

Mapping Left Actors: Croatia

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¹ The authors would like to thank all the organizations and individuals who took part in this study for their contributions and patience. We would also like to thank Stipe Ćurković for his extensive editorial work on this text, which in our view greatly improved it. Responsibility for all statements made in this text lies solely with the authors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of this report is three actors on the political scene in Croatia: *Radnička Fronta* (Workers' Front, RF, founded in May 2014), *Nova ljevica* (New Left, NL, December 2016) and *Zagreb je Naš!* (Zagreb is Ours, ZJN, March 2017). They put up candidates in local elections in May 2017 in several cities, enjoying the most success in the capital city of Zagreb in a broader coalition with two other small parties, where they won four (out of fifty one) seats in the city assembly, along with sixty five seats on the city district level. While this is not the first time since Croatian independence in 1990 that small parties to the left of the social democrats have won seats in various elections (Vukobratović, 2016), there is a sense of novelty and significance, which characterizes all three parties in different ways. All three parties were formed by activists and identified themselves explicitly as new left initiatives. They all attached great importance to participatory politics and equality and included a significant number of members who had developed politically through exposure to contemporary leftist theory. Perhaps most importantly, these three parties found ways to work together, both during the election campaign and in the political institutions in which they are now representatives. We begin this study with a short survey of relevant historical and more recent political events to contextualize the emergence of these parties.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Nominally, Croatia switched to a capitalist economy and parliamentary democracy in 1990. In fact, however, the Yugoslav socialist economy had been turning towards markets from the mid-1960s onwards, gradually transforming its firms into partially capitalist entities which had to compete and validate their outputs on markets. The leading political parties and intellectuals have been united in their wildly optimistic prognoses as regards these transformations, with the promises of a better future taking various forms. Central to these

was - and to a large extent still is - a glorified view of the market and of private sector efficiency. This is a legitimizing narrative accompanying an aggressive privatization agenda, alongside idealized notions of EU integration as a social and economic panacea, guaranteeing generalized prosperity and well-being. While these prognoses were followed by a certain amount of disillusionment, the prevalence of ideological optimism with regard to the future results of capitalist development and EU integration, in combination with a wholesale rejection of the socialist legacy and nationalist hostility towards left positions, created an environment which presented formidable constraints to the possible formation of new left political actors.

2.1. The fear of a return to the 1990s

The first half of the nineties in Croatia were marked by the process of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the dismantling of the institutions and legal framework of the socialist state. The explosion of nationalism; destruction caused by the war, privatizations and the asset stripping of industry; state oppression and violations of human rights (predominantly those of the Serb ethnic minority), characterized this period. Social and class struggles that emerged in this period were suppressed and often covered up by the state and para-state apparatus of the newly established nation: «The entire decade of the 1990s was permeated by strong nationalist resentments inextricably linked to a form of anti-communism characterized by its deep hostility towards organizations, institutions and practices established in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and thus perceived as part of the Yugoslav socialist project» (Ivandić & Livada, 2015). Alternative voices found in a number of media outlets and emerging civil society organizations which were not controlled by the HDZ-led government also came under significant pressure. The most prominent of these voices were the independent magazines *Feral Tribune* (Split) and *Arkzin* (Zagreb), which persistently provided a much-needed critique of president Franjo Tuđman and his HDZ government. Other significant sites of resistance were feminist groups and anti-war

campaigns that emerged during the first half of the decade. They engaged in intense fieldwork, primarily to help the most sensitive groups among those directly affected by the war: Serbs forcibly evicted from their dwellings, female victims of war, refugees from Croatia and Bosnia, etc. All these actors played an important role in creating pockets of anti-nationalism and resistance to institutional violence, thus forming an extra-parliamentary civil opposition to Tuđman's regime. In the process, they offered contesting views of the wars in former Yugoslavia, constructing narratives in opposition to the official ones, including the documenting of war crimes ignored by the judiciary, mainstream media and the political elite. The *Antiwar Campaign*, a network of civil society organizations (CSOs) created in the nineties, established the foundation of a «modern civil society» in Croatia (Janković and Mokrović 2011). Another important direction for future progressive development was the environmental movement that emerged in the period before the dissolution of Yugoslavia and developed in late nineties and early 2000s (Oštrić 2014).

