authorized with only a few minor, relatively cosmetic amendments claimed by the grassroots representatives. Whereas all of the major changes were rejected on grounds of argumentation, which the activists found purpose-built and dismissive. All of the plan's unsustainable aspects were defended by the city's revenue

needs and the need to attract new businesses and development activity. It was also argued that Jablonec nad Nisou needs to create sufficient housing capacities. According to the Czech Statistical Office, the city's population has been either decreasing or stagnating since 1991, which has left some activists with suspicions that new apartments will be built either for people commuting from Liberec or as a speculative investment opportunity.

A completely new political opportunity opened in 2018, when one of the founding members of PLAC decided to run as an independent candidate of the local Pirate Party in the local elections and managed to gain a position as the city's vice-mayor in the area of urban development. From this position, he continued to push for the professionalization of local urban processes and their disentanglement from the non-transparent network of local private interests.

2.2 Case: Citizens' Resistance Against an Obscure Flood Protection Project in České Budějovice

České Budějovice is a 93,000-inhabitant metropolis in South Bohemia located in the basin intersected by the Vltava River at its confluence with the Malše River and surrounded by hills on its eastern and northern side. To the south-west, it overlooks the protected landscape area of Blanský les (Blanský forest) in the foothills of the Šumava Mountains. The city was founded as a royal city in 1256 A.D. and is known today for the production of Budweiser beer.

České Budějovice has a university campus but makes an impression as a quiet, sleepy town where social unrest is quite rare. Thanks to its heterogeneous economic structure and the absence of heavy industry, the city is relatively unburdened by socio-economic or serious environmental problems. In terms of post-1989 development, it has been sprawling into the countryside, with commuters causing daily traffic congestion. This problem has been exacerbated by too few connections between the two banks of the Vltava River and unfinished bypass roads.

Urban controversies, and the grassroots mobilizations which respond to them, are relatively rare, small in scale, and draw little public attention. To some extent, public outrage has been related to various wasteful and ill-considered projects co-funded by the European Union or the state. Projects, especially those associated with the South Bohemian 'godfather' Pavel Dlouhý, have been suspected of involving various non-transparent interests and the extraction of public money for the private profit of the local political and business elites.

One of the biggest controversies in České Budějovice has been the long struggle of local citizens against a flood protection project (referred to hereafter as the FPP) along the right bank of the Malše River, which started shortly after the turn of the millennium. Although promoted by the local government as a necessary protection of the neighbourhoods in the south-eastern part of the city from one-hundred-year floods, local citizens have framed the FPP as a redundant and potentially unsafe destruction of a popular park and recreational areas surrounding the eastern side of the river. Moreover, they also targeted the FPP for being planned and discussed by local politicians in a top-down, non-participatory manner without considering the needs and concerns of the citizens and without providing information regarding the different phases of the project's realization. The strong lobby for the FPP by local politicians also raised suspicions among local activists about possible ulterior motives behind the project.

What follows is a historical outline of the dispute over the FPP, the evolution of the citizens' conflict with local decision-makers, and the role that the local government's lack of openness towards the public played in the way citizens interpreted the controversial top-down interventions into their city, which have often tended to be blamed on problems associated with the democratic deficit of the local state.

2.2.1 Save Malák!

The banks of the Malše River in the south-east part of České Budějovice belong to one of the most popular recreational destinations in the city, which is important for both residents from the surrounding neighbourhoods as well as those coming from more distanced parts of the city. The

more widely used right bank creates a green boundary for the residential district Havlíčkova kolonie, which includes a park with a children's playground near a barrage called Malý jez (Little barrage), popular for summer bathing. A narrow greenfield with an alley of full-grown trees surrounds the river and connects Havlíčkova kolonie with the city centre as well as with the peripheral neighbourhood Mladé, where it merges into gardening colonies and several alluvial meadows. Every day, the bank is used by a large number of cyclists, people with children, strollers, dogs, and so on.

It is therefore not surprising that the local government's intention to build the FPP along the Malše River, whose first phase would require cutting down fifty-one full-grown trees along Na nábřeží Street and a replacement of the natural riverbank with a concrete ledge, spurred the outrage and protests of locals. According to Pavel Kolář, leader of the first grassroots opposition against the FPP, which gave birth to the civic association Malše, the struggle to save the right bank of the Malše River was the very first larger-scale urban conflict between citizens and politicians in the modern history of České Budějovice. The conflict dates to the year 2000, when citizens first learned about the intended realization of the FPP. In Kolář's reminiscences, the government at that time was relatively forthcoming and open to discussion; some of the politicians and activists knew each other from their previous engagement in Občanské forum (Civic Forum).[3] However, neither activists nor politicians were willing to step back from their position, and no compromise was achieved. Activists framed the FPP as dubious in terms of its usefulness and functionality and unnecessarily destructive. They demanded the government adopt an alternative technical solution, which activists acquired through consulting an independent specialist and which was based on building dykes along the stream. They argued that the alternative solution would provide comparable levels of protection without destroying the riverbanks.

Decision-makers nonetheless continued to refuse any alternative solution. Instead, they manipulated public opinion by pointing to the large one-thousand-year flood which severely affected the city in 2002. Politicians used it as a pretext for the realization of the FPP. Even so, activists

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[3]Občanské forum was a Czech civic movement founded by anti-communist dissidents during the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

knew the proposed FPP was not designed to protect the neighbourhood from floods of such scale. They argued that the FPP can only protect them from a one-hundred-year flood, which from their experience floods only their basements. They continued their protests using petitions, information, and media campaigns, becoming involved in administrative procedures, submitting appeals, objections, etc. The project's realization became significantly delayed and, for several years, the debate about the FPP went silent, convincing some that the threat to the park had subsided.

Rather unexpectedly, all necessary permits to initiate the FPP were finally acquired in 2015. Activists around the civic association Malše now saw the battle as lost, but the acute threat of 'approaching excavators' mobilized a new grassroots group composed of residents. This new group decided to reverse the course of events through what they perceived as a final, peaceful, modest, and harmless attempt:

> We decided to go to the city hall, to see the mayor, and ask them [the decision-makers], given that they already want to build there, to at least make some kind of public seminar and public introduction of the project—so that people can see what they can actually expect. And basically, our approach was that we were not trying to stop it and divert it somewhere else, we just wanted them to simply meet some kind of obligation to inform the public and simply introduce the project to them. Because many people from Havlinda [Havlíčkova kolonie] either didn't know at all that something was supposed to be done there, or they thought that the project had already been dropped a long time ago. And those who might have suspected that something was supposed to get done, they on the other hand had no idea what it was going to look like. And at that time, those at the city [hall] sort of promised, off the record, that they would do something like that, but only after the supplier gets selected and when they knew how much it would cost. We told them we were not interested in the supplier or how much it would cost, we were interested in what it would look like and what it would protect us from. And they said, 'Ok, fine'. And that was when we went for the second meeting, and they said, 'So we will try to do it somehow by the end of May.' It was the end of May, the first week of June, and nothing had happened.

The activists decided to frame their demand as a simple request for more information about a project with a large impact on their lives. They nonetheless failed and, as a result, decided to organize an information meeting themselves. They obtained all available technical documentation regarding the FPP, prepared pictures and maps to show to the public, and distributed five thousand leaflets with an invitation to the meeting in the surrounding neighbourhoods. They also informed about the meeting by wrapping red and white tape around all fifty-one full-grown trees under threat of being chopped down and posted posters informing about the prospective threat and the information meeting. Almost three hundred people attended the meeting at the riverbank and demanded to organize a petition. The event was featured in the local newspaper and on Jihočeská televize (South Bohemian television), notifying politicians of the existing public pressure. The activists also learned that the city council had not yet authorized a contract stipulating the project's financing, meaning that the window of opportunity to halt the FPP was still open. Around this time, the activists created an informal citizen initiative called Zachraňme Malák [Save Malák] (Fig. 2.4).

Reacting to the newly discovered circumstances, Zachraňme Malák demanded the city council decline the authorization of the project's financing at the next meeting. The window of political opportunity for activists further expanded when the local government started to face its own internal conflicts, which resulted in the resignation of the mayor and the breakup of the ruling coalition. The authorization of the contract regarding the project's financing was dropped from the programme of two consecutive council meetings. Part of the newly formed governmental opposition then started to support the activists' struggle against the FPP, and new debates were initiated at the governmental level regarding the potential shortcomings and ambiguities of the FPP. In the meantime, Zachraňme Malák continued its campaign, sharing more information about the FPP among councillors. They recruited new members, attended council meetings, and organized their own meetings for the public. On their website, they shared photographs of people who love Malák and amplified the sentimental and aesthetic meaning of the location. They also continued to promote the alternative flood protection solution involving dykes and warned of the inadequacies of the FPP promoted by the government.

Fig. 2.4   Information meeting on the bank of the Malše River (Photo: Jan Pirgl, www.zachranmemalak.cz)

They also started to frame the FPP as costly, too expansive considering its limited ability to protect the city from major floods, and its destructive effect on the popular locality (Fig. 2.5).

2.2.2 Suspected Background Interests Behind Unknown Project Phases

One of the FPP's biggest controversies amplified by Zachraňme Malák was an obscure element regarding the project's three different phases. The plan to build a concrete ledge in the area near Malák represented the first phase of the FPP, but information about the ensuing phases affecting the rest of the river was missing. Activists therefore raised concerns that building the first phase would result in a lock-in which requires the realization of the remaining phases, without which the whole project would not be functional. Politicians, however, never provided any information regarding the remaining phases and the functionality of the entire FPP.

Fig. 2.5 High school student speaking in front of the plan featuring the flood protection project on the Malše River (Photo: Jan Pirgl, www.zachranmemalak.cz)

Activists nonetheless noticed a dyke featured in the city's land-use plan, cutting across alluvial meadows between Velký jez (Big barrage) and U Červeného dvora Street in the Mladé neighbourhood. These meadows help to protect the city from potential flood waves by allowing the river's upper stream to overflow. The dyke featured in the plan divided the meadows into a bigger protected part and a smaller part exposed to potential floods. This intervention would narrow the stream in an uninhabited area where it normally inundates the surrounding fields, whereas the first phase of the FPP would widen the lower stream near Malák where the riverbank is only a few tens of metres away from people's homes. One of the activists framed the FPP as potentially dangerous and the politicians as irresponsible and threatening people's safety:

It is completely unknown how it will influence the water outflow. They will make some kind of dyke here, and then what will happen? They will build the first phase; therefore, they will also have to make the second and then the third phase. And if the details about the third phase are unknown, even

the very first phase might be a big hazard for us. What if the third phase influences or worsens the water outflow? What if there is a flood which overflows the dyke and we end up behind a big barrage full of water? So, if they build the first phase, we will fall into a trap. Perhaps it won't be that way, perhaps it is all okay, perhaps the outflow will remain the same. But I want to know that in advance. There is a huge hazard here. How dare they [the decision-makers] do this to us?

Activists from Zachraňme Malák interpreted the lack of logic and safety concerns behind the FPP design as a potential sign of some politicians' effort to accommodate the speculative interests of property owners in the area of the alluvial meadows. The land is currently designated for agricultural use and is regularly flooded. Building a dyke would allow them to be built upon it, significantly increasing its market value. Activists further supported this hypothesis with two other facts.

First, the transformation of the active flood plain into building lots had already been initiated on the northern edge of one of the alluvial meadows, which features three building lots in the city's land-use plan. One of the activists attempted to notify local authorities as well as the Ministry of the Environment that these lots were part of the active flood plain and should remain undeveloped. The mayor of the city responded to this complaint in a way which the activist found evasive:

I received a letter from the mayor where he dealt with my objections, and it seemed as if he did not really care. He wrote that if I had any suspicion about illegal activities, I should refer them to the construction administration. According to his information, everything was in line with the valid legislation. To me, this is a proof that he does not want to deal with it, he does not care. I find it horrible that the city's main representative is so apathic to a citizen who is telling him that the law is being violated and he does nothing. It is as if my subordinate told me that someone is robbing my workplace and I was just sitting there doing nothing.

Later, the activist heard rumours among the neighbours regarding a strong political lobby behind the new building lots due to which the authorities refuse to intervene.

Second, the property owners on the alluvial meadows were allegedly personally connected to the 'regional boss', Pavel Dlouhý, who held a number of important positions in the public administration during the rampant privatizations of the 1990s.[4] According to the activists, these owners also have personal links with officials in the state's water management enterprise, Povodí Vltavy. Similar suspicions are nothing unheard of in the South Bohemian region. The region was at one point notorious for being under the control of the Civic Democrats and was an exemplary case of the strong undercover mechanisms which the party uses to control local politics, public enterprises and assets, private businesses, the land fund, the property market, and many other areas, including EU funds (see Klíma 2015). In 2008, the position of the regional *hejtman* (a regional leader) was taken over by the Social Democrats, who also formed the municipal government together with the new populist party ANO—Akce nespokojených občanů (Action of dissatisfied citizens).[5] Local narratives, investigative journals (Švehla 2010), and literature dealing with defective democracy in Czechia (Klíma 2015) nonetheless point to the strong continuing influence of South Bohemia's 'godfather' and ODS member, Pavel Dlouhý.

Activists from Zachraňme Malák were therefore also framing the FPP as potentially motivated by non-transparent interests backed by Pavel Dlouhý. One of them said that the existence of hidden ulterior motives behind the FPP is only hypothetical but, nonetheless, activists tried to warn local politicians of suspicious connections, hoping that some politicians might be interested in seeking their own legitimacy through condemning cases of potential power abuse.

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[4]For several electoral terms, Pavel Dlouhý has held the position of vice-mayor of Hluboká nad Vltavou (a wealthy municipal district north-west of České Budějovice). He is also the chairman of the executive board of the Regional Agrarian Chamber and of the District Agrarian Chamber for České Budějovice, and he sits on the supervisory board of the Czech Republic's Land Fund, which has been pivotal in the processes of post-communist privatization. Dlouhý has also been notorious for his involvement in a number of controversial projects sponsored by the European Union, the most famous being the creation of a navigable waterway between České Budějovice and Hluboká nad Vltavou, which many local inhabitants see as redundant and wasteful.

[5]ANO bude líp (Yes, it will get better) is a populist political party founded by Andrej Babiš, the second richest man in Czechia. The main goal of his party is to fight corruption in the Czech government, but Babiš himself is suspected of severe cases of abusing European subsidies.

> It's essentially a 'godfather' affair, if I may put it that way. We don't use this argument though [officially]. We just said who the land belongs to, that there are some connections between those people; we can read that out of the land registry or from the trade registry. We just want the councillors to get an idea about what might be going on there. Of course, we are not trying to criminalize it or use it as the crucial argument because, for us, it is also not crucial. For us, the most crucial is the way they will deal with Malák, what it will look like there, what will the intervention be like, how big or small.

The quote above shows that activists frame possible ulterior motives behind the FPP as a secondary issue in their concerns, which nonetheless could be useful in trying to keep Malák unharmed by the FPP.

Framing the FPP as an obscure, potentially dangerous project which might involve various non-transparent interests played a crucial role in averting the project's realization, especially after Czech Television broadcasted two reports shedding light on the whole case and made it publicly known. With the FPP being challenged through mass media, in March 2016, the city council declined the city's participation in financing the project and suspended its implementation. The project nevertheless still had all the valid permits and therefore could be easily implemented if the situation in government changed. In autumn 2016, the Ministry of the Environment suspended the previous permit to cut down the trees along the river and commissioned a new assessment which takes into consideration expert opinion, according to which the protection of the neighbourhood does not require the FPP nor felling any trees. Activists from Zachraňme Malák also initiated a lawsuit against the prolonged building permit of the FPP and asked that this permit be dissolved and the whole project be remade in cooperation with the public. After a long and exhausting lawsuit, the regional authorities finally dissolved the permit. The new government elected in autumn 2018, formed by a coalition of ANO, HOPB (Hnutí Občané pro Budějovice/Citizens for Budějovice Movement), TOP 09, and KDU-ČSL (Christian and Democratic Union–Czechoslovak People's Party), consequently promised to revitalize the park and build a new kind of anti-flood protection, this time

in close cooperation with the public. However, as activists have informed on their website, citizens will nonetheless need to remain alert.

2.3 Case: Civic Struggle Against Two Demolitions in Prostějov

Prostějov is a 44,000-inhabitant city in central Moravia, Czechia's eastern historical region, and in close proximity to the third largest Moravian metropolis, Olomouc. Prostějov is located in a lowland ravine with an agricultural landscape and is famous for its fashion industry. There is a low rate of unemployment due to the proximity of other regional metropolises, the presence of a highway, and several companies in Prostějov's peripheral industrial zone which provide low-wage jobs.

The city is not particularly famous for its historical heritage. Before World War II, Prostějov had a large Jewish community which was wiped out by the Nazis, and the remaining Jewish ghetto was later demolished by the Communists. During the course of this research, between 2014 and 2017, the few efforts to preserve some of the remnants of the city's memory, including efforts to restore a demolished Jewish cemetery or to cultivate public space in the city centre, ran against the differing priorities of the local government. The government displayed little interest in historic preservation and instead focused on instigating commercial development, attracting investors to the local industrial zone, and random projects to be co-funded by the European Union or the state. Local activists hold that searching for external funding is the main determinant of local urban processes, which often results in numerous controversies.

2.3.1 Citizens Outraged by Controversial Urban Changes

Prostějov is a mid-size city which most inhabitants with higher education leave in search of better opportunities in bigger metropolises. As such, the number of citizens who actively engage in public affairs is relatively

small. However, since the late 2000s, there has been growing disillusionment with local political elites and their many urban controversies. These triggered the creation of a movement party Změna pro Prostějov (Change for Protějov),[6] whose main agenda and members overlapped with local grassroots activists. Four of the movement's members were functioning as the government's opposition councillors at the time of this research, out of which Jan Navrátil represents one of the city's most distinctive activist personalities. In 2012, the civic association Pro Prostějov (For Prostějov) was founded in order to challenge the wasteful and arbitrary approach of the ruling coalition to the city and its public budget. The most active members of the association had an unusual composition: two pensioners and a young sixteen-year-old student Jakub Čech, who at the time of this research had become publicly renowned as an astonishing young activist. Čech received substantial media attention thanks particularly to his conflicts with Prostějov's government, which unlawfully denied him access to publicly available information due to his young age. At his own request, Čech was later recognized by the local court as a person of legal age—a person above eighteen and thus granted civil rights such as the right to vote and access information. While Čech is now mainly renown for revealing various cases where the local ruling coalition was diverting and abusing public money and violating the law, his main concern is with the government's approach to urban space:

> I follow what is going on at the city hall, I can see them wasting and stealing money. I can see that the law is being broken there. There is no democracy. But I don't care about that. A much bigger problem is the devastation of the city and that is what bothers me about the leadership…. There is totally zero conception in the way they develop the city.

Jakub Čech, along with other members of Pro Prostějov, frames the approach of the local government to local spatial production as ill-advised and destructive. Examples include the overpriced project of the Národní olympijské centrum (National olympic centre), which at the time of the

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[6]Although carrying the same name, Změna pro Prostějov was not part of the movement Změna (Change) from Liberec. It was, nonetheless, inspired by it.

research was being built on municipal property despite obscurities regarding its financing; the intention of the ruling coalition to stop operating a popular spa in the city centre; and its constantly changing plans regarding the building of a new public swimming pool. However, the most contentious controversies at the time of the research were the demolitions of two significant buildings, one already accomplished and one still planned.

2.3.2   Right to the Municipal Assembly Hall

The first controversial change in the city concerns the intended demolition of a public building known as KaS centrum. The name stands for Kulturní a společenské centrum (Cultural and community centre) and is also known as KaSC. KaSC was built in the years 1989–1991 in a former Jewish ghetto, and its historical and aesthetic value is debatable. The building is relatively new, and according to some, rather ugly. However, it is the city's biggest, hosting social gatherings such as high school dance lessons and balls. Due to long-term negligence, the building and its surroundings have become the object of local debates about possible revitalization, with some local citizens promoting the idea of cultivating this large area and transforming it into a large public space.

