

# Sofia, Bulgaria: Q&A with Social Center Xaspel - On the history of “a place of solidarity for collective actions”

Saturday 19 October 2013, by [PANAYOTOV Stanimir](#), [Xaspel](#) (Date first published: April 2012).

**Хаспел [has'pel]** – from Bulgarian – winder, windlass, a device for raising or hauling objects, usually upon which a cable, rope, or chain winds, the outer end of the cable being attached directly or indirectly to the weight to be raised or the thing to be hauled or pulled; winch. (source: [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com))

**Q: Xaspel is the first of a kind social center in Sofia. It was set up as a place of solidarity for collective actions, which was followed by the proliferation of other autonomous spaces. What was the collective vision behind it, and its particular history? And what sort of collectively felt reasons were there to found it?**

A: The idea for a social center in Sofia is in fact older than Xaspel itself. It was a result of many years of exchange and meetings with activists from Greece, where part of the Xaspel collective has good friends and connections. The social centers in Greece (different from the squat movement, which is formed around various sub-cultures) were the core of the social movements there. Our visits in “Nosotros” in Athens, “Micropolis” in Thessalonica and other centers gave us an inspiration and an example how we can combine different groups and goals that are beneficial for the general public here in Sofia, but without the dependence from state or other institutional financing. It was exactly the Greek example that showed us a possible way of combining the efforts of various grassroots activist collectives in Sofia and making the “scene” more political and interconnected, because in Bulgaria it is still fragmented and isolated in the communication with each other. The social center started in the beginning of May 2010, but there were a lot of meetings between different groups maybe half a year before the actual start or even more. Different grassroots political, environmental and social movements (radical left activists, environmentalist, anarchists, human rights activists, people, involved in independent art scene and many others) had more or less the same ideas for starting a free and independent place, opened for different groups and individuals who work towards alternatives to the present status quo. All of us felt the need for such a place through which we all can discuss, develop and try the wide variety of vital alternatives of the current social, political and economic organization. The main idea of all those meetings and discussions before the start was to see how we can collaborate in the future and can we do it together, to share ideas and visions. The actual impetus came at some point in late 2009, when it turned out that people from the environmental Association “For the Earth” were trying to start a project for urban sustainable infocenter and we joined forces, so to say. After a few months of searching for a place and collective renovation of the one we chose, we opened the social center with a big party on 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2010. Since then we moved once, now we’re at 8 Madrid Blvd. in Sofia. This is also a new experiment to combine our activity and space with an artist collective “The Fridge” – they have been similarly connected to political issues and struggles, and we anticipate that this fusion will bring great results.

**Q: Xaspel/Windlass is a strange word in English as well. Where does the name of the collective originate from?**

A: It's a funny story. The first place where we hosted the social center was a shop in an early 20<sup>th</sup> century building. Under the first two premises it had a large storing cellar with a Xaspel/windlass hanging over it to lift goods up and down. Someone brought up the word which many of us did not know before. But to some it really had a symbolic meaning – our social center was one of a kind of elevation of society, of bringing up and giving possibilities to those who have been down and out. So we kept the name. Since then we have moved to a new place, but the name of the social center remained, and is something which the collective still strongly identifies with.

**Q: Tell us more about the particular causes, political struggles and activities supported by the center.**

A: The goal behind Xaspel is to bring together social, environmental and political activists that are committed to a better world free of structural, symbolic, and normalized violence. By opening its space for meetings, workshops, activities etc., the center supports initiatives linked to the green movement, social movements, free and accessible education, political and economic alternatives, critical assessment of the current political economy, freedom of movement, etc. That is why the center was also one of the key spots where Transeuropa festival took place last year, and will happen this year again. Of course, we don't think of Xaspel only as a space, but also as a collective – the people who run the place. We are all also activists and volunteers, each of us has a life and work out of the center, but we all come together through our engagement in these causes. We have had events which one of us would propose or feel strongly about, e.g., the topic of migrants' rights and detention centers, ecology, LGBTQI and women's rights, the ParEcon ideology, labor rights, and other. As a whole, our goal is to give voice to causes and struggles which provide alternatives to the current system. In Bulgaria such voices, causes, and stories have been undermined in the "glorious" transition of the country from state socialism to liberal democracy. Our hope was to create a space, where the principles of equality and equity, self-management, solidarity, mutual aid, creativity, and humanity prevail. We think that we more or less achieve it for now. Thus we've had a number of festivals, talks, and projections on issues like the alimentary autonomy, labor rights, student struggles, gender issues. We've also hosted political and artistic workshops, donation campaigns, free fests, and community organizers working with Roma children. We hope to do more of these in the future, but also to simply turn the center into a space where more and more people can simply come in without constraints. It is crucial to rebuild the social fabric of our city and we hope that Xaspel will be a central nod in this process.

