



BATTLE FOR THE AIRPORT

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This study is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of CRTA, BCSP, NCD, PDC and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

The City Council of Niš passed on the decision to transfer the ownership of the Konstantin Veliki Airport into the hands of the Republic of Serbia on March 31st 2018. The next day, the first spontaneous protest took place. The citizens of Niš gathered in front of the City Assembly housing the City Council and the Mayor's Office. This spontaneous protest was an introduction to the process that would last three months and would be marked by a number of mass protests of citizens of Niš against the decision to "hand over the airport". It ended on June 22nd at the session of the Assembly of the City of Niš, when the decision of the City Council was adopted.

A few days after the first rally, an informal initiative was formed under the name "We're not giving up the Nis airport" (Ne damo niški aerodrom), by Miloš Bošković, an outgoing deputy at the time, and by citizens' associations National Coalition for Decentralisation, Proaktiv, Media&Reform centre and the Associated Movement of Free Tenants. The initiative stemmed from the need to articulate a spontaneous rebellion against handing over of the airport, and to enter an active campaign to defend the city's ownership of the airport. The ensuing campaign was primarily focused on informing citizens about the harmfulness of the City Council's decision, and on putting pressure to city authorities, essentially to the City Assembly, to give up such decision. In addition to the aforementioned civil protests, several forums were organised within the campaign, as well as street actions comprising distribution of information leaflets and interviews with citizens. During the entire campaign, the public was informed on daily basis about its course through social

networks, primarily through the Facebook profile of the initiative, which was also updated several times a day and thanks to which the activists of the initiative maintained a two-way communication with the citizens.

This three-month campaign was successful in several of its goals. First of all, it managed to draw the public's attention to the issue of the Niš airport, and a number of printed and electronic media regularly followed up its activities. Furthermore, it reached a large number of local residents, informed them about the actual state of affairs that they were unable to learn from the city and republic representatives, incite many of them to actively participate in rallies against the airport handover. The pressure coerced on city authorities bore fruit in the short-term – the City Assembly session, initially scheduled for April 10th 2018, during which the decision of the City Council was supposed to be adopted, was indefinitely postponed after the initiative organised another protest in front of the Assembly. The session was held two and a half months later, on June 22nd 2018. Nevertheless, the campaign failed to achieve its main goal. At the City Assembly session, the City Council decision was eventually adopted by the majority of votes of city councillors and shortly after, an agreement on transfer of founders' right over the airport was signed.

Successes and failures of the initiative "We're not giving up the Niš airport" can both provide us with lots of information regarding the potentials of the civic activism in Serbia today despite all obstacles that stand in the way of a more active involvement of citizens in decision-making regarding the-

ir community. Let's start with success. How come the initiative "We're not giving up the Niš airport" was able to gather such a large number of citizens? Undoubtedly, the Niš airport has a great impact on the development of the city - since 2014, the airport has begun to sign contracts with various low-cost airline companies offering cheap flights to different European destinations; the number of passengers has started to grow rapidly. With the increase in number of flights, the number of tourists from different European countries has grown, which directly influenced the development of tourism in Niš and the rise of small businesses related to tourism - hostels, hotels, bars, restaurants. Also, an affordable airline connection with Niš, encouraged foreign investors to invest in the opening of local branches of their companies. Last, but not least, since more and more people from Niš (as well as from Serbia in general) go to work or to study in the countries of the European Union, direct flights from Niš to many European cities have provided great relief both to them and to members of their families who remained in Niš.

The main reason for handing over the Niš airport to the Republic of Serbia was, in fact, the agreement on concession of the "Nikola Tesla"¹ airport in Belgrade signed with the French company "Vinci". As a matter of fact, several state officials foreshadowed that there was a clause in this agreement limiting the number of passengers that were able to fly from the Niš airport. It is therefore easy to interpret the spontaneous gatherings of local citizens as a rebellion against the expected restrictions in development of the Niš airport. Nonetheless, although the public grew more and more informed about the reasons for a such a decision with the campaign progress, it is hard to believe that the initial rebellion of citizens was motivated by these speculations. This is why it convenes to search reasons for such a revolt elsewhere.

Political scientists Saymore Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan laid down their thesis on "social cleavages" as the basis for building political options in democratic societies fifty years ago. According to Lipset and Stein, social cleavages represent con-

licts of interest between different layers of the population on various issues, and some of these conflicts become the axes for the permanent articulation of politically opposed groups in one society. One of the cleavages that these authors point out as politically significant is the cleavage in the relationship between the centre and the periphery, which is politically articulated through different regionalist and separatist movements or parties.