However, in 2008, local decision-makers decided to replace the municipally owned KaSC with a new mixed-use building for cultural and commercial purposes. They argued KaSC was economically disadvantageous, decaying, and unable to generate profit. Paradoxically, this was the result of poor care on the part of the municipality, performed only in terms of maintaining and managing this public amenity—a typical neoliberal strategy of achieving citizen consensus on the privatization of publicly owned assets and enterprises. Despite previous lively public discussions regarding the area's future use, politicians changed the functional use of KaSC from public to partly commercial in the city's land-use plan. Afterwards, they made a tender for the sale of KaSC and its replacement with a shopping mall, stipulating that potential developers would be obligated to build a new assembly hall in the building. Three different companies participated in the tender.

Controversy arose around the government's decision to award the contract to an unknown company Manthellan, which had no previous history in this area of enterprise and, according to the opinions of local activists, had been established solely for the purpose of participating in the tender. Manthellan later abolished its contractual commitment to build an assembly hall in the shopping mall and demanded the cost of the new assembly hall be covered by the municipal budget. A number of politicians displayed a surprising willingness to accept this new deal, which activists perceived as unthrifty and fraudulent. Local activist and opposition councillor Jan Navrátil decided to prosecute the city council for a legally invalid contract and raised money from local citizens to pay for legal assistance.

> It is a big area where we expected improvement, for example, an outdoor marketplace, parking lots, a cultural centre, you know? In principle, we were not against the inclusion of some commerce, against the shopping centre, as long as they maintained the parking spots and the assembly hall—even if they had to demolish it or move it—but it had to stay in the city centre. And then we found out that they cheated the people. The assembly hall was dropped, and it had been arranged by ODS with the current investors. They basically made a deal behind the backs of everyone else. Even city councillors did not know what was being negotiated there. Someone should be charged for this and sent to prison. But we were not concerned with criminal liability. We were concerned with bringing down the contract. The lawyer told us that there is little chance if citizens get together and bring the case before the court. But even a small chance was worth it. In the end, we paid for all the courts of appeal and fees for the lawyers. It was not cheap. It was nerve-wracking. It was not easy. But even the little chance, if we managed to bring down the contract, it would be a huge relief for Prostějov. And now, we would not still be again and again dealing with Manthellan. We could already be dealing with the marketplace, parking lots, the assembly hall; all of that could have already been completed. (Jan Navrátil)

Jan Navrátil eventually learned that a private person cannot sue the city over the contract with Manthellan. Luckily, a new opportunity opened up with an unexpected ally: Prior, a Czech department store chain, which has a store located in close vicinity to KaSC and which had unsuccessfully participated in the public tender. Prior sued the city over the contract

instead, and the judicial decision ruled in their favour. Surprisingly, the city appealed this decision even though the contract harmed the city's interests. Local activists interpreted this step as proof of the politicians' compliance with Manthellan and the possibility of their vested interests in the contract.

Jan Navrátil organized other protest activities to highlight the prospective loss of the city's main assembly hall. He organized a documentary film screening on the wall of KaSC and, more notably, an outdoor dancing ball in the main square in front of the city hall. The ball was held in the middle of the winter ball season with temperatures dropping below zero. The event attracted crowds of people as well as the attention of the media. In 2012, mobilizations around the controversy eventually resulted in the foundation of the civic association Pro Prostějov, which continued organizing various events to bring attention to local urban affairs. They also invited Martin Marek, the organizer of a successful referendum against a new shopping mall in the city of Plzeň and consulted with him about effective options in influencing the future of KaSC.

None of these efforts however changed the government's plans. In 2016, the government responded to the threat of being sued by Manthellan for uncooperativeness by granting the company's request to change the city's new land-use plan from 2014 in a way which would allow more intensive development in the KaSC area. In the end, however, the court found the contract between the city and Manthellan invalid. Local government then announced they would reconstruct the building, supposedly with the inclusion of local citizens' opinions and the help of an urban study (Fig. 2.6).

2.3.3   Demolition of Historical Riding Barracks

The second major urban controversy in Prostějov concerns the demolition of an old complex of historical riding barracks, the so-called Jezdecká kasárna, which were built in 1891 under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. According to the activists from Pro Prostějov, the barracks represented an inseparable landmark in Prostějov's south-eastern side, as well as an important part of the city's memory. The local government elected in

Fig. 2.6 The cultural and community centre, referred to as KaSC, and its surroundings. The unappealing design and rundown condition is a pretext for its privatization and commercialization (Photo: Own archive)

2014 nonetheless framed the barracks as completely dilapidated, non-restorable, problematic due to the presence of homeless people, and as something locals should be ashamed of. This frame was further reproduced by local media, which are, according to the activists, highly amenable to the interests of the municipal leadership (one of them, *Prostějovský večerník*, is even owned by one of the city's councillors), and played an important role in celebrating the government's suggested plan to replace the barracks with a new multifunctional centre.

This decision outraged part of the government's political opposition and several local citizens. The demolition was promoted in a highly biased way and was not sufficiently substantiated. As with KaSC, some of the decision-makers in the ruling coalition complained about the buildings' poor conditions, which were in fact the result of their very own neglect.

Moreover, decision-makers intended to replace the barracks with a multifunctional centre, which would also include a new assembly hall, thus compensating for the intended controversial demolition of KaSC. Out of four architects who participated in the tender for the new multifunctional hall, only the architect František Fröml, who was also an opposition councillor for Změna pro Prostějov, included the barracks in one of his designs. The government nonetheless operated only with the designs which disregarded the barracks.

In 2014, the conflict over the barracks' demolition was joined by two young architects, Jiří Zakopal and Vojtěch Jeřábek, who started to frame the barracks as a solid building in good static shape and which could be restored for a new purpose. They also criticized the poor quality of the selected design of the future multifunctional centre. They interpreted the intention to replace valuable architecture with banal architecture as the result of local decision-makers' blatantly amateur attitude towards urban planning and development. They decided that the demolition of the barracks was a good opportunity to prove it:

> The primary incentive was to catch the city leadership and show that they are amateurs who have no idea what they're doing. The riding barracks came to us as a good example to demonstrate it directly. It's not like the building is especially unique or historically valuable; it was a good quality structure, but not one that would be listed as heritage. We wanted to use it to demonstrate how helplessly they treat the city. They own something and do not take care of it at all. When it starts to look bad, they start to say how horrible it is— neglected, not restorable, inhabited by homeless people, and so on. And if that is not enough, they say that if they sell it, someone might house refugees there. They cannot let that happen, they must demolish it, and save all the citizens. (Vojtěch Jeřábek)

These activist architects also showed that local decision-makers try to defend their intention and potential vested interests by manipulating public opinion, framing the building as a potential public threat. They tried to challenge this frame by publishing their expert opinion in the local media. They personally met the editor of *Prostějovský večerník*, who refused to publish their opinion by quoting a proverb: 'He who pays the piper calls the tune', indicating his own bias. Other journalists claimed that publishing

such an opinion would be useless due to the strong lobby backing the barracks' demolition, driven by an intention to create a vacant lot for somebody 'behind-the-scenes'.

Eventually, the activist architects managed to have their opinion published in *Prostějovský deník*. To strengthen their arguments, they gathered several documents about the building and asked more senior colleagues for expert opinions on the condition of the barracks and potential alternative uses. These independent experts concluded that the building was actually in very good condition. Jiří Zakopal even elaborated a master's thesis on the possibilities of the building's conversion and came up with plans for its conversion into a retirement home. Later, *Prostějovský večerník* criticized the activist architects' plan as inhuman, depicting the architects as evildoers who are trying to lock up pensioners in bleak holes. When the editors of the newspaper did not comply with his wish to publish an apology for spreading false information, Jiří Zakopal decided to file a suit against the newspaper. A year later, the court decided in the architect's favour.

As part of gathering information about the barracks, Jiří Zakopal trespassed on the building's property in order to document its physical condition. Later, he decided to test the local authorities' willingness to issue official permission to visit the barracks. His application was declined. Jiří Zakopal filed another official application through his university, but it too was declined. One of the councillors threatened to obstruct both activist architects' future professional activity in the city were they not end their protestation of the barracks' demolition. Eventually, Jiří Zakopal managed to enter the building with opposition councillors, who asked for an official tour. During this tour, visitors were given false information about the building's physical state, including exaggerated cost estimates three or four times the true price of a potential reconstruction. The opposition councillors therefore requested to view the expert opinions on the barracks' statics. This request was declined. The opposition later learned that the document assessed the barracks' static condition as good (Fig. 2.7).

The ruling coalition also repeatedly claimed that the barracks were unsaleable and that nobody was interested in purchasing the complex. According to the interviewed activists, several people had shown interest in buying the barracks and even submitted reconstruction proposals, but

Fig. 2.7 Protesting by design. Architect Jiří Zakopal's proposal for the barrack's restoration (Photo: Jiří Zakopal)

all of them were rejected by the city council. From the beginning, the activist architects unsuccessfully demanded that the government organize a public seminar about their plan to replace the barracks. At the same time, Jiří Zakopal repeatedly attempted to object to the barracks' demolition at meetings of the city council; each time, however, his right to speech was denied by the council. The government opposition therefore complained to the Supreme Administrative Court, which found the council's rejection of Zakopal's speech unlawful. The ruling coalition responded by promising to organize a public seminar, but the seminar never took place.

In July 2015, Pro Prostějov organized a petition to save the barracks and asked the activist architects to be the petitions' expert guarantors. The petition received over a thousand signatures. In September 2015, activists, activist architects, and the government opposition organized a public seminar about the barracks to which they invited members of the ruling coalition, but none of them arrived. In the meantime, the council

made a public tender for a planning study of the area around the barracks. The opposition councillor, architect František Fröml, decided to participate in this tender, submitting the cheapest offer in order to win the tender. He was nonetheless asked to also submit a version of the planning study without the barracks. In November, the local government unexpectedly authorized the demolition of the barracks. František Fröml and Councillor Jiří Navrátil responded by taking legal action:

> At that moment, we said that this was way too fishy, so suspicious, that we would file a criminal complaint against an unknown perpetrator. It is not specifically against the eighteen [councillors] who voted for the demolition, but against somebody who is really trying to demolish it for some reason. (Jiří Navrátil)

The barracks ended up being demolished, and the complaint of the two opposition councillors was later suspended. The same happened when the case was renewed by the activist architects Zakopal and Jeřábek, which ended the whole controversy. The two architects then started to engage in other urban issues as part of their new civic association Prostor Prostějov, whose focus has been on identifying problems and value in the public space of Prostějov.

2.4   Case: Citizen Control Over the City of Prague

As could be expected, urban processes are most tangibly affected by the brokerage of political power in Prague, which is the capital city of Czechia and an almost 1.3-million-inhabitant metropolis in the heart of Central Bohemia. Its metropolitan area houses over 2.5 million inhabitants and, according to Eurostat, is among to the richest regions in the European Union. Prague's wealth, along with the higher incomes and education of its population, increases the city's anomaly in relation to the rest of the country, where the average GDP per capita is below the EU average. The enormous wealth accumulated in Prague nonetheless does not reflect the quality of life of all local inhabitants or the quality of the built

environment. Most of Prague's tourist attractions come from the pre-World War II era. The city suffered significant damage during the socialist era and now suffers the consequences of post-socialist urban reform and the many urban problems ensuing from it. As early as the 1990s, Cooper and Morpeth (1998) demonstrated how the commercial transformation of Prague's historic core, combined with the neglectful approach of the Czech national government to the general unevenness of social and economic development, led to the displacement of residents from the city centre (ibid.). Numerous urban assets in Prague were privatized, either by the municipal and district governments or by large state-owned enterprises, such as České dráhy, which used to own large brownfield areas. The city has thus lost strategic influence over major areas, including large plots of developable land in prime locations now in the hands of private developers and investors. This is also true of the municipal housing stock, which contributed to the current housing crisis and caused Prague to become the least affordable city in the European Union in terms of the number of gross annual salaries needed for purchasing one's own housing (see Deloitte Property Index 2018). In the 1990s, Horak (2007) identified Prague's government as affected by a combination of legacies of the former totalitarian regime and the tendency of politicians to seek opportunities for private gain from the unprecedented investment influx into the city. Especially in the 2000s, Prague was exposed to uncoordinated development pressures and a lack of conceptual thinking and planning about urban space; however, the development lobby and neoliberal tendencies have had a large influence on local urban processes to date, although under the guise of a more cultivated and aesthetic approach. Prague has turned into another typical example of an international metropolis undergoing fast processes of gentrification and residential segregation (Sýkora 2009; Bernt et al. 2015) while facing the pressures associated with underfunded public services, etc.

Today, Prague constitutes a city where the majority of inhabitants, especially the elderly, suffer from economic hardship and limited access to basic social provisions, as well as unfulfilled cultural needs beyond the mainstream (see Pixová 2013; Pixová and Novák 2016). The more professional and economically better-off citizens tend to be concerned with the undemocratic and unprofessional character of Prague's urban processes

and especially with the negative impact of non-transparent business interests on the quality of urban space and life. As we shall see in this case study, three different districts saw urban grassroots movements enter electoral competition as a reaction to the illegitimate political establishment of their district governments (Pixová 2018).

In the following lines I will provide an introduction to the development of urban grassroots movements in Prague over the course of the city's post-socialist development. Afterwards, I will introduce three movements which abandoned their extra-institutional form in order to get rid of the traditional political elites in their districts and exert citizen control over local urban processes and decision-making.

2.4.1 Cradle of Czechia's Urban Grassroots Activism

As the capital and largest city of Czechia, Prague takes precedence in several areas. Not only does it concentrate the most wealth and, therefore, come under the largest amount of development and foreign investment pressure, but it also has the highest concentration of active citizens with a capacity to inspect and challenge the demerits of their national, regional, municipal, or district governments. Prague was, therefore, bound to become the birthplace of civic engagement and grassroots mobilizations in post-communist Czechia and a place that set the trends for other cities and their civil societies.

In the decade following the Velvet Revolution, some of the first forms of civil activism associated with urban issues were triggered by processes of post-socialist transformation, most notably in housing reform, which dramatically changed the housing situation of many inhabitants (see Cooper and Morpeth 1998; Lux and Mikeszová 2012; Pixová and Sládek 2016) and gave birth to several organized civic groups, most notably tenant associations concerned with defending the interests of tenants living in Prague. A particularly active one was the now-defunct Sdružení nájemníků Prahy 1 (Association of tenants in Prague 1)—the urban district most affected by the decreasing affordability of housing. Other urban struggles in Prague centred around issues of heritage protection (see Horak 2007), many of which were fought by Prague's ancient Klub Za starou Prahu

(The club for old Prague), a civic association founded in 1900 by people opposed to the demolition of Prague's Jewish ghetto.

Many of the first urban mobilizations also had a background in the Czech environmental movement, whose legacy reaches back to the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the rare local mobilizations protesting heavy industrial pollution. In the context of the new regime, former environmentalists were often instrumental in acting against destructive interventions into the urban environment. An interesting example is the NGO Arnika, which is predominantly concerned with issues related to the natural environment but is also one of the main opponents of urban processes in Prague, especially its land-use planning. Horak (2007) also brought insight to the instrumental role environmentalists played in civic protests connected to the expansion of the city's road network, the most notable of which were mobilizations aimed at saving Stromovka, a large park in the Prague 7 district, from being intersected by a high-capacity expressway. High-capacity roads and their expansion also triggered the foundation of various other local resistance groups, such as the still-active civic association Občané postižení Severojižní magistrálou (Citizens affected by the North-South Motorway) and many others.

In some neighbourhoods, associations were also founded not only to protect the local environment and overall liveability but to strengthen local cultural life, community, etc. as well. Associations of this kind were established across the city, from centrally located fellowships, such as Sdružení občanů a přátel Malé Strany a Hradčan (Association of citizens and friends of the Lesser Town and Castle District), to ones concerned about the surrounding forest parks on Prague's periphery, such as the association Hezké Jižní město (Pretty South City).

From the very beginning of the 1990s, Prague has also been home to a squatters' movement, which occupied a few dozen buildings across the city throughout the decade. During its initial stage, squatting mainly represented a people's solution to the housing situation and their desire for new forms of communal life, and a substantial part of it centred around anarchism and an escapist subcultural lifestyle. In comparison with later examples of squatting in Prague, the movement's first rudiments were considerably less focused on an explicit political struggle and to a large

extent stayed disconnected from the problems of the general population (see Pixová and Novák 2016).

2.4.2 Urban Grassroots Mobilizations in the 2000s: The Squatters' Movement, Rent Deregulation, Scandalous Public Tenders, and the Blob

While the 1990s were predominantly a fluid and unstable decade characterized by multiple processes of transformation, the 2000s were an era of neoliberal consolidation—opened symbolically by Prague hosting the IMF and World Bank summit in September 2000. This summit symbolized Prague's full integration into global markets and the embodiment of the neoliberal capitalist reality. It also revealed newly emerging societal cleavages, represented at a symbolic level by the anti-globalization protests against the meeting of the global financial institutions. To some extent, the 2000s represented a symbolic end of the uniform societal endeavour to seek emancipation through free trade, international markets, globalization, and in the dismantling of the state.

The fact that life in the newly consolidated neoliberal reality would become more complicated for people with low income or without property ownership became clear soon after the anti-globalization protests. Some of the first urban space related conflicts emerged in relation to the squat Ladronka, Prague's internationally acclaimed squat, which had functioned as an autonomous sociocultural centre since 1993 and had enjoyed considerable popularity among the alternative scene in Prague and beyond. After years of tolerating the squat, local authorities finally took advantage of the moral panic surrounding anarchism and radical forms of activism in the aftermath of the anti-globalization protests and evicted Ladronka in November 2000. Squatters and members of the local alternative scene consequently protested against Ladronka's eviction. Their protests were unsuccessful, and the squatting movement went into decline. For the rest of the decade only two important squats remained. One was occupied by a collective called Medáci in Střešovice, who engaged in environment protection and community building with the neighbours; it was

evicted in 2002. The squat Milada, in Prague's Troja district, was considerably more self-contained and focused on countercultural activities. It faced several attempted evictions, out of which all were accompanied by protests. Milada was finally evicted in June 2009, spurring an unprecedented activization of squatting supporters and giving rise to a renaissance of the Czech squatting movement (see Pixová and Novák 2016).

Throughout the 2000s, Prague was under heavy pressure from neoliberal restructuring. Social provision was being reduced especially quickly. Several mobilizations were triggered by emerging housing inequalities. Central Prague inhabitants were particularly threatened by rent deregulation. Sdružení nájemníků Prahy 1 (SNP1), an association aimed at protecting the interests of Prague 1 tenants, ran in the district's municipal elections and, during the 2002–2006 electoral term, managed to become the government's opposition. SNP1 launched an initiative to redistribute money earned by the Prague 1 municipality through privatizations to people who did not get an equal opportunity to privatize their dwellings. They attempted to organize a local referendum regarding this proposal but failed to gather the needed number of local voter signatures. One former SNP1 member explained that tenants affected by the injustices of the housing stock privatization were generally distrustful, resigned, and fearful and reluctant to challenge the authorities and their landlords. As a result, they refused to sign the referendum proposal. Between 2004 and 2005, SNP1 held several demonstrations to protest a new act facilitating further rent deregulation by another 10%. The demonstrations had low attendance and rents continued to grow (Pixová and Sládek 2016, p. 80). The grievance of the tenants had little support from the general public, out of which most had become homeowners thanks to privatization.

Rent deregulation also eventually mobilized a group of tenants living in council flats in the Prague 2 district. In this case, politicians kept delaying privatizations to the tenants who were entitled to them. In his dissertation thesis, Sládek (2015) describes how tenants of apartments owned by the municipality of Prague 2 district, initially inactive and pacified by the local authorities' promise to eventually allow their apartment buildings to be privatized, finally started to mobilize in response to rising rents. In 2008, after years of unsuccessfully pressuring local authorities, several tenants decided to form an association: Občanské sdružení za privatizaci

a zlepšení podmínek bydlení v MČ Praha 2 (Civic association for privatization and improvement of housing conditions in the Prague 2 district). This time, with homes and their affordability at stake, the willingness to engage in civic protest rose considerably. Hundreds of citizens joined the association and attended a demonstration organized in Náměstí Míru (Peace Square) in October 2008. The tenants demanded an opportunity to purchase their flats at a discounted rate. Interestingly, the ruling Civic Democrats, the strongest supporters of privatizations in the 1990s, completely changed their neoliberal discourse in this case, claiming that privatizations had finished due to the end of the country's economic transformation and accession to the European Union. This change of discourse can be interpreted especially by the high lucrativeness of the council flats in the historical centre of Prague, which local politicians wanted to keep under their control. Eventually, the civic association changed its name to Občané za spokojené bydlení (Citizens for tranquil housing—OSB) and ran for municipal elections in 2010. The association successfully pushed for the privatization of the council flats, with many members abandoning their political career as soon as they managed to privatize their apartments.