Several civil society activists of this generation are now involved in the new left political parties in Croatia, with a significant number of them active in the *New Left* (NL) party and *Zagreb is Ours*. In the interviews we conducted, some of the NL members emphasized the importance of the activism of that period for their political development and education (Borić 2017). They stressed how the traumas of the nineties, such as war, nationalism, the ethnic cleansing of Serbs, and subjects such as women's rights and other identity and cultural issues, continue to affect the political and social reality today, and therefore, they ought to provide a focus for the left in Croatia. Consequently, they see one of the main tasks of their party as preventing «the return of the nineties», a period marked by the unquestionable rule of nationalism, the HDZ and associated far-right groups, media censorship, and the stigmatizing of leftists and Serbs. Fears of «the return of the nineties», an often-invoked phrase among the left-liberal intelligentsia and journalists, to a large

extent still frames the worldview of the generation of CSO activists who were politically shaped in this period.

The electoral victory of a left-liberal coalition in the year 2000 brought about change, temporarily leaving behind the most traumatic aspects of the nineties. The expected and wished for deepening of the «normalization» of life in the country was tied to an optimistic and uncritical view of European integration. This optimistic EU narrative persisted throughout the 2000s, creating a sense of expectation of imminent political and economic stability. From a left-liberal perspective, the final destination, implicit since Croatian independence was gained in 1990, was the construction of a decent liberal, capitalist state. This general optimism survived even the electoral victories of a - at this point - reformed, less rigidly nationalistic and more liberal HDZ in subsequent elections in 2003 and 2007.

2.2. The Late 2000s: New Generations of Activists

The late 2000s can be understood as the years of the so-called «European consensus» between the HDZ and its left-liberal opposition. Ideological differences and minor disagreements on economic issues (all parties were advocating more-or-less neoliberal policies at this point) played a secondary role, with Croatian accession to the EU dominating all political discussions, understood as the solution to all important social and economic issues. Analytically grounded criticism of the EU was virtually non-existent, with the [exception](#) (Miloš et al. 2010) of [a group of leftist student activists](#) (Žitko et al. 2011). EU accession finally occurred in 2013, but in a completely transformed context, with both the Union and the country deeply affected by the economic crisis. In this period, a new generation of activists was shaped, moving beyond the topics that had dominated the previous fifteen years, addressing a new set of issues, engaged both as activists and developing their own positions through the renewed reception of often explicitly anti-capitalist theoretical literature. In this period a variety of activist mobilizations and

campaigns took place in Croatia. A series of protests arose against the privatization of public space: a social movement gathered around Varšavska street in Zagreb (Celakoski, Domes, and Medak 2012; Dolenc, Doolan, and Tomašević 2017; Šarić 2012), Srđ mountain in Dubrovnik (Tolj 2012) and the Muzil peninsula in Pula. Through a wave of university occupations, students demanded free education, taking a stand against the neoliberal transformation of public services (Various authors 2011; Prug 2010; Slobodni Filozofski 2009). The Island Movement addressed the underdevelopment of Croatia's islands (Nobilo 2016), and a campaign was launched against the monetization of motorways, with activists in favour of public ownership of infrastructure (Krzyzak 2014). Another important catalyst for the left in Croatia since 2008 has been the Subversive Festival and Balkan Forum, a week-long annual conference with influential keynote speakers, workshops and regional gatherings of activists (Samary 2012; Bibić et al. 2014). A number of activists who are now engaged in or around all three political parties discussed in this report, were involved in and shaped by these experiences.