Although in Serbia the social cleavage between the centre and the periphery has been hugely pronounced for a very long time, and is reflected in the uneven territorial development of the capital and the disproportionate political representation of the capital of Serbia, Belgrade, and many other parts of the country, in most cases this social cleavage is not appropriately politically articulated. An analysis of this state would require a much more comprehensive study, but one of the reasons can certainly be sought in the centralist organisation of political institutions in Serbia. For example, the current electoral system treats entire Serbia as a single constituency, based on a pro-rata distribution of mandates based on the number of votes from closed lists. This leads to a disproportionate regional representation of various parts of Serbia in the parliament, as well as to a strongly centralised structure of the largest national parties. The proportional electoral system is applied in local elections, and municipal presidents and mayors are not elected directly, but in municipal and city assemblies. Because of this, local political elites have insufficient strength to oppose the national elites, which, according to Lipset and Stein, is the basic generator of a political articulation of social cleavages between the centre and the periphery, so this social cleavage plays a relatively minor role in political life in Serbia.

When it comes to Niš, the third largest city in Serbia, this cleavage is particularly pronounced and present in the consciousness of citizens and their perception of social processes in the last twenty years. Local citizens perceive their city as unjustly neglected and underdeveloped especially in comparison to Belgrade, the capital, and Novi Sad, the capital of the autonomous province. Economic indicators

1 The fact that the City Council's decision to hand over the airports was made only a week after the signing of the agreement on the concession with the company "Vinci" speaks in favour of this interpretation. You can find more details about the non-transparency of this agreement, which has not yet been published, in the text Zlatko Minić "Modern European Banana Republic" (<https://pescanik.net/moderna-evropska-banana-republika/>)

show that this perception is not unfounded. Income and standards of living in Niš are lower than in the other two big cities, the economy is underdeveloped and the number of unemployed is considerably higher. The lack of a political articulation of city interests further heightens this dissatisfaction, since it seems that whatever vote they cast, citizens of Niš cannot influence public policies that would work for the benefit of their community. The claim that politicians from Niš who advanced in party hierarchies left their city and went to live and work in Belgrade, has long been a common place among local citizens, which is not at all groundless.

The decision to hand over the city airport has therefore fallen on the fertile ground previously planted with seeds of dissatisfaction over the centralisation of Serbia and the growing economic backwardness of Niš. As the decision to hand over the airport was made without any public hearing or any previous preparations, it was the most obvious confirmation of what the citizens of Niš had anticipated for years - that the system had been "fitted" to the detriment of Niš and that the capital had not cared about their interests.

Starting from this assumption, the initiative "We're not giving up the Niš airport" joined the campaign by insisting on what unites the citizens of Niš and by putting aside what divides them. The campaign thus enabled the articulation of dissatisfaction with a concrete decision, but also with a long-standing process of centralisation, as well as with existing political actors who do not work in the best interests of the city.

The main obstacle to such an articulation of protests were encrusted political separations. The main challenge for the initiative activists was how to avoid them. Two basic divisions, which were particularly troublesome, were divisions to supporters of the government and of the opposition and to nationalists and anti-nationalists.

In the light of this challenge, the activists of the initiative immediately agreed upon several basic principles to which they adhered throughout the duration of the campaign. First of all, at all gatherings and rallies organised by the initiative, it was forbidden to wear party or nationalist symbols. Secondly, it was explicitly requested from all participants to refrain from all sorts of violence and provocations. Anyone

who would disobey these rules would be suspended from the rally. Thirdly, the basic motto of the initiative was "Niš - the city of decent people" - which would determine all further campaigns, underline its nonviolent and civic character, but also point out that it would not undermine the dignity of citizens Niš with the decision of the City Council.

These principles were soon explicitly found in the invitation to the first protest that was officially organised by the initiative "We're not giving up the Niš airport", scheduled for April 10th 2018, in front of the City Assembly, on the day the session of this legislative body was due to be held. The voting for the decision of the City Council on the airport handover was on the agenda. The invitation to the protest was published on the Facebook page of the initiative, and soon it was broadcast by many Niš and national media. All citizens loving Niš, regardless of their political preferences were invited. The protest gathered more than a thousand people from Niš, who fully respected the demands of the organisers - the gathering ran peacefully and without nationalistic and party symbols. However, there were several opposition leaders from Niš and Belgrade present at the protest. The government representatives used their presence to label protests as oppositional. The activists of the initiative distributed flyers with printed "yes" and "no" answers and requested from citizens to state their opinion about the City Council decision by lifting the appropriate flyer.