As for other urban issues, civic disillusionment was spurred on particularly by the top-down permissiveness towards controversial development projects, demolitions, and other unpopular interventions into urban space. Citizens were gradually becoming critical of the quick expansion of shopping malls across the city, badly regulated residential projects, or insensitive heritage site reconstruction; the unprofessional reconstruction of the medieval Charles Bridge was widely criticized, but so too were many others. Scandals around excessive costs of public procurement and suspected corruption were also highly controversial. One of the most notable in the history of Prague's public spending was the case of Opencard, a municipal smart card system whose introduction in 2008 was outsourced to private contractors and whose costs ran more than ten times what was expected. Another largely controversial case was the sixteen-year-long construction of the 5.5 kilometre Blanka Tunnel Complex, built between 1999 and 2015 for almost 40 billion CZK (approx. 1.5 billion EUR) and connecting the city districts of Prague 5, 6, 7, and 8. The project was protracted and escalated in price against previous plans several times. The tunnel also symbolized the overall tendency of local governments to centre Prague's

development around car transportation. In 2003, a civic critique of the city found Prague to be unfriendly to pedestrians and cyclists and its public spaces congested by cars, giving birth to the establishment of the platform Auto*Mat, which concerns itself with promoting a more liveable and environmentally sustainable city with sustainable transportation. In 2007, Auto*Mat transformed into a civic association and to date represents one of the most active city-oriented NGOs in Prague.

Despite this, most controversies in urban development and municipal expenditures during the 2000s failed to trigger larger-scale mobilizations. One important exception were citywide protests reacting to the refusal of politicians to build the so-called Blob, an octopus-shaped futuristic building designed by internationally acclaimed architect Jan Kaplický to hold the National Library. The library site was proposed in the vicinity of Prague Castle in Letná Park. Prague liberals and intelligentsia saw it as an interesting opportunity to finally have an iconic piece of modern architecture in Prague. In February 2009, around two thousand people protested the leading politicians' refusal to build the Blob, supposedly due to the building's 'ugly' design and its inappropriate location. Paradoxically, the building was most criticized by representatives of the Civic Democrats, who normally assume a rather laissez-faire attitude to urban processes. The library was never realized mainly because of administrative errors in the tender for the library's design, but the whole controversy shed light on the lack of interest among politicians in financing public amenities and in responding to popular demands. The controversy also ignited a hitherto non-existent public debate about the unhealthy attitude of Prague's institutions to urban issues (Fig. 2.8).

2.4.3 Voter Insurrection and the Birth of Grassroots Interest in the City

The contestations around the Blob, due to which thousands protested the controversial attitude of politicians towards urban development, coincided with the ongoing economic crisis. It was also a time of elevated public debate about the democratic deficit in Czechia and the decreasing legitimacy of Czech governments—both national and municipal. Not

Fig. 2.8 Protest against car pollution co-organized by Auto*Mat (Photo: Vít Masare)

only austerity measures and revealed corruption scandals but especially problematic urban issues served as a symbol of undemocratic and corrupt governance. Around this time, citizens increasingly started to target politicians for exploiting the city for private interest at the cost of the city's liveability.

In Prague, citizen disenchantment with numerous scandals in politics and the resulting unsatisfactory urban conditions eventually culminated in the 2010 autumn municipal elections, during which a large proportion of Prague voters attempted to put a halt to twenty years of rule under the Civic Democrats, who had been associated with most of the biggest scandals in the city—most notably, Opencard and Blanka Tunnel—as well as with the haphazard development of the city. More than 30% of all voters consequently voted for TOP 09, which was then a new alternative right-wing party running for the first time. In the traditionally right-wing-oriented Prague, TOP 09 seemed like an attractive alternative to the Civic Democrats as it offered a similar programme but had a scandal-free history. However, despite placing first in the election results, TOP 09 was sidelined

Fig. 2.9 Protest against the coalition of ODS and ČSSD during a council meeting (former President Václav Havel sitting in front in support of the protest) (Photo: Vít Masare)

by the Civic Democrats, who ensured the continuation of their leading position in Prague's government by forming a coalition with the Social Democrats, the second runner-up in the elections. This triggered several protests, out of which the largest took place symbolically on 17 November 2010, exactly twenty-one years after the Velvet Revolution. Around two thousand people gathered in Wenceslas Square to protest the newly formed coalition, which most of them saw not only as a betrayal of Prague's citizens but also a painful reminder of the Oppositional Agreement concluded by ODS and ČSSD after the 1998 parliamentary elections,[7] a landmark event in the state's history of capture by corporate interests (Fig. 2.9).

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[7]The Oppositional Agreement allowed ODS to retain a strong share of parliamentary power despite the electoral success of their political rivals. The Agreement was seen as driven by corruption and as a failure of democratic principles in post-socialist Czechia.

While these protests did not bring any immediate results, they stirred up interest in urban issues among the Czech citizenry and initiated societal debate concerning the city's development, planning, policies, public spending, and public services as well as the impact of badly managed undemocratic urban processes and urban budget exploitation on the quality of urban space and citizen life. Various bottom-up organizations, associations, initiatives, and other groups led the debate, specifically targeting issues concerning the city. Some of them had already existed before this wave of civic interest in urban matters, sometimes having been active since the 1990s or earlier, the more than one-hundred-year-old Klub Za starou Prahu being an example. But the culminating problems in the city also gave rise to an unprecedented wave of newly emerging grassroots initiatives and newly founded civic associations which centred their existence and activity around addressing issues concerning the city. Some of them had a rather nimby character, focusing on single issues in the vicinity of their homes. However, the most notable was the emergence of initiatives which focused on promoting and demanding changes towards a more positive urban future. In other words, their activity was motivated by goals beyond the boundaries of their own backyard. Some pursued activities aimed towards achieving a liveable and just city, where citizens' interests and the urban fabric are protected against the tendency of Prague's decision-makers to prioritize private profits over the interests of the public. Others have aspired after more aesthetics-oriented goals inspired by the seemingly superior Western urban models—characterized, for instance, by the presence of world-class urban architecture, better designed and managed public spaces, etc. These groups would typically interpret the low quality of urban processes as a result of politicians' lack of professional background, their corruptness and involvement in various vested interests, and the backwardness of local institutions. Of course, the focus, perspective, agenda, and formal status of these initiatives and groups also intermingled, overlapped, and changed over the course of time. For example, some of the nimby mobilizations eventually transformed into established associations. Some groups expanded their activities from the level of their neighbourhood to the entire district. Sometimes grassroots groups in the district started to network and cooperate. Groups operating as a neighbourhood watchdog would sometimes mobilize around a pressing issue

Fig. 2.10 Discussion between citizens politicians and experts about the future of an industrial heritage building Nákladové nádraží Žižkov in Prague 3, threatened by commercial development (Photo: Petr Zewlakk Vrabec)

and be instrumental in, for example, defending a specific site against an undesired intervention. Moreover, not all groups could be strictly divided along lines of being aesthetics-oriented or concerned with urban justice. Rather commonly, grassroots have been basing their demands on the imagined ideal of a Western-like city, a city where high-quality urban spaces are believed to be a product of a democratic debate between the public, private stakeholders, and their political representatives (see Pixová 2018) (Fig. 2.10).

2.4.4 The Rise of Watchdog Civic Associations

In order to pursue their goals, groups involved in this new wave of urban activism have concerned themselves with a wide range of activities and strategies. The longest tradition has been petitioning, and many new civic groups were formed around launching petitions, whose popularity further increased with the expansion of online petitions. Other traditional strategies include lobbying politicians and running information campaigns, raising awareness among citizens about issues via media, leaflets, etc. In

line with the Czech mentality, there has been a general tendency to avoid demonstrations, which are usually held only as a last resort. New strategies and approaches have also emerged as a result of citizens' rising education, experience from abroad, and knowledge about good practices in urban governance and urban processes, coupled with their rising disillusionment with the inability of local politicians and institutions to deliver quality services. Most notably, there has been an unprecedented boom of groups systematically pursuing watchdog activities: groups that systematically monitor local events and inform the public of problematic issues via their own websites. These groups would occasionally also engage in protest events, which would not always be only in the form of traditional demonstrations but also, for example, in the form of happenings, performances, urban interventions, etc. Some of them would also engage in organizing educational activities, such as holding public lectures, workshops and seminars, or organizing conferences, providing platforms for networking, sharing ideas, and so forth.

Several watchdog associations in Prague were formed by urban professionals—architects, historians, social scientists, lawyers, and artists, for instance—who were motivated both by achieving a liveable city and by their own professional interest and desire to protect the city as such—its physical appearance, its memory, its functionality, sustainability, democratic processes, etc. One of the very first was a watchdog association which I personally cofounded in the summer of 2010 together with three other activists with backgrounds in urban studies and the non-profit sector. We named our association PragueWatch and based our main activity on operating an online map of Prague's urban controversies. The goal of the map was not only to monitor and record problematic issues but to also provide the website users with detailed descriptions and expert explanations about the various issues and their problematic aspects. People were also able to add their own urban controversies onto our map. Attempting to increase popular awareness and knowledge and skills related to the city and urban processes in a more systematic way beyond the online world, we also organized through PragueWatch educational activities for the public, including guided tours to threatened and controversial localities and various workshops and seminars, most notably, several volumes of the Lidová škola urbanismu [People's school of urbanism]. In 2015,

we also held an international conference called Contested City. In 2011, another similar watchdog association Pražské Fórum (Prague Forum) was founded, focusing predominantly on monitoring cases of corruption, non-transparent governance, clientelism, etc. Through its focus on the political background of urban processes, Pražské Fórum played an important role in framing urban controversies as inherently interlinked with democratic deficit and cases of power abuse.

Both PragueWatch and Pražské Fórum had a citywide focus, but they quickly inspired (either directly or indirectly) numerous local initiatives across the city. As a result, watchdog associations at the community, neighbourhood, or urban district level were founded by small groups of citizens concerned with their surroundings and, specifically, local development, politics, culture, and community building. Examples of district watchdog associations include 8jinak! (Prague 8 anew), Zaostřeno na desítku (Prague 10 under focus), Tady není developerovo (This is not Developerville) in Prague 3, and many others. At the neighbourhood level, associations include Letná sobě (Letná for us), Pro Břevnov (For Břevnov), Karlín sobě (Karlín for us), and many others.

Many organizations were also formed by urban professionals concerned with specific aspects of development, space, and life in the city. Architects, many of which were frustrated with unprofessional and unsustainable practices in planning, development, design, and policymaking related to these areas, started to promote contemporary and innovative approaches in architecture and the design of public space. Some of them also focused on introducing contemporary approaches in participatory planning and other forms of public involvement in spatial production. Examples of non-profit organizations with such a mission include the Centre for Central European Architecture (CCEA), which was founded in 2001, and had an important role during the era of awakening grassroots interest in urban matters. The organization's focus has been on promoting current developments in architecture, interconnecting architecture with people and culture, and on the realization of experimental projects in public space. In 2012, another predominantly architectural organization reSITE was founded with the intention of instigating dialogue around the creation of better, quality urban spaces. It became known mainly as an organizer of an eponymous annual international conference dealing with different urban topics. Other

Fig. 2.11 Containall—a summer season open-air cultural centre. Renaissance of grassroots interest in using public space (Photo: Jan Hromádko)

organizations have been more focused on the use of urban space for cultural and social purposes, examples of which are the festivals Street For Art, typically held in remote and less frequently visited areas of the city; 4 + 4 dny v pohybu (4 + 4 days in motion), a multidisciplinary festival held in abandoned and underused buildings; the citywide street-party Zažít mesto jinak (Experience the city differently) organized by Auto*Mat; and many other one-off events using public space (Fig. 2.11).

2.4.5 Top-Down Reforms of Prague's Urban Management, Controversy Surrounding the *Metropolitan Plan*, and the Housing Crisis

In 2012, the vibrant bottom-up debate about critical issues in Prague's urban processes and the way they affect urban space resulted in a new political opportunity for institutional change. The topic was finally noticed by municipal politicians in the aftermath of several political turnovers in the

municipal government, during which the coalition of ODS and ČSSD fell apart and was replaced by a coalition between TOP 09 and ODS. One of the TOP 09 members Tomáš Hudeček became the vice-mayor of urban planning and, in 2013, also Prague's mayor. As a geographer, Hudeček challenged Prague's outdated planning system and its propensity for administrative and political corruption. Hudeček therefore initiated a comprehensive reform of Prague's planning system, including commissioning a completely new land-use plan with a new planning doctrine.

The new plan was meant to replace one that was already under preparation at that time. Hudeček entrusted the preparation of the new *Metropolitan Plan* to Roman Koucký, an acclaimed professor of architecture and a highly controversial personality. He also established a platform called Metropolitní ozvučná deska (*Metropolitan sounding board*), which was meant to allow 'representatives of the civil society, professionals, academics and politicians to discuss ways of improving the much criticized urban management of the city' (Pixová and Sládek 2016, p. 81) and the preparation of Prague's new planning documents—especially the strategic plan and the new land-use plan. The *Metropolitan Plan* nonetheless became subject to a long and sustained critique which challenged Roman Koucký, who was not selected in a transparent competition, had created a planning doctrine which failed to respect the existing legislation, and had a very vague regulative function. The plan also omitted regulation of Prague's large transformative areas, was not connected to Prague's new strategic plan, and ignored the city's social fabric and public functions. The objective of alleviating corruption by creating a more flexible and predominantly aesthetically oriented plan was also criticized and seen as a way of giving more freedom to developers, property owners, and private interests. In other words, the *Metropolitan Plan* represented a tool which would facilitate the neoliberalization of Prague's urban space.

The *Metropolitan Plan* was heavily criticized by Prague's active civil society, especially the NGO Arnika and Pražský urbanistický kroužek (PUK; Prague urbanist group), which was created by architects and representatives of civic associations for the purpose of officially remarking on the plan as well as other new documents prepared for municipal planning purposes, such as Prague's new construction guidelines. While the PUK eventually ceased to exist, Arnika became the main coordinator of civic and

professional opposition against the *Metropolitan Plan* as the plan's authorization approached. One of the NGO's employees summed up Arnika's opposition against the *Metropolitan Plan* in the following way:

> As soon as there is a bad key regulative document, it will be hard to enforce anything else. Therefore, preparation of the new plan is probably the most important process for Prague's future. It is important that there is a strong voice which can argue against and compete with the dominant debate about development, which is primarily economic and in the spirit of late capitalist doctrine. The primary indicators are financial, not so much social. (Václav Orcígr, Arnika)

In the meantime, Hudeček also initiated a transformation of Prague's City Development Authority (URM), an institution responsible for creating Prague's planning documents, into the Prague Institute of Planning and Development (IPR). IPR had new departments responsible for innovation, such as public participation or organizing transparent architectural competitions in order to improve the architectural quality of new development in Prague. IPR also established a team of academics and urban professionals to create a new strategic plan, which was regularly discussed within the wider professional community, including activists. The main idea behind these reforms was to enable planning and development to become more comprehensive, interdisciplinary, interconnected with the work of other relevant institutions and sciences, and more open to the public. However, these plans were not respected by Roman Koucký, who prioritized the *Metropolitan Plan* over the work of other departments and professionals outside of his team. An anonymous opponent of the *Metropolitan Plan* characterized Roman Koucký as a person whose efforts to create the plan are desperate, mainly due to his 'incredible ego' and 'his expectation that everybody must listen to him'.

Internal debates and disputes regarding the *Metropolitan Plan* were nonetheless relatively concealed from the public outside of the professional community and activists. Prague institutions and media attempted to frame the city's new planning efforts through fashionable catchphrases inspired by Western approaches and trends, such as innovation, creativity, and smart cities. In this spirit, IPR launched a campaign called Ladíme

Prahu (We are tuning Prague), aimed at facilitating cooperation between the municipal government and local artist and civic initiatives in search of a new vision for Prague's development. These efforts were nonetheless short-lived. New pressing disputes in the planning arena appeared after the 2014 elections due to personnel changes and complications with newly proposed building regulations in Prague. A new project Kreativní Praha (Creative Prague) was launched in connection with the establishment of the Prague Creative Centre in a municipally owned building at the very core of the historic city centre in order to create a centrally located space for citizen activities, non-governmental organizations, and innovative companies and to counter the one-sided orientation of the city centre towards mass tourism. The next innovative step taken by IPR, in 2017, was the opening of a modern centre enabling public discussion about Prague's architecture and planning called Centre for Architecture and Metropolitan Planning (CAMP).

In 2014, Tomáš Hudeček was replaced by Prague's first female mayor, Adriana Krnáčová, from the populist party ANO, which had formed a ruling coalition together with the Social Democrats and Trojkoalice (Tricoalition), a coalition of three smaller parties consisting of the Green Party, Christian Democrats, and STAN (Mayors and Independents).[8] The new vice-mayor for urban planning was now the Green Party member Matěj Stropnický, renowned for his struggle against haphazard development in the Prague 3 district. Matěj Stropnický intended to continue reforming urban processes but, unlike Hudeček, he identified the *Metropolitan Plan* as a tool which would facilitate Prague's neoliberalization. Instead, he demanded more regulatory planning. His left-wing rhetoric however raised many controversies and led to internal problems in the ruling coalition. In April 2016, Stropnický was replaced by his party colleague Petra Kolínská. Although not using the same confrontational rhetoric, Kolínská continued to oppose the *Metropolitan Plan* and complained about poor communication with the plan's author, Roman Koucký. Mutual disagreements resulted in the denouncement of IPR's director, Petr Hlaváček, who refused to dismiss Roman Koucký; Koucký's team reacted to this by

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[8] Forming coalitions between parties running for government is a typical strategy for smaller parties which otherwise would not be able to reach the treshold limit of 5% of the popular vote allowing them to be represented in government.

collectively resigning from the institute. The mainstream debate targeted Kolínská and the Green Party for causing delays in the production of Prague's land-use plan, whose completion and authorization were legally due by the year 2020, for blocking development in Prague and, along with other activists in urban districts, for causing Prague's housing crisis and lack of available flats. The whole dispute highlighted the main division lines in different actors' perception of an ideal city. The Green Party, activists in districts, and other opponents of the *Metropolitan Plan* called for an urban model inspired by Western European welfare states with a strong regulatory function. The supporters of the *Metropolitan Plan* favoured the American urban model, with a minimal regulative function of the local state and a large role for private businesses.

In 2018, the lobby behind less regulated development took advantage of the newly incurred housing crisis in Prague and other Czech metropolises. At this time, housing prices in Prague had reached an all-time high, with 11.3 gross annual salaries needed to purchase a new standardized apartment (seventy square metres) according to the Deloitte Property Index 2018, making housing virtually unaffordable for middle-class citizens and first-time buyers. The strong development lobby blamed the housing crisis on the overt regulation of building administration, especially long building permit proceedings, due to which residential development was supposedly stagnating. The same lobby also blamed the situation on the Green Party and grassroots movements, accusing them of delaying new residential projects and blocking development in unregulated large development areas. At the same time, Arnika made an analysis which identified the housing crisis as mainly caused by housing financialization (Orcígr et al. 2018). The housing crisis then became one of the main topics of the 2018 municipal elections, which I will pay more attention to in connection with the rise of the Praha sobě (Praha for us) movement.

2.4.6 From the Backyard to the City Hall—Three Urban Districts Run by Activist Mayors

As we were able to see in the preceding lines, the 2010s became a decade of awakening grassroots activism. In many cases, groups of citizens organized around various single issues in their neighbourhoods, but sometimes these groups transformed into established associations with goals reaching beyond their local interests. This was typically driven by the group's desire to stop politicians from prioritizing private interests and their own profit at the cost of a liveable and functional city.