**Q: How do you relate the very concept of the "social center" to that of the "commons"? And to what extent do you intertwine theory with practice in running the center, i.e., what is the place of social and political theory in the collective?**

A: Commons. It's funny, in Bulgarian we don't even have a proper translation of that. It can be something upon the line of "common goods and services". It is a concept which disappeared with a lot of other genuinely left-wing vocabulary which became completely obsolete during state socialism. For the time being our task is to revive such vocabulary but in a critical way, rethinking the recent past, as well as our current struggles and conditions of living. That is why at present together with the team of Transeuropa festival we are setting a trans-European discussion of commons and the way we need to articulate and reclaim certain areas of shared livelihood that were also self-understood as common, but are nowadays increasingly privatized and dominated by profit: natural resources, education and culture, housing, digital commons and other. Over the last year in Europe there have been significant struggles over these issues, and Bulgaria has been strong in reclaiming certain reservations, the right not to extract shale gas, and information rights and liberties. Sadly, by now housing, education, and more bread and butter causes have not been on the agenda of the Bulgarian movements, and we will now try to introduce them back there through our program. At the same time, exactly because this vocabulary and discourse is still very distant for the Bulgarian

public, theory work is crucial for us. In 2012 the Xaspel collective obtained funding from the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung to make a project called "New Left Perspectives" – a series of serious lectures, seminars, and projection, dealing with the post-1989 transformations in Bulgaria and the region. We have invited scholars, but also activists, who deal with macro-scale analysis of the neoliberal transformations, as well as those engaged in fieldwork and grassroots exploration and interventions. The attempt is to recuperate some left vocabulary from both the liberals – who have refuted it for the last 20 years – and from the old nomenklatura Left of the Bulgarian (so-called) Socialist Party, who still use this vocabulary but mostly emptied it out of substance. Starting with words as "collective", this vocabulary of collectivity and solidarity has been discredited and has made it impossible for us to speak positively about social change brought beyond individual life trajectories. It is an issue which philosopher Boyan Manchev – a member of our fellow collective "The Fridge" outlined during his lecture in Xaspel in January 2011 – and which we have now taken on seriously to discuss and deal with within a broader theoretical and activist program. Because theory is, of course, good only in a healthy balance with direct action. Many of us have an academic background and we are at times indulged in theoretical discussion, but we try to keep out of claims and theories unsubstantiated by action.

**Q: Can you try to contextualize the Xaspel collective in light of the so-called commodification of social movements and struggles (and in particular with reference to the ngo-ization of grass-root activism)? How do you differentiate in the Bulgarian social context in order to bring about social change?**

A: This has been a significant challenge for us, as, perhaps, for most grassroots initiatives. In Bulgaria the context has been rather harsh because the project culture developed since the 1990s has mushroomed and created a vacuum of any other type of activism, but the one sponsored by the EU, American Think Tanks and Thrusts, Open Society Institute, and the like. In this context it is almost impossible to create a sensible fundraising campaign without the public reacting reticently as "Oh, yet another NGO". At the same time, funding is important and even to get a project going as the one with Rosa Luxemburg, we had to make some compromises. Part of the collective, interested in doing editorial work, has registered an association, which is by now not involved in decision-making on the organizational level, but has served as great support for most of our activities. This has allowed us a relative liberty without going into institutionalization of all the relations between us. So far so good, but as many of us have participated in former attempts to avoid institutionalization which have either failed or succumbed to it, we are still anxious and try to be on the alert of the signals that might betray such a process being underway among us.

**Q: How do you appropriate and reorganize around recent uprisings such as OWS, Indignados, etc., which are taking place in Europe and beyond? It's really interesting to know how these processes of collective struggle are being locally mobilized in the Bulgarian context.**

A: These movements propose a change in the commonly accepted capitalist social orders. They realize in practice and through practice constantly evolving communal structures. This is a relatively new (if not entirely new) way of resistance. The "no cause rebellion" for which OWS was constantly blamed at the beginning, actually appeared to be a cause in progress, and strategy in progress, an embrace of partiality and constant change as a strategy and as an attitude to issues. This "partiality" is a realization of many dream feminist scenarios, or proposed feminist strategies of governing, therefore the intersection of class, race and gender seems to be happening at OWS. Of course it builds over the experience of previous resistance movements. However for a first time we are able to clearly see the role of women in the resistance movement, because it is valued and respected by all participants in this struggle. The issues of race, gender and their intersection with class, seems to be addressed and recognized by the movement from

its very beginning. In Bulgaria these global frames have been only partially translated. For example instead of taking on the "Occupy" label, a local movement which emerged simultaneously, gathered for weeks under the banner of "direct democracy." One reason for this is the closer proximity of the Bulgarian activist circles with the debates going on in Greece. Another issue is that the Occupy or Indignados movements are very specific and often nationally or even locally framed. This is an issue we find we need to articulate further. On the one hand, of course, these movements are beautiful and their energy has spanned through different locations on the globe. On the other hand, they are often an expression of the outrage of a middle class in former (neo)colonial spaces that for the first time lives the precarious conditions in which the minorities in these countries, and the rest of the world, has been living in forever. So if we are to perceive e.g. of the Occupy movement as aligned with our own struggle, we need to see it not just as an attempt of redistribution within the US - which will be great in itself, but not enough. We need to see it as an analysis of global inequalities, in which the American 99% are just the tip of the iceberg. And there is where our struggle begins. While we see successful globalization of markets and corporative strategies we are still not able to see a global resistance, which is the only way these global corporative structures can be effectively fight against. This "global resistance" has to be based on extensive cross-cultural transnational exchange of strategies, developed on the basis of a profound understanding of local issues and practices. The resistance movements, although seemingly more globalized through information technologies and social networks, are still partial and do not exchange among each other enough. For example there is a lot of attention to the Arab Spring right now and almost zero attention to what is happening in Eastern Europe. The corporative media creates these informational gaps, and the resistance movements and independent media are not effectively filling them out. This partiality and inability to connect for instance the Western and East European leftist practices sometimes leads to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of issues and radical practices, as well as to weakening and even impossibility of a more globalized and stronger resistance on transnational level.

*Questions by Stanimir Panayotov*

*For Xaspel answered: Boryana Rossa, Mariya Ivancheva, Peter Piperkov*

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\* <http://xaspel.net/2012/04/qa-with-social-center-xaspel/>