The attitude towards the opposition continued to be a challenge for the activists of the initiative during the two following months of the campaign. On the one hand, regime politicians and media used every opportunity to link protests with the opposition and thus disqualify them, counting on the already built negative media image of the opposition. On the other hand, the opposition actors were continuously pressuring activists of the initiative, as they wanted to have a permission to actively participate in protests. They even went so far as to issue press releases on several occasions insinuating that they were standing behind these protests.

The activists of the initiative, however, remained persistent in their intention to keep the protests away from political party influences. There were several reasons for this perseverance. In conver-

sations with the citizens of Niš, it was soon concluded that the rebellion against the airport handover transcended party affiliations and divisions and that a number of ruling party supporters pleaded against the decision of the City Council. This impression was later confirmed by a [public opinion survey](#) which was conducted mid-May by the New Serbian Political Thought Portal, and given a symptomatic title – “They love Vučić, but they won’t give up the airport”. According to the results of the survey, more than fifty percent of respondents pleaded against the airport transfer and almost fifty percent supported protests.

Furthermore, according to informal knowledge of the activists of the initiative, the final decision on donating the airport, i.e. its adoption in the City Assembly, largely depended on the attitude of ruling party voters towards such a decision. In that sense, the opinion of the pro-regime voters was extremely important for stopping the decision to hand over the airport, and the initiative actively worked to ensure that these voters would not be antagonised, but rather focused on the airport issue and the citizens’ rights to decide about the city property.

The tensions between the initiative and the opposition actors, who supported the protests, concentrated not only on the goals but on the strategy, as well. The aim of the opposition was above all to increase visibility and popularity in the public (primarily of the anti-regime part of the public), and then to prevent the adoption of the decision by the City Council. Accordingly, the antagonisation of regime voters was not their main concern. On the other hand, the aim of the initiative was to prevent the adoption of a harmful decision on the airport transfer and also to strengthen citizens and build solidarity amongst them.

The difference in goals was also reflected in the different strategies and actions conceived by the activists of the initiative, on the one hand, and by the opposition actors, on the other. The clearest example of this difference can be seen in a different focus on decision-makers. Specifically, the activists of the initiative agreed at the very beginning of the campaign that they should primarily insist on accountability of municipal councillors. This resulted in a wide variety of actions, during which citizens were informed about the composition of the City

Assembly, leaflets containing names of all councillors were distributed and official demands requesting that all councillors state whether they would vote for or against the decision of the City Council sent, etc.

This strategy emanated from a principled position that only citizen representatives and citizens of Niš can make decisions on the city property, and from a tactical assessment that the government would intervene by introducing its trump card in the game – the President of the Republic – and that it would try to transform the airport ownership issue into a pleading for or against Aleksandar Vučić. This assessment was soon proven right, as the President announced that he would visit the city of Niš mid-April.

Moreover, the primary focus put on the city councillors made sense in the light of the fact that interests within the ruling party were actually divided on the local level. The airport was governed by the ruling party representatives who wanted it to remain the property of the city. Such conflict of interests could have caused cleavages within the very ruling party, which eventually happened. However, the officials who governed the airport left this conflict defeated and were dismissed shortly after the airport was handed over.

On the other hand, the opposition actors did not hesitate to direct their criticism primarily to the figure of the President of the Republic. Once again, this difference in strategy reflects a deeper difference in the goals between the activists of the initiative and the opposition actors. While the activists of the initiative were initially focused on a strategy that could most effectively prevent the City Council from making a harmful decision, for the opposition actors it was more important to use this conflict as another point in the political conflict with the regime, i.e., with its central figure - the President of the Republic. It should be noted that the President remained fairly reserved at the beginning of the airport crisis and to a large extent left the airport topic to the Minister of transport, construction and infrastructure. Only after April 10th 2018, and postponement of the session of the City Assembly, did the President begin to comment on the situation in Niš more often, and after a few delays, he finally visited the city.