In several cases, different civic groups joined forces and, together, formed more powerful grassroots coalitions which could struggle for their right to participate in local urban processes and decision-making concerning local spatial production and demand that such a right is not restricted only to the political and economic elites. Such coalitions typically support each other in organizing various activities ranging from petitions, sharing information among citizens, attending council meetings, contacting and lobbying local politicians, to organizing demonstrations and protest happenings. During the course of this research, I also recorded a rise in the popularity of local referendums, a strategy some civic groups opt for in cases where other forms of protest are inefficient and disregarded by political elites.

In Prague, I recorded two cases where organizing local referenda led to the civic groups' decision to enter electoral competition, either as entirely independent candidates, together with another party, or by founding a new party—the movement party. Civic groups entering formal politics at the municipal level became a phenomenon which started to occur with increasing frequency during the 2010 elections, especially outside of Prague. The practice however proliferated during the 2014 elections, which were unprecedented in terms of the scale at which urban activists started to see electoral competition as the only viable way of making themselves heard. The 2014 elections were also unprecedented in terms of the impressive electoral success some of these movement parties managed to gain in several districts of Prague (see Pixová 2018). This was especially the case in Prague districts 7, 10, and 11. According to some of the interviewed activists, at some point removing representatives of political

corruption and non-transparency and replacing them with grassroots candidates seemed to be the only effective way of resolving some of the major urban conflicts and achieving professionalization and democratization of local urban processes. The following subsections will introduce some of the most notable examples of movements whose members were elected to local governments.

2.4.6.1 Koalice Vlasta and Its Struggle Against the Prague 10 Mafia

Over the course of this research, the district of Prague 10 represented one of the most notable examples of a municipality exploited by a non-transparent network of politicians and private business. The district was infamously connected with numerous scandals involving problematic sales of municipally owned apartments and houses, disadvantageous leasing of municipal property, and an attempt to buy a new overpriced city hall. It has also been associated with some of the most notorious 'godfathers', especially the businessman Tomáš Hrdlička, one of the most influential members of the Civic Democratic Party. Hrdlička had previously held the function of councillor in the Prague 10 government and closely cooperated with Pavel Bém, Prague's mayor between 2002 and 2010, as well as other important personalities involved in non-transparent 'political-business structures' (Klíma 2015).

The urban district of Prague 10 was therefore exposed to numerous scandals with a negative impact on the public budget, public services, spatial production, etc. With rising grassroots' awareness, confidence, and emancipation, this situation was sooner or later bound to result in social mobilizations and conflicts between the public and local decision-makers. The following outlines the gradual awakening of local grassroots activism, its organized cooperation and networking, and finally, its referendum campaign and efforts to change the status quo of local politics from within the district's government.

Struggle for a Green Trojmezí

One of the best-known controversies in the district, which also became one of the most important triggers for local grassroots mobilizations, was the struggle for a green Trojmezí, which started in 2009 and which concerned extensive residential development in a large undeveloped area between Prague districts 10, 11, and 15. The main personality behind the local mobilization was Renata Chmelová, a local resident with no previous experience in civic activism and who would become one of the most important leaders in the district's grassroots mobilizations as well as the district's mayor and, eventually, a Czech senator.

When Chmelová first heard of the plans to destroy the green area in the vicinity of her house—used by locals for leisure activities and relaxation—she had only been living in her house for three years. As she says now, one of the most important reasons for moving to this location was that local land-use plan featured a large green area near the property of the house she intended to buy. The plan did not in any way indicate that this green area could be developed. When Chmelová heard of the plans to destroy the greenery via a new residential development, she immediately mobilized thousands of local inhabitants. Within just eleven days, she managed to gather sixteen thousand signatures in her petition against the development. When asked why she decided to take such massive action and what happened afterwards, she answered:

> The main thing that really got me off my chair was the arrogance of political power, when they thought that they could change the land-use plan with one click of their finger and then turn a natural park into a housing estate, that they were sure that they could do anything. That was during the era of Bém, in 2009; one political party was making decisions about what the city would look like. There was no possibility to pull the emergency brake.

> Then we gave it [the petition with signatures] to Bém at the council meeting. He thanked us, and then they all voted to change the land-use plan. So, it was obvious that none of them cared about what sixteen thousand people thought. We said to ourselves that we would not give up and that we would at least bring our input to the discussions about the change. I approached the most active associations in the surrounding areas, and we created a

coalition, Trojmezí. I started to apply for grants, and we started to gather professional arguments as to why the change needs to be cancelled. Then the 2010 elections came, and we got half a million crowns from OSF (Open Society Fund) for a civic campaign. We managed to get a promise from all parties that they would stop the change.

Chmelová framed local political representatives as uncommunicative, uncooperative, and arrogant towards popular needs. She also pointed out the simplicity of making major changes to the approved land-use plan, which many decision-makers and stakeholders in development seem to perceive as an undisputed matter of course and a suspected rich source of corruption. Extensive corruption in the area of development and the non-transparent extraction of public money were especially associated with the political situation prior to 2010, then under the rule of the Civic Democrats and the mayor, Pavel Bém. The experience of Chmelová shows the occurrence of a new political opportunity after the 2010 elections. Although ODS stayed in power, urban development fell under the responsibility of Tomáš Hudeček, the councillor for TOP 09, who identified corruption as one of the biggest problems in Prague's urban planning and development. Around the same time, Chmelová created an alliance of civic associations potentially affected by the development in Trojmezí, which was called Koalice Trojmezí (Trojmezi coalition). With the support of Tomáš Hudeček, the alliance demanded a consensus regarding future development in Trojmezí be achieved by creating a memorandum of cooperation among all involved urban districts, developers, and citizens. Members of the coalition agreed that some parts of the green area could be built over; however, they also insisted that all future plans be discussed in a participatory manner with the residents of the surrounding areas. In the end, the whole plan failed due to some of the property owners' insistence on the original extensive development plans. Chmelová interpreted the developers' lack of interest in achieving a consensus—which consisted of downscaling local development and giving up a large part of the investment opportunities for the sake of public interest—as partly motivated by their expectation that the political leadership would eventually change and potentially become more supportive of development.

Zaostřeno na desítku, Společně pro desítku, and the Struggle Against an Overpriced City Hall

Later, in March 2012, another important civic association was founded in the Prague 10 district. The association Zaostřeno na desítku (Prague 10 under focus), with the leading personalities of Olga Richterová (in 2017, she became an elected member of the Czech parliament) and Martin Moravec, was mainly performing watchdog activities, focusing not only on controversial development but also on non-transparent public expenditures, dubious outsourcing of public services, suspicious business activities of local politicians, etc. Through their activities, Zaostřeno na desítku highlighted the interconnectedness between local urban problems and severe cases of power abuse by non-transparent private interests. The association decided to initiate a more coordinated cooperation with other active citizens in the district and started to meet with other active individuals from different local groups and organizations. They also contacted Renata Chmelová and motivated her to expand her focus from problems in her neighbourhood to their deeper systemic causes at the level of the district government. Martin Moravec remembers how these meetings eventually resulted in the creation of a grassroots initiative called Společně pro desítku (Together for ten), established for the purpose of effectuating positive changes in the district by demanding systematic communication and cooperation between local decision-makers and citizens.

> We were meeting in cafés. Sometimes we invited some other people. Once every three months we had a meeting for more people. And then one day we said to ourselves that we did not want to just fight. And then Společně pro desítku came to being. And with that, we went to the city hall telling them that we were the representatives of the citizens and that we want systematic communication with the city hall. Their first reaction was: 'Let's go communicate with each other.' We established working teams. (Martin Moravec)

Not long after the local political representatives agreed to communicate with the public, the first reciprocal step was followed by a major local controversy. Společně pro desítku learned of the local government's controversial plan to spend over 1 billion CZK (approx. 40 million EUR) to build a new district city hall. Activists interpreted the disproportionate costs of the plan, which were surrounded by many dubious circumstances and which would indebt the district for many decades ahead, as potentially motivated by non-transparent interests in the background. The Společně pro desítku initiative therefore demanded the government be more open about their plans and discuss them with the public. Activists in the end succeeded in convincing local decision-makers to allow the public to participate in the processes surrounding the planning and purchasing of the new city hall. The participatory process nonetheless took a form of a purpose-built show. Local government agreed to include two independent experts in a committee established for the purpose of purchasing or reconstructing the new city hall. One of the independent experts chosen by local civic associations was Martin Veselý, who is a colleague of mine from PragueWatch and who is also an experienced activist with a professional background in urban sciences and expertise in participatory planning. The committee was supposed to explore the possibilities of building a new city hall, finding an appropriate location, and organizing an assembly hall for the new city hall. Martin Veselý describes how the whole planning process as well as efforts to include the public ended in complete failure:

> The committee functioned for only about half a year, and then we found out that the architectural competition had been cancelled. You don't do that. That really upset us. So, I met up with the other independent member of the committee, and we decided that we did not want to be associated with such a practice. We sent a letter to the chair of the committee and told him that we wanted to resign. It nonetheless remained part of the committee's regulations that they must have two independent representatives, so they decided to recruit two new citizens instead of us. In order to find them, they sent letters to all people in the district and asked people to apply for the position. And then they chose a man who was about ninety years old and a lady who was over eighty. But what really made me raise my eyebrows was that the meeting of the committee took place on Wednesday. But people had received a CD with all the background information on Monday. The

old guy did not even have a computer to open it. These people were selected in an official way. The truth is that people interested in being involved in these committees usually tend to be seniors. In the committee they get water and sandwiches. For people of productive age, it is not that interesting. As a result, the average age of the participating citizens is high. But these two were so old that it really makes you think that the ballot must have gotten manipulated. These people had no chance of navigating through the whole process. Nobody would be able to under such conditions. (Martin Veselý)

The account of Martin Veselý demonstrates that the local government attempted to comply disingenuously with the requirements demanded by activists. However, activists interpreted this step as a sham strategy intended to pacify the activists' cry for more public participation which, from the very beginning, the politicians supposedly never took very seriously. In the end, the whole effort to find the most suitable solution for a new city hall ended in another scandal, which Martin Veselý described as follows:

There was some kind of speculative game with the land in Hagibor, which is near the Radio Free Europe building on Vinohradská Street. It was considered suitable for building the city hall. But, historically, the land used to belong to the urban district of Prague 10, but the district sold it to some companies which are associated with Tomáš Hrdlička [one of the local 'godfathers'], and the idea was that the district would buy the land back from these companies. But I have no evidence for this, there are only some indirect indications that this was the case. (Martin Veselý)

Martin Veselý pointed out that the local decision-makers' attempt to purchase land which they had previously sold to companies associated with local clientelistic networks could be interpreted as one last attempt to extract private profits out of the district's pressing need to move their offices into a new city hall. The attempt to buy land from companies which are allegedly linked to Tomáš Hrdlička, the district's former councillor and one of Prague's most influential 'godfathers', represents an example of a relatively widespread practice aimed at diverting public money into private hands. The practice consists of private people with exclusive political connections gaining access to advantageous privatization of municipal assets,

often very lucrative and strategic to the city's functioning. Later on, the very same people and their businesses gain an opportunity to sell or rent the same assets back to the municipality for much higher costs, which usually happens when the municipal government identifies the sold assets as necessary or strategically important for urban infrastructure, service provision, etc. The question of to what extent such situations arise by chance, due to a lack of strategic thinking on the part of politicians, or whether they are artificially created through the instigation of transactions in order to extract private profit from public resources remains unanswered. The costs of repurchasing or renting privatized assets would usually surpass the amount paid for the privatization of the assets by magnitudes. For example, according to the activists, the land in Hagibor was sold to a private owner for just 25 million CZK. Only one year later, decision-makers in Prague 10 considered the possibility of buying this land back and building a new city hall for a price nearing 1 billion CZK. Local activists filed a complaint against this dubious plan and managed to attract extensive media attention to the controversy. Thanks to their effort local decision-makers eventually abandoned their plan (Fig. 2.12).

Local Referendum and Political Campaign

Local activists eventually became tired of the continual attempts of local decision-makers to find ways of taking advantage of the municipal district's pressing need for a new city hall. At this point, they saw their last opportunity to stop the politicians from spending a disproportionate amount of taxpayer money in the organization of a referendum. A group of local activists involved in Společně pro desítku consequently launched a campaign called Stop miliardové radnici [Stop the billion crown city hall] and started to collect the signatures needed in order to organize a local referendum. The campaign succeeded and collected 9641 signatures, exceeding the minimum number of 8300 signatures of the district's voters needed to organize the referendum.

Subsequently, local decision-makers took several steps to undermine the referendum: First, they refused to declare the referendum during the 2014 municipal elections, attempting to prevent the referendum from having

Fig. 2.12   One of the first grassroots meetings in Prague 10, the early beginnings of Společně pro desítku (Photo: Own archive)

the attendance required for the result to be binding. The referendum was held during the second round of the senate elections, which traditionally has low attendance. Second, they tried to confound people with confusing referendum questions. In the end, the referendum had a higher turnout than the senate elections, and citizens clearly expressed their disagreement with the overpriced city hall and their agreement with the city hall's price limit, with economic advantageousness and accessibility being the main criterion for the new city hall, and with organizing an architectural competition for the city hall's design. However, with a turnout of only 35%, the results were not binding.

The politicians' attempts to undermine the referendum motivated local activists to join with other independent candidates and the local Christian Democratic Party to create the electoral group Koalice Vlasta (the Vlasta alliance), which was named after the existing city hall, Vlasta, a modernist

Fig. 2.13 Future mayor Renata Chmelová collecting signatures needed for the organization of a referendum against an overpriced city hall (Photo: Renata Chmelová)

concrete building which the existing political leadership framed as out-of-date and inadequate for the future functioning of their offices. As stated by Martin Moravec, local activists interpreted the local political leadership as unreformable and therefore saw participation in elections as the only viable way of changing the situation in the district, a strategy inspired by success stories in other municipalities. The first elections in which Koalice Vlasta ran for offices were the municipal elections in 2014. As we saw above, the electoral campaign coincided with the referendum campaign, which helped Koalice Vlasta raise awareness and gain support for their candidacy (Fig. 2.13).

By creating populist pro-democratic frames of the local urban controversy, in which citizens featured as victims of bad policies and wasteful spending on the part of local decision-makers, the campaign managed to accumulate a lot of popular support. Koalice Vlasta placed second

in the 2014 elections, winning 18% of all votes and gaining a fifth of the seats in the local government. These results far outnumbered traditional political parties, such as ODS or ČSSD. The main winner was nonetheless the populist party ANO, and activists from Koalice Vlasta therefore found themselves in government opposition, playing the role of a relatively strong and attentive governmental watchdog. In this role, activists continued to highlight especially cases of power abuse and non-transparent public expenditures, for example, through systemic funding of selected sports clubs and associations, false public procurement for the maintenance of public greenery, overpriced outsourcing of the city hall's IT services, etc. Koalice Vlasta also advocated for progressive changes in local policies, such as the introduction of a participatory budget or a more effective management and just redistribution of council flats.

In 2016, Renata Chmelová was elected as the district's representative in the Czech senate. Around the same time, Koalice Vlasta also faced a discrediting campaign organized by anonymous political opponents in the form of a custom-made tabloid magazine; members of the coalition were featured in various derogatory, ridiculing, and vilifying pictures and fabricated articles. The magazine was distributed for free to the mailboxes of all residents of the Prague 10 district. According to Koalice Vlasta, people involved in the preparation of the magazine were associated with the controversial personality Tomáš Hrdlička.

Aside from the Christian Democrats, in 2018 Koalice Vlasta also joined with STAN, a smaller centre-right party, and Desítka pro domácí (District 10 for home), another local movement party formed around the controversial sale of a popular football stadium in the district. In 2018, Koalice Vlasta won the local elections, creating a ruling coalition with the local Pirate Party and, quite surprisingly, also with Civic Democratic Party, which has entirely changed its representatives in the district. Renata Chmelová became the district's mayor. In their electoral programme, the coalition pledged to make local government more open and cooperative towards its citizens, disrupt existing clientelistic networks and their influence over the district's decision-makers, and manage public services, assets, and the whole urban space in a way which prioritizes public interests over short-term profits and private gain. How successful the coalition will be

in executing its programme, and to what extent they will be able to retain their autonomy and independence, remains to be seen.

2.4.6.2 'Saving' Jižní Město from Predatory Governments

Another notable case of an urban grassroots movement transforming into a movement party with a populist discourse occurred in the Prague 11 district on the south-eastern edge of Prague. In order to get a better understanding of the movement and its struggle for a liveable city, we must first introduce the character of the Prague 11 district and what distinguishes it from other parts of the city.

Most of the Prague 11 district is comprised of a large housing estate called Jižní Město (South city), which was built along with other peripheral housing estates in the 1970s and 1980s to solve a housing shortage in socialist Prague, and it belongs among Czechia's largest housing estates. Only a small part of the district consists of the remains of a former village with family houses. In the 1990s, many peripheral housing estates in Prague were left relatively untouched by development pressures; most development concentrated mainly on the attractive areas in the city centre, inner city, new commercial nodes, suburban zones, and areas surrounding highways. This neglect by development was further reinforced by politicians' popular perception of the estates as a relic of socialism, condemned to gradual doom under free market conditions. It was not until after the turn of the millennium that these marginalized areas begun to be exposed to investment pressures when the estates finally became recognized as an important part of Prague's housing stock,[9] and new programmes and policies aimed at their revitalization and regeneration were introduced (Maier 2003). Jižní Město offered new development opportunities and thus became exposed to a significant boom in new development, which started to densify the estate's vast spaces of undeveloped land between individual high rises and the surrounding forests and parks. Aside from that, the district has traditionally been treated by the citywide government as the city's hinterland, serving the purposes of transit traffic and as a gateway for intercity public transport.

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[9]In Prague, housing estates make up almost 40% of the city's housing stock.

Jižní Město's vast green spaces have traditionally been held in high regard by local citizens as they epitomize a pleasant counterbalance to the omnipresent concrete of the estate's tall buildings and lack of urbanistic structure. The increasing arrogance and insensitiveness of many building projects, which saw these vast spaces as an exploitable opportunity for ad hoc investment, were bound to deteriorate local living conditions and ignite numerous conflicts between proponents of new development and residents (Fig. 2.14).

Some civic associations in the district were founded as early as in the beginning of the decade, such as Hezké Jižní Město (Pretty south city), which became mobilized in response to a new development in the forested area of Milíčovský Les and, later, represented an instrumental mobilizing structure for the emergence of new civic associations searching for advice in starting their own civic struggles. A lot of new associations mobilized especially in the second half of the decade during the rule of then mayor

Fig. 2.14 Combination of contemporary (left side) and socialist development (far right) near the Opatov metro station in Jižní Město (Photo: Own archive)

Dalibor Mlejnský, a controversial member of the Civic Democratic Party suspected of corruption, EU funds' abuse, and expensive privatizations of municipally owned property. He was also denounced later on for commissioning the stalking of local politicians and activists. Mlejnský supported numerous controversial development projects in the district, triggering the response of local citizens and the creation of new civic associations. One of them, the association Zelené Roztyly (Green Roztyly), became mobilized around a development project called Rezidence Letokruhy, a large dense complex of apartment and office buildings on the border of a large forest park, Krčský Les, near the metro station Roztyly. Approximately one thousand people signed two petitions against the project. In this case, local politicians attempted to frame the development project as an outcome of a responsible public–private cooperation and announced that the sale of the land for the development was conditioned by financial compensation from the investor. However, they never announced what the financial means would be used for. This was interpreted by activists as a legal form of corruption. Consequently, the Zelené Roztyly association highlighted the case in the media and framed local authorities as perpetrators of the area's degradation in exchange for dubious profit. In the end, the activists won their struggle for the green edge of the forest, but some of the legal proceedings took five years before judicial decisions were made in favour of the citizens' struggle (Fig. 2.15).

Another civic association mobilized by another misdeed of Dalibor Mlejnský was an old, already existing civic association named Chodov, which had been founded by the residents of the remnants of the neighbourhood's original settlement of family houses and served predominantly cultural purposes. The activities of this small association were previously not concerned with local politics. This nonetheless changed when Dalibor Mlejnský became the district's mayor. Chodov consequently became increasingly engaged in criticizing the mayor's activities, especially his engagement in extensive privatizations of public space for the purpose of large-scale development which was disrespectful of the surroundings. The biggest mobilizations occurred around the municipally supported proposal to build a high-rise office in Litochlebské Square, named after the former village of Litochleby which had existed in the area prior to the construction of the housing estates and today forms only a few remaining

Fig. 2.15 Vast spaces between buildings are like a lure for new building projects and densification (Photo: Own archive)

streets of family houses. The development proposal required the removal of World War I and World War II memorial tablets in the square and the felling of the surrounding linden grove. The Chodov association consequently launched a petition against the removal of the memorial site, and in less than two weeks, they had managed to collect the signatures of 1445 citizens. Due to the substantial media coverage of the case, the hitherto unknown association then became widely known and received wide popular support, especially among locals. Although first formed by the dwellers of the original settlement, the association then recruited new members from other parts of the district and expanded its focus to the entire area of Jižní Město.

When activists approached Dalibor Mlejnský, the district mayor, with signed petitions against the urban controversies, they were told that their opinion was inferior to the opinion of the democratically elected mayor. Joining up also with some of the local housing cooperatives, associations of

condominium owners, and local Christian Democrats, the different civic groups decided to form a movement party called Hnutí pro Prahu 11 (The movement for Prague 11), which participated in the 2010 municipal elections. The main goal of Hnutí pro Prahu 11 (HPP 11) was to stop the districts' controversial development and disrupt local networks of corruption between politicians and non-transparent businesses. The movement's activities against the local political establishment and their development projects ignited a fierce conflict in which activists faced numerous counterattacks. These counterattacks ranged from malicious violent assaults, such as the notorious case of unknown aggressors violently beating up the movement's leader, Jiří Štyler, or spying on some of the movement's members through a private detective agency ABL.[10] More subtle and sophisticated counterattacks took the form of a disinformation campaign, assumed to be run by people allied with local political leaders. According to one of the members of HPP 11, a fictive civic association was founded only three months prior to the local elections in 2010 in order to spread information which would paint local activists in a bad light. The association issued a magazine, whose content was described by one of activists from HPP 11 in the following way:

> They featured assaults against our activity, which were documented by various articles, in which individual people were attacked for accepting hush money from developers in return for not blocking their projects and so on. In the end we found out that, at the time this magazine was issued, there were letters from the mayor appearing in various places around the city, and they had very similar content. At the same time, they were spreading anonymous leaflets, which again repeated the same stuff from the magazine. Eventually, we learned that the originator of the magazine was the councillor Janeček, who was at that time a member of ODS, and this was his way of trying to discredit us.

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[10]The detective agency ABL is owned by Vít Bárta, a controversial leader of a now-defunct populist political party Public Affairs. Bárta was a member of parliament between 2010 and 2013 and also the minister of transportation between 2010 and 2011. He resigned from his political functions due to a scandalous revelation that he was secretly financing members of his political party, buying their loyalty.

It later became known that the attempts to frame HPP 11 as fake activists who blackmail developers by demanding bribes in exchange for not blocking their projects were in fact orchestrated by local politicians. Despite these attempts, activists succeeded in gaining positions in the local government. In the 2010 local elections, they won nine out of thirty-nine mandates. During the following four years, the elected representatives from HPP 11, as the government's opposition, continued to struggle against the ruling coalition's support for local development plans and put much effort into keeping the public informed about the government's factual and potential misdeeds. However, in terms of pushing forward more substantial policies and procedural and institutional changes, the movement did not have a strong enough mandate. The biggest success of HPP 11 was their move to bring a suit against the unlawful practices of the local political leadership. Mayor Mlejnský and several councillors were consequently investigated by the police and finally charged with corruption.

The deepening legitimation crisis of the ruling coalition opened a window of political opportunity for the activists. In 2014, HPP 11 won the elections, and its leader, Jiří Štyler, became the district's mayor. With this mandate, HPP 11 managed to halt controversial development projects in the district but also faced animosity from their political antagonists, as well as complaints and threats of legal charges from stakeholders involved in local development. The movement nonetheless enjoyed the support of residents as they increased the government's transparency, tirelessly provided residents with information about building interventions and projects in their neighbourhood, and instigated several participatory projects. They also initiated citywide debates about the insufficient powers of Prague's districts, due to which district mayors have less power than mayors in small autonomous municipalities. Pointing to the principle of subsidiarity, Štyler demanded that Prague 11 have the same powers as an independent municipality and as such receives larger financial allocations. Based on critiques of the new *Metropolitan Plan* by local citizens, he also complained about Prague's land-use planning being commissioned in a top-down way by the main government and without allowing districts to create their own regulatory plans, due to which decisions about peripheral urban neighbourhoods are made by people who do not live there and do not regard these areas as fully fledged municipalities. As one movement's member

Zdeněk Kvítek put it, 'They don't understand that the people here don't want to have a bus terminal instead of a central square'.

The efforts of Jiří Štyler were nonetheless interpreted by his opponents and the media as separatist attempts. In 2016, after only two years in office, the opposition removed the movement's vice-mayor for finances, Ladislav Kos, and the vice-mayor for environment, Šárka Zdeňková, supposedly due to their inability to do their job properly. Ladislov Kos was nonetheless later voted into the Czech Senate by the citizens of Prague 11, proving his legitimacy in the eyes of local voters. Consequently, the mayor Jiří Štyler was removed as well, particularly because of his endeavour to create a regulatory plan for the district which would have hampered local development. After two years in a fragile ruling coalition with their political adversaries, he lost the mayoral post and the movement was sent into opposition. Unfortunately for HPP 11, two of its members deserted the movement and joined the new ruling coalition. This shift in power again allowed the traditional parties to regain their influence over the district and resume local building projects. In the elections of 2018, HPP 11 won again and almost formed a ruling coalition with the local Pirate Party. However, they were missing one mandate and the rest of the parties coalesced against them, sending them once again into opposition so as to continue business as usual.

2.4.6.3   Citizens from Prague 7 on Their Quest to Save the City

Out of the new movement parties with grassroots origins, the most notable has been Praha sobě (Prague for us). It first started operating in the Prague 7 district under the title Praha 7 sobě (Prague 7 for us), where it experienced extraordinary success in the 2014 and 2018 district polls. Prior to the elections in 2018, the movement also formed the citywide movement, Praha sobě, which placed third in the elections and became part of the new ruling coalition of the entire city. Its subsidiary, Praha 1 sobě (Prague 1 for us), also found success, managing to gain the mayoral post in Prague's city centre, the historic district of Prague 1. The grand story of Praha sobě

however originated from more modest grassroots beginnings and will be outlined in what follows.

Non-sensical Projects and the Rise of the Letná sobě Association

Some of the key personalities of the district movement Praha 7 sobě started their engagement with local urban affairs in the Letná neighbourhood, which is a popular residential and historical part of the Prague 7 district located above the cliffs on the Vltava River's left bank. Unlike the historic core on the other side of the river, Letná has the spirit of what Prague's centre used to look like before becoming a commercialized tourist ghetto. Moreover, it is surrounded by large beautiful parks and has many cultural institutions. These qualities nonetheless seemed to be taken for granted by the district's leaders, represented predominantly by the Civic Democratic Party. Instead of cultivating the high quality of the built environment, they actively supported its degradation by authorizing controversial development projects and wasting the municipal budget on ill-advised public projects.

In the second half of 2010, a concurrence of several controversial building projects planned for the Letenská pláň (Letná plain), a large empty plain in Letná Park, mobilized a small group of local residents who coincidently met at the public introduction of the new development. Three architects and one art historian, out of which some were already active in other non-profit organizations, were so outraged by the proposed projects that they decided to form an initiative called Letná sobě [Letná for us]. The goal of the group was to promote a better-built environment in the neighbourhood and to instigate a debate about the quality of the neighbourhood's architecture and urban development. Their first activity was to make a detailed map of the neighbourhood and describe its main qualities:

> We were walking around all the streets, getting to know all the corners. And then there was an exhibition *Čí je to město* [Whose city is it?], where we published a paper 'Letná sobě', where we divided the problems of Letná into 10 phases or topic groups: public space, transportation, new buildings, greenery, heritage. And then we did a series of events for every topic—lectures, site-specific picnics, a barbeque. We were also able to use the space

in the National Technical Museum, so it was quite professional, we had good graphics. We also did a petition against the shopping mall Stromovka. We brought it to the city hall; we got into a conflict with the city hall. We also did commented tours focusing on the topics. With my partner, we were mostly doing workshops where things were getting made. They were events with a community character, not only professional. Then we ran out of topics. But everything had great attendance. A lot of people came. Richard [Richard Biegel from Klub Za starou Prahu] is a good speaker, we shared it via Facebook, leaflets, we even had ambassadors and noticeboards in some of the houses. We had lots of meetings. Then we started to do more sophisticated things, for example, participating in Zažít město jinak [a big event with street parties around the whole city] and exhibitions. And then other people joined us. (Kateřina Videnová)

The action repertoire of Letná sobě was quite versatile and largely benefited from its members' high social and cultural capital, which allowed them to organize quite professional events. Some of their protest activities were framed positively, for example, by building on the neighbourhood's qualities and offering an image of an ideal city. Other activities were more confrontational, openly targeting local politicians and controversial development projects.

Referendum Against the Overpriced City Hall

Throughout 2011, further events in the district of Prague 7 became driven by two controversial plans promoted by the district's political leaders. One of them was the plan of a private development company to build a shopping mall in close vicinity to Stromovka and the National Gallery, mentioned above by Kateřina Videnová. Letná sobě organized a petition against the intention of local politicians to sell a large municipally owned vacant lot for this purpose. The other project, which raised even more outrage and criticism, was the intention of the local political leaders to build a new city hall, a project which was challenged by citizens for several reasons. First, the location of the new city hall was planned for a less accessible site than the existing city hall. Secondly, the architectural design of the building was not selected on the basis of an architectural competition

or in consultation with the citizenry. Most importantly, the costs of the project were projected to reach the sky-high amount of 1 billion CZK (almost 39 million EUR) plus another approximately half billion crowns to be paid in interest.

While both controversial plans, the shopping mall and the new city hall, were on the programme of the council meeting in December 2011, Letná sobě approached several active people from the Prague 7 district and asked them to attend the meeting. One of the attendants came in the guise of St. Nicholas and in a humorous speech criticized the decision-makers' plans, threatening the political leaders to organize a referendum should they approve the overpriced city hall. The mysterious speaker in disguise was Jan Čižinský, a local resident, a member of KDU-CSL, a high school teacher, and a former scout. Jan Čižinský consequently became the leading personality of the mobilization against the overpriced city hall. He was soon joined by other active citizens and, together, actively endeavoured to raise public awareness about the controversy. Kamil Vavřinec Mareš, also a member of KDU-CSL, was instrumental in organizing online broadcasting of the council's meetings:

> In cooperation with the independent TV Praha 7 and the organization Prague Watchdog, I started to organize online broadcasting of the council meetings so that as many people as possible could find out about this pandemonium and were able to watch it directly from home. Almost nobody from the public could fit into the boardroom; officials had to go there in order to fill up the space. The protests of the former coalition against this broadcasting just assured me of my opinion that we must persist in this struggle. (Kamil Vavřinec Mareš)

The quote above shows that activists in Prague 7 framed the political situation in the district as non-transparent chaos created by politicians to hide their background interests funded by the money of citizens. Public awareness about the overpriced city hall quickly increased and resulted in the formation of a preparatory committee for organizing a local referendum. This coalition was meant to be a civic non-party project, but it also included representatives of the government's political opposition, such as members of the Green Party and TOP 09, as well as representatives

of various activist groups, including Letná sobě and others. The committee started to collect signatures from residents, of which they needed approximately thirty-five hundred, which is 10% of the district's voters. In the end, the committee managed to gather thirty-six hundred signatures. According to the organizers, the success of the referendum consisted in the possibility of framing the issue as something which affects all citizens:

> Each office spot simply cost around 5 million CZK [194,000 EUR]. That became the symbol. Everybody knows how much they bought their apartment for. If one spot in an office building costs as much as a 100 square meter apartment with a garage, it is obvious that there must be a mistake somewhere. (Jan Čižinský)

This frame was successful in creating a feeling of collective grievance, making all citizens feel robbed by the intention of local politicians to use their tax money for an overpriced, controversial, and undemocratically selected project. Thanks to gathering enough signatures, the movement slowly constituting around Jan Čižinský was entitled to demand the district's leaders hold a referendum. In the referendum, the committee proposed the following suggestions:

1. The costs for the new city hall should have a financial ceiling of 500 million CZK (half of the cost amount planned by the political leaders).
2. The ongoing process of selecting a new city hall should be abolished, and a new one should be announced in accordance with the Act on Public Procurement and the Concession Act, with preference to building on a plot that belongs to the district of Prague 7.
3. The main criterion for the selection of the city hall should especially be its economic advantageousness and transport accessibility for citizens of the Prague 7 district.
4. The architectural design of the city hall should be selected based on an architectural competition in accordance with the guidelines of the Czech Chamber of Architects.

In their last desperate attempt to prevent the referendum from happening, local political leaders commissioned a legal analysis of the referendum's

feasibility. According to the expertise of the Ministry of the Interior, the questions posed in the referendum were posed in an ambiguous way. Local political leaders therefore declined to hold the referendum. The referendum committee nonetheless appealed this decision to the city court, which agreed with the expertise from the Ministry of the Interior. The committee therefore appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court, which ruled in favour of the referendum, claiming that the principle of enabling citizens to express their opinion is of higher importance than the ambiguity of the questions. The Supreme Administrative Court also commanded the referendum be held at the same time as the first round of presidential elections. This was an immense opportunity for the referendum to be successful as the concurrence of the two polls ensured a high turnout, without which the result of the referendum would not be valid.

Decision-makers in the district lost their last chance to prevent the referendum from happening and instead attempted to confound voters by adding more questions to the referendum. The referendum committee therefore recommended citizens leave these supposititious questions unanswered. The turnout at the referendum was sufficient, and the majority of the district's voters agreed with the suggestions of the activists.

The Rise of Praha 7 sobě

Luckily for citizens, the existing political leadership had to freeze its attempts to buy a new city hall from the moment activists managed to collect enough signatures to hold the local referendum. The newly created movement around Jan Čižinský was nonetheless afraid that local political leaders would not stop passing terrible policies. Enthusiastic to continue their activities, members of the movement decided to run in the municipal elections in 2014. Jan Čižinský saw this step as the last opportunity to reform the district's political environment.

> I actually felt like it was a hugely important battle, and it was necessary to either lose it, and in that case give it all up in Prague 7, or win, and then perhaps change it here. And I think that what played an important role was that I already knew that a similar initiative succeeded in Semily [a small town in North Bohemia]. The plan was to see whether the people

here would be indifferent, in which case there would be no point in trying, and we could just check Prague 7 off as nonreformable and not worth our efforts. The other scenarios are that it might be worthy, but we might not succeed the way we expect. Or we might succeed. (Jan Čižinský)

Despite being a member of the Christian Democratic Party and working with a few other local party members, Jan Čižinský wanted to enter the electoral competition with a non-partisan project that was strictly grass-roots in character. Later on, this decision was subject to a lot of critique and interpreted as Čižinský's attempt to gain electoral success by disavowing his involvement with traditional politics. Most of the members of the movement, which was called Praha 7 sobě (Prague 7 for us), were active independent citizens from the district, many of who were involved in various civic associations, such as Letná sobě; local groups engaging in different protests and lobby efforts, for example, parents complaining about the insufficient capacity of the district's preschool institutions and people involved in various conflicts over land-use; and numerous other volunteers and supporters.

In order to be perceived as a group of independent civic candidates detached from traditional parties, Praha 7 sobě did not want to just simply register as a new party. Instead, they decided to run in the local elections as an independent civic movement, and their candidacy therefore required the collection of 7% of the local voters' signatures. According to Jakob Hurrle, one of the founding members of Praha 7 sobě and my colleague from PragueWatch, collecting signatures presented a great opportunity to raise public awareness about their existence and candidacy:

> We perceived it as a rather awesome tactic in gaining civic support. It also gave us a civic character; the movement was presented as a non-partisan project. Even though it also involved some of the people from the government's opposition. We were successful in presenting it to the citizens and then winning on a large scale in the elections. (Jakob Hurrle)

In autumn 2014, Praha 7 sobě celebrated large success. Not only had they managed to collect enough signatures and were therefore able to run in the local elections but with 43% of the votes, they also experienced a

spectacular electoral victory. Jan Čižinský became the district's mayor, and Praha 7 sobě far outpaced the second- and third-placed parties, gaining only eleven and 10% of the votes, respectively. Although there were more cases of similar civic initiatives running in the 2014 municipal elections in other Prague districts, as we saw in the earlier examples of Prague 10 and Prague 11, Praha 7 sobě was by far the most successful among them, gaining a strong majority and the ability to choose partners to form a ruling coalition with.

On the basis of the after-election negotiations, Praha 7 sobě formed a coalition with the Green Party, with whom it shared a similar programme, and was able to start extensive reforms of the existing city hall and the entrenched practices of their political and bureaucratic predecessors, as well as intervene in various ongoing building projects. According to Jakob Hurrle, one of the hardest parts was to accomplish a demanding and profound exchange of the existing personnel in the city hall. Despite riding off the previous political leadership associated with the non-transparent abuse of political power and of the public budget and assets, it was soon obvious that some of the administrative workers were also involved in entrenched practices and strongly resisted the changes imposed by their new leaders. People who were involved in non-transparent practices and in opposition to the new leadership were dismissed and replaced by new employees. Many cases of suspected crimes and misdeeds were reported to the police. Jan Čižinský nonetheless complained that police investigations were too slow. In one case, a fraudulent handling of public money was dealt with in court, but all accused suspects ended up being cleared and released. According to the words of several activists from Praha 7 sobě, their political predecessors left the city hall in chaos and an incredible mess. The court therefore concluded that it was impossible to find anybody guilty.

Other reforms included the tasks of increasing the local government's economic transparency, instigating participative negotiations with developers, securing enough preschool capacity, hindering further privatizations of public services and amenities, and pursuing an inclusive social housing programme. The new government also improved the district's magazine, *Hobulet*, previously reputed for spreading manipulative news and propaganda of the former political leadership, including various efforts to delegitimize local activist initiatives.

Becoming an All-City Movement–Praha sobě!

Throughout their work in Prague 7, the movement nonetheless kept running into obstacles and difficulties posed by the limitations of their power and competencies within the district. Many areas and competencies were under the jurisdiction of Prague's main government, whose management of the city was just as chaotic and non-transparent as the management of the former government in Prague 7. Jakob Hurrle summed up some of the main obstacles posed by Prague's main government and its style of urban management:

> We were annoyed by lots of little things, it was a catastrophe. Everything was taking forever. Take cleaning, for example; money was pouring somewhere, and nobody knew where. The city was paying for some cleaning services which were supposed to do cleaning in Prague 7, but no one ever saw the cleaning company. It is a whole list of things, it doesn't matter whether ANO or ODS [in the main government of Prague] is there, the current coalition [coalition between 2014 and 2018] is useless, the system that is there, that has been created there, and has been there for thirty years, requires a complete removal of the old political parties. Also, there are a lot of big areas in Prague 7 which are managed by the main government, such as the exhibition place, the marketplace, or Štvanice [an island in the Vltava River]. Those were three critical points where we could observe the clumsiness of the system, that nothing much is happening, or if it does, it never goes in the right direction. Even the sidewalks are managed by a city-owned company, and whatever you do, you need to get the permission of the TSK [Technical Road Administration—a joint stock company of the City of Prague]. The more you see it, the more you understand. We also had some empty apartments which we refurbished and leased to people, but we knew that once we ran out of apartments, we would have no more space for other people in need. We don't have the means or the land for building new apartments. You cannot solve these problems at the level of the district, things such as homelessness; one municipal district cannot solve it if the rest of the city does not do anything at all. So, we realized that if things are to improve in Prague 7, especially the things we were the most concerned about, we could not do anything about them without also changing municipal authorities.