The President's visit was announced for April 25th 2018, at ten o'clock in the morning. The official reason was the opening of the "Leoni" company plant. A rally gathering the President's supporters was supposed to take place in front of the factory. The activists of the initiative decided to schedule their protest in the afternoon of the same day at the central city square. The reason for scheduling the rally on the day of the President's visit was the intention to prevent the shifting of focus from the airport issue to the political conflict between the government and the opposition. The activists used the session that preceded this protest for their everyday action consisting of the distribution of informative material and of talks with citizens in the main city street. This turned out to be a rather successful move – a large number of citizens were ready to talk and the majority had a negative attitude towards the City Council decision and a positive one towards protests. The only hesitation that the citizens expressed in these talks regarded the opposition politicians (their attitude towards the opposition was unequivocally negative) and their involvement in protest organisation. For the activists this was yet another confirmation that their decision not to engage in party-based gatherings was clever. During the talks, the citizens often said that the takeover of the Niš airport was just another event in the entire series aiming to deprive Niš of important institutions and yet another step towards "Belgradisation" of Serbia.

At the rally in front of the "Leoni" factory which took place on April 24th 2018, the President yet again seized the opportunity to accuse the opposition leaders of orchestrating protests and to characterise protests as "political" and not "economic" ones. He pointed out that the decision on the airport faith should be brought by the city councillors. The protest which was held in the afternoon was the most large-scale protest so far and gathered more than five thousand people. This protest, too, ran smoothly, without party symbols. However, several opposition leaders were present.

The President's visit and civic protest once again showed the differences between the activists of the initiative and the local opposition representatives. The slogan "Protest in Niš – larger than the government, larger than the opposition" held an important

place at the protest. Citizens were once again asked to behave decently. The party affiliation remained unseen. However, the opposition actors very often used the motto "Get out of Niš" on social networks – addressed to the President of Serbia.

Before this protest, the initiative invited graphic designers from Niš to propose their solutions for the trademark of the initiative, and unanimously adopted the solution that represented the monument-fist from the Bubanj memorial park with a stylised plane overflying, so that this symbol took a significant place in the iconography of the protest - the citizens themselves made drawings and banners with this sign, and it was widely accepted on social networks. A few weeks later, in cooperation with the cycling club, the initiative organised a bike ride to the Bubanj memorial park, attended by several dozens of citizens.

During all these events, speculations were made about the new date of the postponed session at which the vote about the City Council decision should take place. The session was announced, then rescheduled in the guise of ongoing works in the hall. Unofficially, the activists of the initiative got the information that there were serious disagreements between the ruling party councillors and it remained unclear whether the majority of councillors would vote in favour of the decision to hand over the airport. The case of Jelena Đorđević - the councillor from the United Serbia – is an excellent example illustrating the disagreement between the councillors. As a matter of fact, she publicly objected to handing over of the airport and spoke about the pressures coming from the heads of the city authorities. After this ordeal, Đorđević was expelled from the party and fired from the public company "Unified billing" ("Objedinjena naplata").

The issue of a postponed session became more important as the expiration of the legal deadline for its holding approached, as there was a threat that the assembly might be dissolved and an interim administration be introduced in the city. However, the date was announced two days before the deadline and the session was scheduled for the very last day, June 22nd.

The initiative "We're not giving up the Niš airport" prepared the protest in front of the City Assembly on the day of the session, but as the date was unpre-

cified, the citizens could not be invited on time and it was difficult to organise the protest. The invitation to protest was published as soon as the date and time of the session were announced, but it was impossible to mobilise a large number of citizens on such short notice. Besides, as the session was rescheduled until the beginning of a summer holiday season and children summer holidays, there was a smaller number of citizens than usual in the city. For all these reasons, the protest held in front of the City Assembly, beginning at eight in the morning, was the least visited of all the previous ones - the estimated number of people was several hundred. One novelty regarding this protest was that all individual calls to councillors urging them to vote against the decision were recorded. After the end of the protest, several activists of the initiative tried to enter the hall and use their right to attend the session, but the assembly security did not let them in. The protest and the session were covered by a number of local and national media.

The outcome of the session is well-known. Nearly all councillors of the ruling coalition voted in favour of the decision of the City Council (only one councillor of the Socialist Party of Serbia abstained). The decision to hand over the airport was adopted.

After the decision was adopted, the initiative sought new ways to legally contest the decision and found a number of procedural and substantial irregularities. Lawsuits were filed to the Administrative Court, and notifications were sent to all competent judicial authorities. Their outcome is yet to be learnt. One of the noted procedural irregularities regarded the scheduling of the postponed session that was supposed to take place on April 10th 2018. Such postponement was not performed in accordance with the City Assembly statute.