Fig. 2.16   Bikers' protest against the cycling ban in the city centre preceding the victory of *Praha 1 sob*ě (Photo: Ladislav Kerleha)

In his account, Jakob Hurrle frames the main government of Prague as corrupt, ineffective, useless, and unreformable unless the traditional parties are driven out of power. Because of the poor policy outcomes of Prague's main government, Praha 7 sobě was unable to deal with problems in their district which did not fall under their own jurisdiction and had to be dealt with by the main government. Praha 7 sobě was particularly concerned with the catastrophic state of some of the city's infrastructure, which they could not fix without the cooperation of the main government. The most famous was the case of the Libeňský most (Libeň bridge), which connects the districts of Prague 7 and Prague 8, and specifically the neighbourhoods of Holešovice and Libeň. Municipal authorities diagnosed the bridge as being in a disastrous state and proposed its demolition. In 2016, this intention was challenged by a civic initiative called Libeňský most nebourat, nerozšiřovat (Don't demolish or widen Libeň bridge), which was supported by Jan Čižinský and Praha 7 sobě (Fig. 2.16).

The increasing frustration of Praha 7 sobě with Prague's main government resulted in the movement's decision to transform into a citywide

movement and run in the 2018 municipal elections in order to take control of citywide issues. At first, some of the members thought it was a crazy and unrealistic idea, but most of them also found it an interesting opportunity to see whether their success in Prague 7 could be repeated at the level of the entire city. As a result, they founded a new movement called simply Praha sobě (Prague for us). Members of Praha sobě again decided against registering a new political party and for the second time attempted to run as a non-partisan movement of independent candidates. This strategy was more difficult, as participation of unregistered movements in the electoral competition was conditioned by the collection of signatures from 7% of all voters in Prague—almost a hundred thousand signatures. The movement's members had experienced this strategy as a useful grassroots method of campaigning and as a good way of reinforcing the civic nature of their initiative. They started to collect signatures in January 2018, during the presidential elections, and with the help of members and volunteers around the city established several sub-branches in various districts of Prague. To sign one's consent that Praha sobě could run in the elections was also possible in many shops, cafes, etc. Quite naturally, the campaign had the biggest support in the district of Prague 7, where people were happy with the movement's achievements.

The Praha sobě electoral campaign mainly took place via Facebook and personal contact in the streets. Volunteers gave out leaflets with Praha sobě's programme. The programme included many progressive and largely socially oriented steps, for example: increasing the number of public apartments with affordable rent; dignified salaries for teachers (long criticized for being well below average salaries in Prague); more accessible services for senior citizens; professional administration of the city's budget; easier transfer from cars to public transit on the city's periphery; elimination of Prague's visual smog (regulating advertising in public space); public transit improvements; sufficient preschool capacity; preventing the displacement of universities, schools, and public institutions from the city centre; safer pavements for pedestrians; reconstruction of Libeňský most, etc. (Fig. 2.17).

In the end, Praha sobě succeeded in collecting the required percentage of signatures and placed third in the municipal elections, with almost 17% of the votes. They formed a coalition with the Pirate Party, which placed

Fig. 2.17 *Praha sob*ě celebrating its success in the citywide elections in front of Prague's city hall (Photo: Martin Mádl)

second with a similar percentage, and Spojené síly pro Prahu (United forces for Prague), a coalition of smaller right-wing and centre-right parties which placed fourth with slightly above 16% of the votes. All three parties involved in the coalition had a shared desire to prevent the rule of ODS and ANO in Prague and spent a long time negotiating various compromises which would allow them to create a common programme. Praha sobě had to give up the mayoral post, its members instead occupying vice-mayor positions responsible for transportation (with activist Adam Scheinherr from the grassroots initiative to save the bridge in Libeň becoming the vice-mayor for transportation), culture, social and health care, and the financial budget. Housing became the responsibility of the Pirate Party and urban development the responsibility of Spojené síly pro Prahu— namely Petr Hlaváček, former director of the Institute of Planning and Development and a big proponent of the *Metropolitan Plan*. This later created some of the first frictions in the coalition. The right-wing part of the coalition retained their critique of overly regulated development in Prague, which according to them slowed down the building of new

apartments and was responsible for the sky-high housing costs. At the same time, they fought against the progressive ideas of the Pirate Party and Praha sobě aimed at regulating the speculative practices of real estate investors in Prague, framing them as communist interference with private ownership.

The movement Praha sobě also continued its mission in its domestic district of Prague 7 through its original local branch of Praha 7 sobě, where they gained 55% of the votes in the 2018 elections. The new branch of Praha 1 sobě (Prague 1 for Us) was also founded relatively spontaneously in the Prague 1 district, and its leader Pavel Čižinský, the brother of Jan Čižinský and a lawyer specializing in providing legal help to migrants and activists, became the district's mayor. This was an unexpected achievement, which mainly benefited from the fame of Praha sobě, and was much welcome in the city centre affected by touristification, commercialization, and twenty-nine years of exploitation by the previous governments' neoliberal policies and non-transparent private interests. In its programme, Praha 1 sobě pledged to serve the citizens instead of the tourist industry. This included modernizing the Na Františku hospital, and other local health-care services, removing tacky and loud tourist attractions, launching the so-called night-time mayor to deal with problems connected with night-life disturbances, reducing traffic, ensuring better protection of historic heritage, reducing visual smog and kitsch, regulating Airbnb, and many others. At the time of writing, many of these promises were already in the process of realization, although some of them, especially those connected to the intended traffic reduction, also brought many new challenges.

Around the time of concluding this writing, and in the midst of the globally acknowledged state of climate and environmental crisis and the sway of global mass-mobilizations of youth against the inaction of national governments on climate change, Prague's ruling coalition has been dealing with high civic pressure to declare a state of climate emergency. While the Pirate Party mayor was hesitant and sceptical, Jan Čižinský took the initiative and declared a state of climate emergency in the district of Prague 7. Quickly after, the city as a whole endorsed a climate 'commitment' to reach carbon neutrality by 2050. It will be very interesting to observe what other policies, activities, and potential frictions ensue from this step, and whether these promises are not just rhetorical.

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3

Analytical Part

The concluding analysis is supported through the theories and contexts introduced in Chapter 1 of this book, including my earlier research findings (Pixová and Sládek 2016; Pixová and Novák 2016; Pixová 2018) and my insider knowledge. It is based on the empirical data collected within the four case studies presented in Chapter 2. Aside from that, it also draws on numerous expert and informal interviews, which I conducted with activists, urban professionals, and politicians across the country and, more generally, from my long-term insider observations of urban change and grassroots movements in Czechia, and especially Prague, as well as other countries. In the following sections, I will focus on the way different types of activists tend to frame urban problems and their solutions, and how these different groups of activists cooperate and create coalitions. After that I will show the role played by mobilizing structures and political opportunities in the success of the researched movements. Finally, I am assessing individual movements in each case study from the perspective of their ability to successfully influence local political processes and resolve local urban conflicts.

3.1   Framing Urban Problems and Their Solutions

As I outlined in the introduction, paying attention to the way activists frame urban problems in their cities has had a profound effect on the design of this research and has helped in revealing how urban conflicts are related to local problems of democratic deficit and power abuse. Activists' understanding of the problem also determines the changes and solutions they are proposing, as well as their demands and goals and the contentious repertoire they choose to employ in order to achieve them.

The way in which activists interpret urban problems and articulate their demands depends on various factors, such as the focus and level of the activists' professional expertise and education, political identity, social class, previous activist experience, and level of engagement; or, for example, on how they relate to the contested issues, their city, and their community; and also on what they perceive to be at stake, and so on. My experience in the Czech environment has revealed that we can divide three general approaches to framing urban problems and their solutions, which of course can partly overlap.

3.1.1   Nimby Activists

Many urban conflicts are fought in the spirit of nimby by citizens who are concerned with a concrete issue in an area in close vicinity of their homes. Their interpretations of urban problems are often simplified and subjective. Typical nimby activists usually challenge problematic issues only from the perspective of their own self-interest and their own emotions. New development might, for example, spoil the view from their homes; new roads can bring in more traffic, noise, and pollution; social housing will drive in less affluent citizens or ethnic minorities; etc. A critique of the broader socio-economic or environmental context is less common in protests which are pursued in the strictly nimby spirit. Demands made by nimby activists are usually quite simple too: They are not demanding institutional changes or the introduction of new practices or procedural

changes, they simply want to prevent change near their homes from happening and demand a stop to it. Their strategies include administrative appeals and objections aimed at delaying the implementation of projects, letter writing to politicians, lawsuits, and personal visits to local council meetings. In Czech cities, nimby protests have had a damaging impact on public acceptance of citizen engagement and grassroots activism, especially when nimby activism conflicts with the interests of the public. Similar cases contribute to the negative public perception of all urban activists as self-interested or ideologically biased people and saboteurs. In Prague, for example, the housing crisis is often blamed on activists who are reputed to be obstructing the construction of new residential projects, without acknowledging that there are also activists who do so due to broader concerns, such as insufficient planning regulations on new development, the potential violation of the law, power abuse, etc. Complicating matters, the public engagement of residents in Prague 1 against night-time nuisance in the city centre, is sometimes regarded as a form of nimbyism. Some people have a tendency to see the city centre dwellers' right to a liveable neighbourhood in conflict with other people's right to party at night.

3.1.2 Local Activists

Some activists engage in urban conflicts triggered by a problem in the vicinity of their homes, but unlike nimby activists, they have a considerably more comprehensive understanding of urban problems in relation to their social and environmental impacts, legal framework, municipal budget, and associated political and urban processes, as well as cases of power abuse, undemocratic policymaking, etc. Their frames of problematic urban issues are not based only on their subjective sentiments and grievances but instead their frames contextualize the issue's potential negative implications for urban space, local society, and the natural environment and, more broadly, for democratic development, justice, sustainability, etc. In comparison with nimby, these activists are also capable of employing more comprehensive and overarching frames for their demands. Activists in the case studies presented in this book were, for example, linking new development to the destruction of environment and the natural habitats of bird species,

and in some cases contacted environmental agencies for help in this matter or demanded natural protection be declared in the threatened area. In the Prostějov case, activists framed the local demolition of the historic barracks as a way of erasing the remnants of their city's heritage and genius loci. In Jablonec nad Nisou, activists argued that suburbanization was directly linked to the depopulation of the city centre and negatively affected the surrounding landscape. In České Budějovice, activists pointed to the natural hazards potentially caused by an ill-advised flood protection project. In other cases, activists complained about the politician's lack of vision, long-term strategies and sustainability in planning and development, or shortcomings in building projects selected without citizen participation, such as the city halls in Prague 7 and Prague 10. In Prague 11, activists complained about the negative implications of the densification of the housing estates on the quality of local life.

Solutions proposed by activists with this more complex understanding of urban problems as well as the strategies which they use to achieve them depend on many factors, out of which the most important is the responsiveness and cooperativeness of the local government. If the government is responsive, activists are satisfied when they manage to prevent particular undesired changes from happening through use of an action repertoire similar to that of nimby activists. If the government is not responsive, they progress to other strategies, such as happenings; performances; organizing educational and informative events for the public and politicians; awareness raising through media and printed materials; social media campaigns; networking; cooperating with other activists, professionals and organizations; commissioning alternative opinions and solutions; etc. In desperate situations, they may also attempt to obstruct the implementation of undesired plans by appealing and objecting to administrative procedures, additional lawsuits, sending complaints to superior governing bodies (such as ministries), etc. It is often in these desperate situations that activists also start focusing on a critique of various aspects of the government's undemocratic practices and start to interpret local problems through the corruptness of politicians, suspected background deals and secret vested interests, clientelistic networks, manipulated procurement, abused EU funds, etc. Sometimes it is the only way activists can make

sense of the refusal of politicians to comply with popular demands. However, they rarely make these frames public to avoid counterattacks and accusations of aspersion, and when they do, they emphasize the fact that these are just suspicions, not hard and proven facts.

Most local activists predominantly focus on a particular problem in their city and do not try to change entrenched processes and practices. In some cases, they try to change processes and practices which are reinforcing a closed political opportunity structure, such as the reluctance of politicians to communicate with citizens, non-transparent decision-making, and limiting citizen access to council meetings, relevant documents, contracts, etc., as well as various dubious strategies employed by politicians to silence critical voices and conceal unlawful practices—by filling council meetings, for example, with their administrative staff in order to prevent citizen attendance, making council meetings early in the morning and during summer holidays, publishing biased and manipulative information in the local media, etc. In such situations, activists demand the government abide by the law, become more transparent, open, and accessible for citizens, and so on. Activists frequently propose that urban governments establish a department responsible for citizen participation or introduce a participative budget which would allow citizens to propose their own improvements for the city. Case studies in this book have nonetheless shown that activists have a hard time convincing politician to even have one-off meetings with citizens. We saw, for example, activists in Jablonec nad Nisou, Prostějov, and České Budějovice ask local politicians to organize information meetings for citizens, wanting them to make their development plans more transparent. When the government in České Budějovice and Prostějov failed to do so, activists organized the meetings themselves and invited their own experts. In Jablonec nad Nisou and in the Prague 11 district, activists witnessed how meetings organized by traditional politicians were manipulative and dismissive of citizens' opinions. In the Prague 10 district, activists saw traditional parties create a participatory process which was just a sham strategy aimed at creating an image of inclusive decision-making, in which citizens are powerless to disrupt the decisions of politicians. In many cities across Czechia, activists have also been lobbying for council meetings to be broadcast online and

all relevant documents be made publicly available on government web-
sites. While in many cities, such as in Prostějov, activists have achieved
regular streaming of council meetings, in the case of the Prague 7 district,
activists had to organize the broadcasting of the key meetings themselves.
As we saw in the presented case studies, in cases where activist efforts to
improve communication between politicians and citizens failed, their last
resort was to move on to the organization of a referendum. The fact that
politicians almost unanimously attempted to undermine even these efforts
led to the conviction of activists in Prague 7 and Prague 10 that the only
way of improving the situation in their urban district was by participating
in the electoral competition and gaining positions of power in the local
government.

3.1.3 Professional Activists and Professionals in Activism

The third group of activists consists of people from various specialized
professions, such as architects, urban planners, lawyers, social scientists,
environmentalists, historians, conservationists, etc. Some of them work in
various NGOs, such as Arnika, Nesehnutí, Auto*Mat, reSITE, and others,
and activism is part of their profession. But urban grassroots movements
in Czechia also involve many people with a professional background who
simply take part in different urban struggles or start their own civic asso-
ciations, initiatives, campaigns, petitions, and so forth while retaining
another job. In comparison with nimby and local activists, activists with
professional backgrounds typically have more comprehensive concerns
that encompass the whole city as a complex. Instead of focusing on single
issues, they understand the issues' interconnectedness with urban processes
and political structure and can identify the main inadequacies and short-
comings in the procedural and institutional status quo, as well as the deeper
causes of why such status quo was established and entrenched. These pro-
fessionals may engage in protests against particular urban problems by, for
example, speaking out against the destruction of an important heritage
site, the construction of a new shopping mall, or the non-transparent sale
of municipal assets; however, they sometimes also target the deeper causes

of these problems, and in many cases propose and demand their reform. In their interpretations of urban problems and conflicts, they often identify the main weaknesses of urban processes and suggest solutions which would lead to their improvement, professionalization, and democratization. Some of them are even able to identify the main reasons behind the refusal or reluctance of politicians to effectuate necessary changes, which are mostly associated with the various aspects of democratic deficit in Czechia and the influence of private interests and the corporate lobby, further exacerbated by the creeping process of neoliberal restructuring; however, as I clarified in the introduction, even Czech urban professionals rarely target the role of neoliberalization and instead focus only on domestic problems and solutions. Urban professionals point to the fact that this context is responsible for outdated and inadequately reformed methods in land-use planning, building codes, and other regulations; the disconnect between land-use and strategic plans; the non-existing and non-transparent competitions for architectural design; manipulated procurement of municipal contractors; weak or missing control mechanisms on institutional performance; non-existent social housing policies; poor condition of public infrastructure, etc. The list of urban problems is almost endless and so is the list of controversies, inadequacies, and failures behind them.

Activists with a professional background can use the same action repertoire as nimby and local activists, but also many additional ones which require special education, skills, and deep understanding of the roots of urban problems. They can, for example, provide advocacy and other professional services for politicians and other urban professionals, engage in capacity building for other activists—teaching them about their civic rights and about the legal as well as theoretical frameworks of urban processes and democratic governance. They can introduce experience and practices from abroad, such as forms of participatory planning and decision-making; provide new perspectives of sustainable and socially responsible development, strategic planning, or trends in public space design and architecture; or propose alternative solutions to various urban problems, such as the use of space, planning methods, etc. In Czechia, interesting personalities also played an important role in awakening citizen interest in urban issues, such as Adam Gebrian, an architect who

started to familiarize the public with the importance of architecture and its role in the city—as an author, moderator of debates, and host in the media. Many young architects followed suit and engaged in the same activity, typically launching their own websites, organizing events in their cities, and commenting on the activities of their local governments and other such endeavours. Richard Biegel from Klub Za starou Prahu did an excellent job in popularising heritage protection—not only by publishing but also as a tour guide of organized urban walks. And social scientists, including me personally, have tried to bring attention to the social aspects of the city, familiarizing people with topics such as uneven development, displacement, gentrification, homelessness, etc. These topics have nonetheless always enjoyed less attention than architecture as Czech society tends to perceive them as ideologically biased and in opposition to the free market.

Solutions proposed by activists with a professional background are very diverse. Architects, especially those in different cities, have been lobbying for the consistent use of architectural competitions when selecting the design of new buildings and public space as well as urbanistic solutions to different neighbourhoods and areas. Or they have challenged the land-use plans of their cities. In some cities, they have also demanded the establishment of a chief architect, who is a professional employee of the city hall and whose task would be to ensure quality of urban processes and architecture in the city. In Prague, architects also created and lobbied for a revised version of the building code and promoted innovative uses of various neglected urban spaces. Generally, the professional debate among architects played a decisive role in the creation of IPR, Prague's Institute of Planning and Development, including its department for citizen participation. The NGO Auto*Mat has engaged in promoting urban infrastructure which prioritizes pedestrians, cyclists, and public transit over car drivers. They have used professional advocacy, proposing their own alternative plans, but have also made campaigns aimed at encouraging people to bike and organized critical mass bike rides. Arnika has traditionally opposed market-driven changes to the city's land-use plan. In 2018 and 2019, it criticized the *Metropolitan Plan* and created a critical analysis of the causes of Prague's housing crisis. Our NGO Prague-Watch organized public lectures, workshops, and a conference concerning

diverse urban topics in order to draw people's attention to the issues of urban processes and various aspects of urban life. A few of our members also opposed the preparation of Prague's *Metropolitan Plan* and engaged in activities that promoted new attitudes towards securing social housing. Another important actor has been the NGO reSITE, founded by architects, which promotes cooperation between different stakeholders in urban development, especially public institutions and private companies. While the NGO's annual conference has made reSITE well known, it has also been criticized for basically engaging in city marketing instead of promoting socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable cities.

Finally, urban professionals can also operate as activists from within governmental bodies—as members of government advisory boards, for example, where they can propose various policies and refocus the debate from business interests to professional concerns. It is often also the activists with a professional background who eventually change their professional and activist careers for a career in local politics, where they can effectively execute the transformation of entrenched practices and processes. But even at the level of municipal government or the government of a municipal district, they find themselves limited by the power and institutional set-up of superior governing bodies and the existing legislation. Paying attention to the political engagement of Praha sobě begs a question as to whether there is perhaps a chance that an urban movement or a movement party might eventually have ambitions of nationwide impact and run in the national electoral competition.

3.2   Mobilizing Structures

As we saw above, urban grassroots movements are formed by activists with different attitudes and levels of understanding concerning the problems they are contesting. Whether they are successful in forming a movement, diagnosing and interpreting the problem they are facing, framing their demands, and achieving their goals largely depends on available and functional mobilizing structures. In other words, they are reliant on the presence of organizations, associations, groups, or individuals who help

in leading, organizing, supporting, and networking grassroots initiatives, campaigns, or other grassroots efforts aimed at achieving change.

As shown in the introduction, Czech citizens tend to be predominantly passive, disengaged, and sometimes quite helpless in defending their interests. Before the emergence of urban grassroots movements towards the end of the 2000s, there was a long vacuum of grassroots mobilizations. An important exception was the environmental movement, which was nevertheless marginalized from the political debate, as well as various depoliticized professional NGOs, which were financed by donors and focused on providing support to institutional actors (Císař 2008; Jacobsson and Saxonberg 2013). In the course of this research, and in the context of quickly changing cities, environmentalists and people from professional NGOs often became involved in struggles over various urban issues or provided newly emerging grassroots groups with professional advice and counselling—for example, regarding their choice of contentious repertoire, informing them of their civic rights, explaining various injustices, etc. This is typical for lawyers who specialize in providing legal advice in various environmental disputes, out of which many are urban. In our case studies, we saw, for example, that activists from Srnčí Důl in Jablonec nad Nisou approached Frank Bold, a legal service that specializes in consultations with civil society, to discuss different options of preventing the new road from being built in their valley. Similarly, activists from Horní Proseč approached the Czech Nature Conservation Agency, where they learned about the possibility of using an endangered bird species protected by the EU as leverage against new development in the surrounding hillsides. During the initial years of existence, our association PragueWatch also cooperated with Ateliér pro životní prostředí (Atelier for the living environment), an already exiting association specializing in providing legal help to municipalities affected by environmental destruction.

Newly formed groups can also seek help from individual activists and older grassroots groups with more experience and skills. They can learn from them how to organize, set their agenda and strategies, find resources, etc. For example, in Prague 11, the local environmental association Hezké Jižní Město was one of the first groups to fight against new development in the nearby forest in the 2000s, and later it assisted in the formation of new civic associations, helping them with their protest activities. Pavel

Kolář from the Malše association in České Budějovice also helped the new initiative Zachraňme Malák and together joined forces in protesting the flood protection project. In Prostějov, activists invited Martin Marek, an environmental activist who had organized a successful referendum against a new shopping mall in the city of Plzeň and consulted with him on the most effective tools of influencing the future of KaSC.

An essential part of building strong mobilizing structures is also networking, cooperating with others, and the formation of various coalitions. Thanks to similar cooperation, people with different levels of activist experience and professional expertise can join forces, start new associations and initiatives, form formal and informal coalitions, and cooperate in achieving their common and overarching goals. Thanks to this, we have seen stories of small local associations and modest grassroots initiatives gradually turning into much larger and stronger civic formations with enough power to affect true change. Cooperation and coalitions make it possible for movements to employ strategies which require larger masses of people, such as demonstrations or petition campaigns, and provide them with a wider variety of people with different expertise and know-how. They also make it easier for the movement to disseminate its messages, take advantage of different political opportunities, and create new ones. Bigger activist formations can also be useful in bridging various fragmented interests and overcoming different internal divisions, which stem from members' priorities, values and political conviction, former activist experience, different level of trust/disillusionment with political representatives and institutions, or their focus on procedural and institutional problems instead of single issues. Divisions inside movements nonetheless represent a challenge and can be threatening if not well handled by members. We saw that, for example, in České Budějovice a conflict arose when some activists used birdlife as a pretext to block permission proceedings for the felling of the trees along the river; other activists saw this tactic as a substitutional reason which was undermining the movement's efforts to achieve their goals democratically. Conflicts are also typical between reformist and radical approaches, that is, activists who refuse capitalism and those who believe in its reform. Generally, anti-capitalist discourses are quite unpopular in Czechia, and as such, also rather counterproductive (see Pixová 2018).

Good leadership also plays an important role in strong movements. Good leaders are typically the most devoted activists, who understand the complexity of the challenged urban problem, can identify its deeper causes and negative implications, and also propose effective solutions. Many of them recruit from professionals such as architects, economists, or lawyers, who are of high importance in Czech society, where persons with a university degree in technical fields tend to be held in especially high regard, and as such, they provide grassroots movements with much-needed legitimacy in the eyes of the general society. These leaders also play an important role as networkers, who help to initiate cooperation between local citizens, civic associations, and other experts and stakeholders—even politicians. They often take the main initiative in navigating the way in which the movement frames its concerns, demands, and goals and propose strategies towards achieving them. Good leaders may also help in scaling up activists' demands by focusing on more profound procedural and institutional changes. Some of them might even set new trends in what citizens and activists in different cities demand from their governments and local urban processes.

In my research, I saw examples of cooperation and strong leadership in all four case studies. In all the cities, movements consisted of a wide spectrum of people with different grievances and aspirations, who nonetheless came together to struggle for a better city and a better urban life. To what extent they managed to change the local situation largely depended on the focus and ambitions of the movements' leaders and, in some cases, on their ability to create a common identity for the movement's members as well. In České Budějovice, we saw how a new civic initiative joined forces with an already existing local association and other experienced activists from the city, who together managed to prevent the realization of the controversial flood protection project. The leader of the initiative to some extent acted in the spirit of nimbyism; his struggle against the flood protection project was important for the entire city, but he was also driven by his desire to protect the close surroundings of his home. As a person with a technical education, he was well disposed to challenge the technical aspects of the controversial project, but he also had a high level of trust in the democratic foundations of the local government. His goal was to hinder the realization

of the flood protection project, not push for institutional and procedural changes. When the goal was achieved, the initiative became dormant again. A different scenario was that of Jablonec nad Nisou, where *activist architects* brought together all local activists in a struggle against the city's destructive developmental plans, creating a shared identity around the critique of the land-use plan, which thus became an overarching frame for the fragmented and emotionally grounded demands of activist groups from different parts of the city. Their struggle did not focus on single issues, instead focusing on the weaknesses of local urban processes. As a result, conflict between politicians and activists was driven primarily by a professional dispute. When the activist architects realized that urban processes would not change unless they replaced local politicians, they decided to join the local Pirate Party and run as candidates in municipal elections. A similar situation was found as well in all three urban districts in Prague, although shared identity was in this case created through the use of more populist discourses, distinguishing between 'good citizens' and 'bad politicians'. In Prague, members of grassroots movements also refrained from joining established parties and instead either registered themselves as new political subjects or ran in the elections as a civic association.

3.2.1 Building Mobilizing Structures as a Form of Political Activism in a Country Affected by Democratic Deficit

The presence of mobilizing structures and their further development are of particularly crucial importance in the context of post-socialist society, which displays a low-level of civic skills and a lack of trust among people. Networking and cooperation among different social actors involved in grassroots movements, and especially NGOs and more experienced associations providing know-how to those who do not have it and need support in their engagement, are also crucial for overcoming local problems with democratic deficit, a circumstance which inhibits the ability of citizens to publicly engage and demand change. The more experienced and educated not only share their expertise and new ideas with others, help the less experienced in obtaining resources and finding personnel

support, but they also instil the much-needed self-confidence and motivation in previously disengaged citizens and help them to discover new avenues of relating to other citizens, to their common public interests, and to urban space. This is especially important in smaller cities where charismatic leaders are often missing. When they do however show up, they can provide residents with a broader perspective of the local problems and help in mobilizing and networking citizens who would otherwise stay disconnected from each other or oblivious to the wider socio-spatial context of the issues they are addressing.

As noticed by Jacobsson (2015), urban grassroots movements in Central and Eastern Europe frequently engage in activities which are not very visible in public space, such as organizing educational activities, workshops, debates, conferences, and other events aimed at the education and dissemination of new information, the introduction of new topics and approaches, etc. Such activities might not fall into the typical action repertoire that social movement studies traditionally focus on, but in the post-socialist context they may represent an important precursor to the movement's development and to the creation and strengthening of its mobilizing structures. In the case studies researched in this book, we observed that activists often felt change could only be achieved if there is a bigger awareness of the existing problems and a demand for change, and only if they managed to overcome the general indifference, passivity, incompetence, and feeling of helplessness among the general population. Activists therefore frequently feel that successful mobilization requires dissemination of relevant information, skills, and perspectives among the public.

In my personal opinion, I think a certain level of the ideology of Eastness plays a role in the expansion of this type of activity. Many people involved in urban grassroots mobilizations, especially professionals and including myself, often feel that Czech citizens are undereducated and more ignorant in comparison with citizens in Western democracies. Although this is not necessarily always true, it explains the urge to provide local citizens with important knowledge and skills. In fact, our watchdog association Prague-Watch was one of the first grassroots organizations to provide episodic and continual education in various city-related areas not only for laypeople but also for other professionals and politicians. Many other organizations followed suit, organizing lectures, panel discussions, conferences, guided

walks, etc. Professionals and politicians are sometimes involved in these events as discussants, panellists, lecturers, or guests, and similar events can therefore mediate the much-needed bridges between the public, professionals, and decision-makers. Most groups which organize similar events operate their own websites, blogs, and widely use social media, especially Facebook, where they publicize their activities—some even publish their own newsletters and so forth. Another form of educational and informative engagement is the dissemination of information regarding particular problems through print materials, such as flyers, leaflets, posters, or through the media (which requires good public relations, media contacts, etc.). In this way, participants attempt to draw citizens' attention to contested issues; familiarize them with topics, such as sustainable development, participatory planning, contemporary architecture, urban design, etc.; and potentially create demand for change and recruit new members. In the researched case studies, activists also engaged in substituting the informational obligations of local authorities in response to the failure of local authorities to provide such a service.

In general, it is likely that educational activities and information dissemination have a lot of relevance in Czech cities, where wider civic engagement requires a certain cultural shift and a substantial change in people's mentality in relation to public affairs. The biggest downside of these events is the low attendance of the main target groups: disengaged citizens and political opponents. However, even the fact that these events take place is evidence of increasing citizen engagement, the strengthening of mobilizing structures, and the sense of agency in relation to urban affairs and their democratization and professionalization. They also provide politicians with incentives to be accountable for their decisions, act more transparently, as well as slowly dismantle civic passivity and disengagement as a societal norm. From this perspective, conventional media, such as television and newspapers, still play a crucial role in helping spread information to the mainstream public. Conventional television for example played an important task in bringing attention to the controversies around the flood protection project in České Budějovice. Newsrooms also spread information about the activities of Jakub Čech and his quest for justice in the municipal government of Prostějov. Mass media as a contentious tool is nonetheless also frequently used by the adversaries of activists, whose

Fig. 3.1 Urban farming in the community garden Smetanka, a soft form of civic engagement in a post-socialist city. Local government, inimical to community building and organized civil society, displaced the garden in order to make space for a sheltered sports facility for the local school (Photo: Petr Zewlakk Vrabec)

means and possibilities in relation to information dissemination are much greater. Frequently, these are abused to confound and misinform the public, which was obvious for example in the Prostějov case and in Prague (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2).

3.3   Political Opportunities

Political opportunities play another key role in the possibility of forming grassroots movements and in their chances of successfully achieving their goals. As regards the urban grassroots movements in our four case studies, their emergence, activities, victories, and failures were influenced by opportunities which occurred at both the national and municipal level.

Fig. 3.2 Autonomous social centre Klinika in Prague—an important point of grassroots activity and networking. It was evicted in January 2019 (Photo: Petr Zewlakk Vrabec)

At the national level, one would have expected the largest political opportunity to have come with the country's regime change. Many academics and political commentators expected the emergence of a vivid and active civil society and an uncomplicated path towards democratic establishment. However, as we saw in the introduction of this book, in the context of a society pacified by the achievements of the Velvet Revolution, and more so, disempowered by its lack of previous experience with active engagement, urban grassroots movements were not very widespread until recently, towards the end of the 2010s. This era has been characterized by a combination of new opportunities and a new legitimation crisis (see Guasti 2016). On the one hand, EU accession worked as an important factor in the empowerment of Czech citizens and the promotion of tighter partnerships between the public and the institutions, but it also raised many questions regarding the level of the country's achieved democratization and approximation to EU standards of policymaking. Consequently, the global financial crisis in 2008 brought about much disillusionment among citizens as regards their relationship to decision-makers, who on

the one hand promoted austerity measures and, at the same time, actively engaged in corruption scandals, undermining democracy, etc.

The newly created legitimation crisis influenced the political opportunity structure by leading to several waves of voter insurrections, manifested in voters turning away from traditional political parties and instead voting for new faces and political formations, including new populist parties (Klíma 2015), which concerned not only the national level but also municipalities. In some cases, newly elected politicians were more open to cooperation with citizens and activists in their effort to distance themselves from the agenda and attitude of their political antagonists and predecessors. This was the case in České Budějovice, for example, where local activists lobbied individual politicians to turn away from the flood protection project which had been promoted for many years by the previous governments. Newly elected politicians thus had an opportunity to prove their legitimacy by distancing themselves from the controversial projects of their predecessors.

A very different situation occurred in Prague in the aftermath of the citywide municipal elections in 2010. When the Civic Democrats formed a coalition with the Social Democrats in order to retain their power and sideline the winning TOP 09 (which at that time was considered a new party, but eventually fell into the traditional party category as well), the legitimation crisis of Prague's government further deepened and triggered an even bigger dissemination of grassroots activities aimed at addressing various urban problems in the capital city. Within this atmosphere of vibrant debate, ODS ended its coalition with ČSSD and instead formed a coalition with TOP 09, whose member Tomáš Hudeček, in the position of the city's councillor for urban planning and, consequently, Prague's mayor, initiated a top-down reform of Prague's urban processes in which he included the professional public and civic associations. An impassioned public debate was led about various urban issues and the disastrous state of local urban processes, which contributed to the modernization of Prague's planning authorities (creation of IPR) and their opening towards citizens. The debate nonetheless to a large extent ended up seized by architects, the development lobby, and discourses promoting urban renewal and gentrification. Later in 2018, the dominance of the pro-development lobby

paradoxically contributed to the disappearance of an important political opportunity for civic associations, which lost their right to participate in planning and building permission proceedings, supposedly for the purpose of speeding up the completion of development projects.[1] In spring 2019, even established ecological and heritage protection organizations were threatened by the same potential disempowerment, a possibility fuelled especially by the housing crisis, allegedly caused by slow permission proceedings for new development.

The early 2010s also coincided with other factors, such as the growing self-confidence, education, and awareness of the Czech urban population and the boom of urban grassroots, whose emergence and activities were supported by the dissemination of funding schemes for the support of civil society in Czechia and the CEE region. Important donors included for example the Open Society Foundation, the Visegrad Fund, US Embassy grants, Nadace rozvoje občanské společnosti (The Civil Society Development Foundation), Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe, the Czech Architecture Foundation, Nadace Via (The Via Foundation), as well as various funding schemes of the European Union, Czech ministries and municipalities, and private companies (the Vodafone Foundation and others). Funding schemes often contributed to the creation of new civic associations and grassroots initiatives (which was also the case for our civic association PragueWatch, whose creation was financially supported by the Open Society Fund), or significantly contributed to some victories for civil society involved in urban conflicts, such as the struggle against residential development in Trojmezí in Prague 10. The combination of growing self-confidence and the availability of funding schemes especially inspired various urban professionals to start engaging in public affairs and challenge existing urban processes in their cities, and these encouraged many citizens to abandon their passive attitude and become actively involved in shaping their cities.

However, as we saw in the framing processes analysis, many urban grassroots continued to interfere with a closed political opportunity structure, which hindered their activities and limited their ability to achieve their

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[1] https://frankbold.org/poradna/kategorie/stavebni-zakon/rada/nejvyznamejsi-zmeny-stavebniho-zakona-v-kostce#vylouceni-spolku.

goals. As a result, many activists felt like their only option to open the local political opportunity structure was by participating in electoral competition as independent candidates, either by joining existing parties (most frequently the Green Party, Christian Democrats, or the Pirate Party); registering a new movement party (such as the movement Změna [Change] and its local branches Změna pro Jablonec [Change for Jablonec], Desítka pro domácí in Prague 10, or Hnutí pro Prahu 11); or by running as an independent association of civic candidates. The latter is the most complicated tactic, requiring the signed consent of 7% of all local voters, but it also represents a great opportunity for a contact campaign. This tactic was chosen by the movement Praha sobě as well as, for example, Osmička žije (8 alive) in Prague 8; although not always successful in electoral competition, political opportunities differed based on the power of the achieved political mandate and potential allies in the governments.

In some cities, independent candidates and movement parties formed the governments' opposition, which gave them only limited powers to influence various urban issues. In Prostějov and Jablonec nad Nisou, a relatively small number of independent councillors attempted to outvote controversial decisions and provided non-institutionalized activists with first-hand information about the governments' controversial intentions and steps leading towards their realization, such as information about urban changes and processes, based on which activists could plan their strategies accordingly and in a timely and potentially most effective manner. Independent councillors and other political allies can furthermore appoint activists as members of local government auditing and advisory bodies or various working groups. In Jablonec nad Nisou, local activist architects were thus able to disrupt the partisan influence over local urban processes by proving the rest of the board's members lacked professional expertise, and their decisions were being driven solely by the private interests of local elites. In Prague 10 and 11, activists managed to form stronger oppositions and were basically using their mandate in a similar way, although with a higher potential of finding political allies to outvote controversial decisions.

A much bigger political opportunity quite naturally emerged when movements established by activists and independent candidates formed ruling coalitions in their municipal governments and thus gained executive

power. This happened in cities where movements arose from large urban conflicts and managed to successfully mobilize large numbers of local voters, as was the case in Prague 7, 10, and 11, where movements opted for electoral competition after tiring of their endless efforts to change the political process from activist positions. The size of the opportunities they managed to gain was nonetheless different for each one of them and largely dependent on many other factors, which will be summarized in the following section.

3.4 Case Study Assessments from the Perspective of the Political Process Theory

The case studies presented in this book have one common feature. In all four cities, activists encountered a lack of communication and cooperation from the side of local politicians about urban processes which are pursued in a non-transparent and secretive way without being openly communicated to the public. Activists thus invested a lot of energy into fruitless efforts to initiate a constructive dialogue with politicians. In Prostějov and in České Budějovice, politicians ignored activists' demands for a public information meeting where politicians could have their visions confronted by those of the citizens. In Jablonec nad Nisou and in Prague 11, politicians organized an information meeting for the public, but ignored the opinions of the public and promoted only their own vision. In Prague 10, politicians organized a sham process with public participation, in which the opinions of citizens did not hold any value. In Prostějov, politicians repeatedly unlawfully denied one of the activists' right to speak at council meetings and threatened activists with lawsuits and other forms of revenge, while in Jablonec nad Nisou activists complained about councillors holding key meetings at the least convenient times for the public. Activists in Horní Proseč managed to convince local politicians to visit the location threatened by new development, but politicians continued to object to their concerns about environmental destruction. In Prague 7, politicians deliberately filled council meetings with employees to block the attendance

of activists. And in both Prague 7 and Prague 10, politicians also actively sabotaged local referendums. As we can see, in all researched cities, political opportunities for activists were rather closed, which increased the cost of collective action, forcing the movements to find a new action repertoire for achieving their goals.

Some political opportunities nonetheless emerged unexpectedly or were created by activists through their tactics. Which movement was most successful in overcoming the closed structure of political opportunities? Which movement managed to prevent undesired urban change? And which movement was successful from the perspective of longer-term effects such as achieving procedural changes, improving local democracy, and disrupting the capture of the local state? The following consists of an overview of all case studies and an assessment of how resources, skills, networks, strategies, and frames contributed to their success or failure.

3.4.1   Jablonec nad Nisou

Urban grassroots mobilization in Jablonec nad Nisou can be assessed as only partially successful in terms of preventing undesired urban changes since activists managed to achieve only minor changes to the land-use plan they had objected to. However, in 2018, they ensured control over local urban processes by joining with the local Pirate Party, thanks to which one of the activist architects gained the function of vice-mayor for urban development. Aside from activist architects and local activists, an important role was also played by several allies from the local movement party Změna pro Jablonec, which had four mandates in the local government between 2014 and 2018 and appointed activist architects as members of the government's advisory board, who thus gained first-hand information about local urban processes and valuable insight into local affairs and power relations. In this board, they failed to instigate a constructive professional dialogue with other members and did not manage to break through the barrier inflicted by the vested interests of local elites' non-transparent networks. However, this access and professional perspective helped them identify local urban processes as unreformable, which accelerated their

decision to create new political opportunities by running as candidates in the municipal elections and becoming part of the formal political realm.

Activist architects also played a crucial role in unifying the fragmented struggles of different activists around the city and in bridging their local demands into an overarching struggle against the city's new land-use plan, in which citizens called for a more sustainable approach to planning and development. Thanks to the networking and engagement of politicians, professionals, activists, and citizens from different parts of the city, it was also possible to organize a joint demonstration in the main square, which is a relatively rare tactic for the smaller municipalities of Czechia. This network of local activists was later beneficial when collectively applying the so-called materially consenting remarks to the plan—a legal method of objecting to the land-use plan.