Before we start analysing the failure of the campaign organised by the initiative “We’re not giving up the Niš airport” to prevent the passing of the decision to transfer the ownership of the airport, we should sum up once again its positive results. First of all, the campaign consisting of informing and mobilising the citizens was a success. It reflected in the number of citizens who protested and who shared different contents published on the initiative Facebook profile on social networks. The campaign referring to informing the public and drawing

its attention to the problems with the City Council decision can also be considered a successful one. A large number of news and texts in the media witness to activities of the initiative, to civic protests and to problems linked to the decision passed on by the City Council. Finally, the campaign aiming to coerce pressure to the city authorities to prevent them from voting in favour of the questionable decision, at least until a comprehensive public hearing is held, was successful in a short-term. The quarterly postponement in the final decision was largely the result of civic protests and of the campaign led by the initiative “We’re not giving up the Niš airport”. Thanks to this three-month period, it was possible to publicly question the decision to hand over the airport, to present numerous arguments against such decision and to inform citizens more thoroughly about its harmfulness, as well as about the actual situation at the Niš airport.

Whilst this may be true, the campaign failed to prevent the adoption of the decision to hand over the airport and it is necessary to consider all possible reasons of this failure.

The pressure on the city councillors was aimed at asking these elected representatives of the citizens of Niš to reconsider the decision of the City Council in favour of which they were ordered to vote. This kind of pressure made sense in the light of the fact that the adoption of the decision depended directly on them, as well as of the fact that they are most clearly accountable to the citizens. On the other hand, thanks to the existing electoral system, councillors are elected from the party lists and not directly. It implies that their prospects depend on the parties’ will and not on citizens’ opinion of their efficiency as councillors. Besides, in the situation where the rating of the ruling coalition depends of the rating of the president of the strongest party in this coalition and where the results at the local level reflect the results at the national level, obedience to the party seems to be a much more appealing strategy than accountability to citizens. It seems that this is the main reason why the ruling coalition councillors were ready to ignore the massive citizens’ disapproval and to vote as ordered by the party headquarters.

Furthermore, as the aforesaid example of the coun-

cillor Jelena Đorđević tells us – many councillors of the ruling coalition have much more to lose if they oppose to the party headquarters' will than if they oppose to their voters' will. Even if in the second case the voters might not vote for them, in the first case the risk is even higher – not only do they risk their councillor seat, but they can also lose their jobs and jeopardise their security. For institutional reasons and due to specific structure of the clientelistic regime, the power is completely displaced from local self-government units to party headquarters. However intensive the citizens' pressure may be, it is insufficient and cannot influence the local representatives in situations where there is a conflict of interests with party headquarters.

Moreover, if the decision to hand over the Niš airport primarily depended on the agreement on the concession of the “Nikola Tesla” airport with the French company “Vinci”, which is several billions of euros worth, then it is reasonable to assume that the scale of the interests at stake was too great to be effectively countered by one local initiative. The Niš airport served as a bargaining chip in a much larger game, and the protests of citizens of Niš were a negligible price to pay for the parties in power, compared to the potential profit from an agreement with a foreign investor.

Finally, a relatively big time distance between the local elections and the moment when the Niš airport faith was being decided (the next ordinary election for the City Assembly should take place in spring 2020), might have facilitated the decision-making in this case supposing that there would be enough time to push this case out of the public's memory until the next election campaign. Whether this assumption is true shall depend on further actions that shall be conducted by the initiative “We're not giving up the Niš airport” that is trying to keep this topic alive in the city and national public by regularly reporting on harmful consequences of the airport handover.

All things considered, it is easy to draw pessimistic conclusions about the current situation in Serbia: institutions are alienated, power and decision-making are moved from the local self-government units to the small circle of people at the top of the parties' hierarchy. Subsequently, all sorts of local activism, like the one launched by the initiative

“We're not giving up the Niš airport”, are doomed to fail. However, in view of the previously discussed considerations on the ways of political articulation of social disputes, the success and failure of such initiatives should not be measured solely by whether they achieved their immediate goal, but also by whether they succeeded in enabling previously neglected interests of the citizens to become more explicit and subsequently whether they opened up space for the expansion of social and political debate so that it incorporates the topics that the citizens care about, but they failed to put into clearly-defined political platforms.

The campaign against the handover of the Niš airport managed to bring important issues in the focus of political debate for at least for several months. These issues concern decentralisation, the competencies of local governments, and the ability of citizens to decide on public goods that belong to their local communities. Also, this campaign provided the opportunity for citizens of Niš to see themselves as political entities with common interests and to seize the opportunity to work together for the first time since the introduction of the multi-party system. The affirmation of the local identity and city symbols that the initiative insisted on during the campaign, gave an opportunity to citizens of Niš to see themselves as a part of the collective that is different than the one otherwise dominating in the political life of Serbia – parties and nation. Seen in this way, the campaign against the handover of the airport ceases to be a mere incident in the political and social life of Serbia, and becomes a forerunner of the possibility of returning politics to citizens with topics that are primarily of interest to them, such as managing local communities and public goods.