Despite the lack of success in stopping the undesired development, from the perspective of longer-term effects the movement was quite successful in terms of giving local citizens a sense of common agenda and a desire to engage in public affairs, as well as an opportunity for cooperation and building a sense of community. Created in this way, the movement eventually benefited from the high professional capital of the activist architects, out of which one gained the position of vice-mayor for urban development in the 2018 elections, and thus political power and influence over local urban processes from within the government. It is nonetheless unknown to what extent this power will be limited by private interests of local political and economic elites.

3.4.2 České Budějovice

Mobilizations in České Budějovice were successful in preventing the flood protection project and can be ascribed to several factors. The initiative had well-educated and experienced leaders with good communication skills, and their interactions with the government were quite diplomatic and unconfrontational. They also had important support from pre-existing organizations: the Malše association, which had struggled against the flood protection project in the past, and the local environmental lawyer. The activities of the movement were financed only via donations from the

movement members and local citizens. The movement also had a positive and proactive approach: Instead of being only defensive, they presented the city with a more sensitive and less expensive flood protection which had citizen support. The movement also profited from successful frames. The controversy was illustrated by two contrasting framing techniques, which in combination was very successful in the given circumstances. On the one hand, they framed the locality of Malák in a very emotional way—as a beautiful natural place of belonging for many residents of the city. At the same time, they framed the inadequacies of the flood protection project by using technocratic expert discourses—as technically inadequate, overly expensive, and surrounded by many obscure unanswered questions.

Thanks to the publicity surrounding the case, politicians became reluctant in their support for an unpopular and potentially dangerous project in a location many of their voters cared about. An important aspect of the activists' success was nonetheless also the lengthy and complicated nature of the project's implementation and financing, which gave activists several opportunities to not only raise public awareness about the controversy but also slow down and hinder the project's realization. One such opportunity came at a time when the government was supposed to authorize the project's financing but due to internal disputes within the government, the decision was postponed indefinitely.

The simplicity of the activists' demand likely also played an important role. The movement's only goal was to prevent the undesired destruction of a popular urban locality. At the same time, because of this narrow focus, activists were not interested in entering the formal political realm, and the movement did not have any ambition to improve and democratise local urban processes by, for example, demanding the institutionalization of a municipal department responsible for communication with citizens and citizen participation. The democratic situation in the city has thus remained relatively unchanged. The mobilization nonetheless contributed to a better establishment of civic engagement in České Budějovice and increased awareness among local citizens and politicians regarding the importance of mutual communication and cooperation.

3.4.3 Prostějov

From the perspective of both short- and long-term achievements, ambiguous results were achieved by the mobilizations in Prostějov. Activists celebrated only a semi-victory as regards preventing undesired urban changes; they did not manage to spare the riding barracks from demolition. However, the cultural and community centre KaSC was however saved, albeit credit for this victory should not go to the activists but to the department store Prior, which legally disputed the contract between the city and the company Manthellan; Prior's business competition and the final judicial decision recognized the contract as invalid.

As regards the mobilizing structures, resources, skills, action repertoire, and frames employed by local activists, it seems that activists disposed of a lot of enthusiasm and were able to finance all their campaigns through grassroots collection. Through attractive events, such as ball dancing in the main square, they managed to attract the attention of the locals. At the same time, their movement lacked a large number of members with a wide range of skills and experience in protest movements, especially quality legal experts or professionals with good communication skills. Some of the movement's most active members were also involved in the movement party Změna pro Prostějov and operated in the government's opposition as an internal watchdog. Activist architects involved in the efforts to save the riding barracks were rather inexperienced with civic engagement. In the context of a particularly closed political opportunity structure, communication between local politicians and activists was highly confrontational. While politicians unlawfully excluded one of the architects from speaking at council meetings, activist architects were determined to paint local politicians as having a hopeless and amateur attitude towards city planning. In the end, the activists wasted a lot of energy on fruitless conflicts and lawsuits which further entrenched a 'dynamic of mutual delegitimation' between adversaries.

The other downside of the movement's efforts was the low interest in the two cases among the local public. Neither of the two buildings were perceived by the public as emblematic heritage of the city, and their demolitions were not regarded as an immediate threat to the quality of life of the local citizens. In fact, some of them might have preferred the idea of the

city having new modern buildings, regardless of the value of their architectural design. The social composition of Prostějov, where most people work in low-skilled jobs, also implies a predominantly passive attitude to public affairs, which is also why, out of fear that not enough people would attend, local activists decided against organizing a demonstration. In this context, the politicians did not feel enough public pressure and, in fact, were able to manipulate public opinion through their links to the local media. In this environment of low popular demand for more efficient and democratic policymaking, the elections in 2018 did not bring about any substantial changes in local power relations. As a result, it seems that, from a longer perspective, the activists' energy in Prostějov could probably have been used more productively if aimed at informing and empowering local citizens, especially through more intensive contact campaigning. At the same time, both urban controversies—the demolition of the barracks and controversial sale of KaSC—required immediate action.

In the end, urban struggles in Prostějov did not improve the local political situation or the democratic nature of local urban processes. However, from the state-wide perspective, high importance can be ascribed to the achievements of Jakub Čech. The young teenage activist gained the attention of the Czech media thanks to his tireless efforts investigating the unlawful practices of local politicians, such as cases of money extraction into private hands; the purpose-built subcontracting of public services, including non-existent services; encroaching upon citizens' rights to access public information; and many others. Jakub Čech received elevated coverage and public interest especially thanks to his dispute with local authorities for refusing to provide him with publicly available documents due to his young age (he was fifteen years old at the time). This coverage significantly increased public awareness about the prevalence of undemocratic and unlawful practices in Czech municipalities. Considering this coverage, it is surprising how little the political situation in Prostějov changed after the 2018 elections.

3.4.4 Prague

All three movements in the three different districts of Prague had to cope with very closed political opportunity structures and extremely unresponsive and insidious governments suspected of involvement in illegitimate activities and non-transparent business interests with detrimental consequences for the districts' public space and budgets. After failed attempts to reverse the state of local affairs by standard means of civic engagement, such as petitioning or lobbying, the three movements had to opt for new strategies. In Prague 11, activists decided to found a movement party Hnutí pro Prahu 11 as soon as their local mayor blatantly dismissed their petitions. In Prague 7 and Prague 10, local movements decided to organize local referendums in which citizens voted against extremely overpriced city halls. In both Prague 7 and Prague 10, local governments' efforts to sabotage referendums resulted in the movements' decisions to participate in electoral competition in order to replace illegitimate governments. The movement party Koalice Vlasta came into existence when activists joined with Christian Democrats, whereas Praha 7 sobě, and consequently Praha sobě, opted for the more complicated tactic of running as an association of independent candidates, which required collecting signatures from 7% of the district/city voters, respectively. Collecting signatures nonetheless served as a good way of campaigning and raising awareness, which later proved its worth in the election results. Praha 7 sobě had by far the best results, gaining a secure majority both in 2014 and in 2018. In the main government of Prague, Praha sobě received 16.6% of the vote total.

Movements and movement parties in the Prague case study all have a similar background but different outcomes. They were all composed by a diverse mix of people, who nonetheless had a shared identity created by populist discourses which drew division lines between local citizens and the local political establishment—good people vs. bad self-interested elites, 'neighbours' together facing 'non-transparent business'. In this regard, the most blatantly anti-establishment movement party has been Hnutí pro Prahu 11, whose electoral programme included many slang terms aimed at vituperating local political elites. The reason for this 'confrontational' rhetoric may be due to the extremely bad experience of the movement's

members with local political elites, especially the impertinent and arrogant behaviour of the prosecuted mayor, Dalibor Mlejnský, and the violent physical attacks against the movement's leader, Jiří Štyler. Comparatively, the discourse of Koalice Vlasta has been more placating and positive, opposing terms such as 'unhealthy relations' with 'city friendly to citizens', 'privileges' with 'principles', etc. Praha sobě and its district branches mostly avoided anti-establishment discourses. Instead, the movement put emphasis on the citizens' shared identity as 'neighbours', a term used by the movement's leader Jan Čižinský when addressing the citizens of Prague. On its website, the movement promotes its achievements, especially its credit for returning the city hall to citizens, stressing that any kind of public input is more than welcome. 'After all', says the website of Praha 1 sobě, 'we are neighbours'.

Both the grassroots and electoral campaigns of the movements and movement parties were funded from the bottom-up, although some of the pre-existing organizations and initiatives occasionally drew from various grants provided by civil society foundations. Each movement was composed of people with different levels of education, activist experience, and skills, which provided for the possibility of diversifying activities, recruiting new members, and raising awareness among voters. Contact campaigning, either through referendums or petitioning, was very important in mobilizing district communities and providing an incentive for the voters' insurrection in municipal elections. In a way typical of populism, the studied movements managed to recruit large numbers of supporters from across the political and ideological spectrum by placing strong emphasis on their non-partisan and civic character, which was instead replaced by the social credit of their members, typically promoted as trustworthy citizens and accomplished professionals or personalities with high cultural and social capital. Some of the movements' electoral candidates were people with a background in cultural entrepreneurship, strategic and urban planning, environmental protection, architects, artists, university professors, people from the non-profit sector and social services, lawyers, documentarists, etc. Renata Chmelová from Koalice Vlasta and Ladislav Kos from HPP 11 also became Czech senators, which further increased the social credit of their movements.

In terms of their ability to influence the political process, the movements and movement parties had mixed results. The biggest success was achieved by the movement Praha 7 sobě, which was able to form a strong government coalition in both 2014 and 2018. Its leader, Jan Čižinský, become the district mayor, and thus it gained control over local decision-making, urban processes, and other aspects of public administration. Koalice Vlasta and Praha 1 sobě achieved the second-best results, with both managing to form ruling coalitions in 2018. These coalitions were more fragile than in Prague 7, and HPP 11 achieved only short-lived results, having executive power in the district only temporarily between 2014 and 2016. It consequently ended up in opposition while the 'new' old government returned to the old status quo. The achievements of Praha sobě should not be compared to the district movements since the movement concerns the whole city and will thus be assessed separately.

One of the first things that the new *activist governments* did when they managed to create ruling coalitions in their districts was to replace part of the administrative staff with new employees and to start cooperating with professional workers and acclaimed consultants. They interrupted disadvantageous and sham contracts and rents and started to negotiate with stakeholders in local development, trying to either end controversial projects, or attempt to negotiate their improvements. Some projects were entirely suspended. In cases where development projects were too far along in their implementation, which was, for example, the case for the shopping mall Stromovka, activist governments had only limited options to influence the development without risking legal recourse and thus had to settle for negotiating only small details, such as their design, number of floors, etc. Activist governments also stopped various privatization processes. For example, Praha 1 sobě put a stop to negotiations over the disadvantageous lease of the district's Na Františku hospital to a private operator. Activist governments also started to renew the role of the municipality in providing affordable council housing to people in need and elaborate plans on expanding and renovating municipal housing stock. Another step was the improvement of municipal websites to make them better arranged and easier to navigate, helping people, for example, seek social help, announce a problem, or learn about local events, planned

projects, and various announcements in the district. The Prague 7 municipal website also included information for foreigners, and in Prague 10, a translation was provided in sign language. The websites also started to include transparent and easy to find information about the municipal budget, contracts, documents, public procurement, council meetings, etc. The activist government in Prague 10 started to publish a new municipal magazine, and in Prague 7, they improved the old one, *Hobulet.* New versions of municipal magazines replaced manipulative content with more diverse non-biased information, articles of interest, and a more attractive design. Activist governments also became more inviting of citizen participation and established or reformed departments for communication with the public. One of the biggest innovations launched by Koalice Vlasta was the project Strategie pro desítku (Strategy for ten), which invited citizens to take part in the planning of the district's space and future vision. In Prague 1, the new activist government also started to focus on improving the regrettable situation found in the touristified city centre, regulating nightlife and visual smog, preparing toll zones, and taking other steps to prioritize the life of locals and other Prague citizens over commercial interests and the tourist industry.

The citywide movement Praha sobě achieved mixed results. Placing third in the municipal elections, they are included in the ruling coalition of Prague's main government, in which power was equally distributed among Praha sobě, the Pirate Party and Spojené síly pro Prahu. Unfortunately, the only truly unifying element of these political allies was their effort to prevent the rule of ODS and ANO. During their negotiations, the coalition partners agreed that one of their main priorities was to solve the housing crisis in Prague, but each party proposed a different solution. Efficient policymaking was limited by the strong ideological position of the neoliberal coalition partner, Spojené síly pro Prahu, which continued to promote the development lobby and proposed measures for improving citizens' access to mortgages. Contrarywise, the other two parties focused more on building affordable housing, council flats, and regulating Airbnb. Spojené síly pro Prahu strongly opposed measures which would eliminate the negative effects of housing financialization. Due to the strong influence of the vice-mayor for urban development and the former director of IPR, Petr Hlaváček, all three parties also assumed a relatively uncritical attitude

towards the basic concept of Prague's *Metropolitan Plan*, although Praha sobě insisted that all objections to the plan must be dealt with. At the time of this writing, indications started to appear that the vice-mayor for transportation, Adam Scheinherr from *Praha sobě*, the initiator of the grassroots campaign to save the Libeňský most (Libeňský bridge), might succumb to the technocratic pro-development lobby behind the construction of Prague's bypass.

In spring 2019, in the midst of increasing public awareness regarding the threat of catastrophic climate change and ongoing mobilizations of both the global and Czech climate movement, Praha sobě for the first time experienced what it is like to be exposed to the strong popular demand of the societal grassroots. The newly mobilized climate movement demanded Prague's government declare a state of climate emergency. While the Pirate Party mayor Zdeněk Hřib did not take this demand seriously, Jan Čižinský declared a climate emergency in Prague 7, manifesting his determination to respond to popular demands calling for positive change. In June 2019, Prague's coalition followed suit, endorsing its own climate commitment, although its ensuing performance indicates a low level of determination to work towards the established goals.

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4

Conclusion

My journey towards this understanding was nonetheless not an obvious one. As an urban geographer from Czechia, where the field of urban grassroots movements remains largely understudied, my main source of knowledge about the field predominantly came from Western scholarship. Attempting to bring an authentic picture of urban contests in Czechia, I have found it crucial to make a deliberate effort to avoid perspectives which would distort my analysis via a strong bias towards the Western experience. I have thus focused on the perspectives of activists involved in Czech urban conflicts instead of comparing them only to the Western ones, which was my original inclination. I observed how the problems which they are challenging arise, how urban grassroots movements interpret them, and what are the most typical ways in which they attempt to solve them. I have used the perspective of political process theory to demonstrate the interrelations between political opportunity structure and urban grassroots' framing processes, mobilizing structures and action repertoire, and the effect of these interrelations on urban grassroots movements' immediate and longer-term achievements. This approach has proven pivotal in making many interesting revelations about the actual role urban grassroots movements are

playing in the Czech society, especially in determining Czech urban reality, local democracy, and societal relations. Thanks to exploring this role, I have gained valuable insight into the deeply entrenched mechanisms of corporate capture at the level of the local state, and I have identified how these mechanisms also affect urban processes, decision-making, and the practices of municipal governments in Czech cities, as well as how they determine the goals which urban grassroots movements try to achieve, and their strategies towards achieving them.

In many ways, Czech urban grassroots movements are similar to those in the Western contexts. Just like them, they tend to arise around controversial urban change in which public interests are under assault from private capital. Their members nonetheless rarely interpret these injustices as the outcome of their cities' neoliberal restructuring or as an inherent product of capitalist relations. Instead, they predominantly focus their critique on bad urban processes, which they perceive as undemocratic, unprofessional, and outdated, and which they typically blame on the illegitimate practices of post-socialist municipal governments, such as various cases of power abuse, corruption, clientelism, and a lack of communication and cooperation with the public. We can thus conclude that urban problems around which Czech urban grassroots movements tend to mobilize are predominantly the materialized consequences of policymaking which is affected by the non-transparent interests of various private and corporate actors interconnected with local political representatives or who constitute local political power themselves. These actors typically exploit public sources for their own gain by cooperating with politicians who use privatization, regulation, public procurement, and EU subventions as a commodity of their power brokerage. Although this exploitation may often appear as completely legal, it reinforces politicians' tendency to eliminate public oversight and undermine citizen participation in urban processes.

Provided with the basic tenets of formally institutionalized democracy, urban grassroots movements in Czech cities often experiment with the classical action repertoire available to them, such as petitioning, attending council meetings, lobbying politicians, organizing happenings, and in rare cases, even demonstrations and other forms of protest. However, due to the limitations outlined above, citizen action challenging undesirable policy outcomes often ends in unregulated conflicts in which the

dynamic of mutual delegitimation between activists and politicians limits the prospect of achieving consensus. Aside from surrender, urban grassroots movements typically react to this dead-end situation by choosing between two tactics. They either employ more pressure tactics, including lawsuits, referendums, appealing and objecting to various administrative procedures, which normally further widens the gap between them and the state, or they make a deliberate effort to expand their own political opportunities. This can mean demanding improvements in the mutual relationship and communication between politicians and civil society, for example, by inviting politicians to public debates and taking them to the affected urban areas or demanding institutionalized forms of citizen participation, easier access to council meetings, or steps towards more transparent governance—that is, publicly available and easy to find information about public contracts, procurement, expenditures, announcements, etc. Part of the tactics which contribute to the expansion of political opportunities also consists in expanding mobilizing structures and creating popular demand for the goals of the grassroots movement. This is done through networking with other activists, professionals, citizens, and allied politicians, forming new alliances and coalitions, awareness raising, watchdog activities, work with the media, and various educational events such as seminars, workshops, panel discussions, etc. These subtle activities tend to be neglected by perspectives with a Western bias, while in fact they are an important aspect of building mobilizing structures and can be regarded as a form of democratization in its own right.

It tends to only be when all these efforts fail that urban grassroots realize the political processes in Czech cities are very hard to influence, if not impossible, from outside the formal political realm. At this point, they often decide to abandon their extra-institutional position and instead participate in electoral competition, either as individuals who join other political parties or by forming their own movement parties. And, as we saw in the case of Praha sobě, this also takes the form of an entirely independent non-partisan group of civic candidates. This strategy not only responds to the particularly closed political opportunity structure but is also convenient to Czech citizens' widespread tendency to hold activism in low regard and to limit their own participation to quadrennial elections.

Out of the four case studies, only the urban grassroots movement fighting against the flood protection project in České Budějovice managed to achieve its goals and prevent the contested change in their city without attempting to enter local electoral competition. Their achievement was facilitated by the character of the project they were contesting. Its implementation was protracted and surrounded by administrative complications, as well as many obscurities and potential hazards due to which some of the local politicians turned to the side of the activists. The threatened locality was also rather emblematic and held in high regard by many residents; its destruction would have threatened the legitimacy of the responsible government. At the same time, the movement had no longer-term achievements in terms of democratizing local governing structures and urban processes.

All the other movements decided to influence local political processes from within the government, typically due to their conviction that politics cannot be democratized and urban processes made more professional without driving illegitimate and incompetent politicians out of their offices. As we saw in the researched case studies, only activist governments with a strong enough mandate to build a strong ruling coalition can eliminate illegitimate practices, policies, and processes from governments with non-transparent private interests. The need for wide popular support explains the frequent tendency of the movements and movement parties participating in electoral competition to use populist discourses as a tactic which transforms their grievances into the shared identity of large groups of citizens who are disillusioned by the policy outcomes of post-socialist urban governments. In doing so, activist candidates to municipal government disavow conventional and partisan politics which citizens have become sceptical of and provide an alternative which is presented as a form of citizen control over municipal government. As pointed out by Aslanidis (2017), this trend offers an interesting opportunity for further research of populism in social movements and its democratizing potential (Aslanidis 2017). It remains to be seen in the future whether activist governments will be successful in terms of having a longer-term effect for the democratization of Czech urban governments. Their repeated electoral success and many of their policy outcomes nonetheless indicate that such a scenario is likely. Their populist approach may however eventually reach limits in a

moment of crisis which will require an ideological position to be taken and perhaps undermine the movements' base of support. This might for example happen in the aftermath of the Prague 7 district or Prague declaring a state of climate emergency, a step welcome by much of the green youth but perhaps unpopular among older generations, citizens with more conservative identities, and even urban liberals who are opposed to an overly regulated local state.

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