The American political theorist Bonnie Honig has written a number of articles over the past few years about the importance of “public things” for the health of democracy. According to Honig, public things are durable and resistant objects that are the subject of popular affection, and to which citizens get emotionally attached. These things can be different public institutions, parks, schools, hospitals, monuments. The feeling of connection to these things enables citizens to perceive themselves as a part of the same community capable of joint actions. In short, according to Honig, democracy is primarily

a dispute over public things and their functions in the life of the community. Neoliberal policies of the privatisation of public works are therefore not only questionable from the economic point of view, but also from the aspect of preserving democracy. Honig writes:

“All forms of government and citizenship are connected with desire. They are not just rules for coordinating local collective actions. They also introduce us into imaginary past and future, direct our desires, structure our friendships and hostilities, and shape, then feed or starve our hopes. But the *common* orientation for common objects is specific to democracy, and it forces us to wonder if our own era, marked by ruthless privatisation, could be an introduction to the demise of democracy. Will the neo-liberal indiscriminating privatisation of public things and the production of the desire for private, commercial objects represent a specific - perhaps even cataclysmic - challenge for *democracy*?²”

Like the rest of Serbia, Niš has passed through a cataclysmic privatisation process over the last thirty years. The disappearance of *public things* – process in which entire factories disappeared and these factories used not only to provide jobs for tens of thousands of Niš citizens but were also an object of collective attachment and pride (an old inscription at the entrance to Niš says: “Welcome to the electronics city!” - a message that directly refers to nowadays dismantled Electronic Industry of Niš). This process was not the subject of a political debate or of a decision-making, but was seen as inevitable, and that is precisely the kind of natural cataclysm that hit the city. Having stood in defence of their airport, the citizens of Niš had risen for the first time in the last thirty years in the defence of a public thing that ties them together. It might have not changed the outcome of the process itself, but it enabled them to see themselves as members of the same community that cares for common things and that wishes to fight for these things. The symbolism of the fist from the Bubanj memorial park connects the fight for defence of the airport with the history of the struggle for freedom, but also with another public thing that is the subject of a collective attachment - the Bubanj memorial park itself.

Honig often illustrates the importance of public things by an example from the film *Melancholia* by Lars Von Trier, which literally deals with cataclysm – the end of the world caused by the collision of Earth with a rogue planet named “Melancholia”. By the end of the film, we can see three characters, two adult women and a boy who, faced with the imminent cataclysm, start building an improvised wattle and daub tent that one of women calls a “magic cave” that will protect them against the catastrophe. At the very end of the film, we see all three of them sitting in the tent holding hands at the moment the asteroid crashes in the planet destroying everything in its path. In the story about the “magic cave”, Honig does not see a mere illusion, but rather hope, mediated by a common thing, an improvised tent where characters feel safe with one another in spite of the upcoming cataclysm. Referring to the work of the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who pointed out the importance of attitudes toward objects (such as favourite toys) for the healthy development and growing up of children, Honig argues that the Trier film can be interpreted as follows:

“A fantasy of a boy who dreams his way through an adolescence that feels world-ending because it involves aggression, anger and other “ugly feelings”. We are reminded by Von Trier of our need for play, for intersubjective pleasures and of the importance of shared or (in more democratic terms) *public things* to hold us and cared for by us, built and fought for by us. Winnicott would say that in such an environment we experience what feel like world-ending feelings, but we – and the world – survive. This requires that things themselves survive. In Winnicott’s world, their magic consists of it. We destroy them, but they survive and transfer their endurance to us.”

The fight against the takeover of the Niš airport can, in retrospect, look as if it had been previously condemned to fail. Once the whole set of interests and power relations that stood behind the decision to take over the airport are taken into consideration, citizens’ protests may look childish and powerless to change anything. However, the readiness of the citizens to embark on a three-month long struggle for the public cause they care about is indicative of

2 Bonnie Honig, “Public Things: Jonathan Lear’s *Radical Hope*, Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*, and the Democratic Need”, *Political Research Quarterly*.

something else: the perseverance and endurance of citizens of Niš and their commitment to a common democratic future. Paraphrasing Honig, we could say that this is what makes the magic of the Niš airport.