No less important for the context of the emergence of the new left parties discussed in this study is the re-emergence of a reinvigorated and renewed far right, emerging from a complex set of events and circumstances. Initially, the most important of these circumstances was most likely the HDZ's need to regain legitimacy after a deep crisis resulting from widespread corruption scandals. All this occurred in the context of disappointment generated by the economic and social crisis associated with the long recession following 2009. From the perspective of the rightist factions within and around the HDZ, as well as - of equal importance - the Catholic Church, another significant factor was their growing irritation with what they perceived to be a hegemony of liberal values in both the public sphere and many state institutions. The ascendance of new far right actors and forces was marked by a variety of features: very aggressive media pundits, the vastly increased engagement and public visibility of new and old clerical civil society organizations

and war veterans' groups, all traditionally linked with the right wing of the HDZ. In 2015 and 2016, what might be described as a kind of *Blitzkrieg* occurred. The HDZ, led by its right-wing faction, marginally won national elections and created an unstable government coalition with The Bridge of Independent Lists party (Most), who were meritocratic, neoliberal and anti-corruption in their programmatic outlook and posturing. The far right saw this moment as a window of opportunity. They launched a protracted offensive by persistently attacking the institutions of the liberal state established during the «European consensus» period, such as The Ombudsman for Human and Children's rights, the Agency for Electronic Media, the Croatian Audiovisual Center, the National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society, and - arguably the most decisive for the emergence of the new left parties - a wide spectrum of left-liberal civil society, cultural and media organizations. This attack also targeted certain progressive legacies of socialism, such as secular education and legal access to abortion in public healthcare. As we found out from the interviews we conducted with actors in the new left parties, this aggressive re-emergence of the far right was often the final straw for many, leading to their decision to engage in party politics.

3. POLITICAL PARTIES

Broadly speaking, the political context of the emergence of the new left actors is what is best described as a relative destabilization of the Croatian two-party system. For two and a half decades, the party system in Croatia was organized around the two big parties and their smaller coalition partners: the conservative HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) and the left liberal SDP (Social Democratic Party). In retrospect, the dominance of the HDZ was unquestionable, except for during the periods of their internal party crises, generated initially by the death of its first president, and later mostly by the indictment of party leaders and by the economic crisis that affected the country during the late 1990s and early 2010s

as well. When in power, the SDP introduced centrist and third way policies similarly to its sister parties around Europe. However, their approach to everyday state practices did not differ much from the system initially developed by HDZ, i.e. turning public funds and welfare state services into a selective system of the clientelist management of consent and support. The character of public sector production and financial assistance has historically been a combination of three mutually contesting functions: a form of (potentially and/or nominally) universalistic and egalitarian non-market provision of strategic goods and services; a system of comprehensive social management of the population/popular classes; a means of depoliticizing social issues, producing consent and legitimizing the existing social order (by selectively appropriating and enacting aspects of the demands of the historical left). A general tendency of the Croatian political system is that parties have utilized this system as a means of building and strengthening their supporter base, eroding its (at least in theory) universalistic and to some extent egalitarian character in favour of clientelist selectivity (e.g. the HDZ's symbiotic relationship with war veterans' organizations). This also explains why the HDZ, a centre right party which has ruled Croatia for most its independence, is often criticized by neoliberals for its lack of resolve in implementing its own predominantly neoliberal party programme and resultant austerity measures, contributing instead to the stealth growth of public expenditures.

The last economic crisis and very long recession period arguably brought the greatest amount of turmoil to the Croatian parliamentary system that it had experienced since Croatian independence. The two-party system, which has often since depended on smaller parties to form coalitions, now entered a new and more complex constellation with the emergence of new political actors. The Bridge party (*Most*) emerged on the political scene from local elections, while the party named Human Shield (*Živi Zid*) (Mihaljević 2017) developed from direct action forms of activism. In both cases their rise to significance was a result and symptom of growing dissatisfaction with the two dominant parties and their

satellites, which were utilized frequently to form governing coalitions. In addition, hit by multiple political court cases and accusations of deep seated corruption at the very heart of the party, the weakening of the HDZ opened the way for a new right populist civil movement², which soon gained prominence and started significantly influencing the HDZ-led government. The receptiveness of the HDZ to the influence of these new right-wing actors suggests a strategic decision made to redefine its image along the lines of the party's nationalist «core values». This seems to have been the result of a calculated move to regain legitimacy in the wake of still ongoing court proceedings against prominent party leaders and the former [prime minister](#) Ivo Sanader (*BBC News* 2012), and the subsequent loss of trust of voters, reflected in an inability to form stable governments in 2015 and 2016. It seems entirely plausible to assume that the leadership of the HDZ did not see any other way out of this protracted negative phase, but to strategically allow the promotion of its far right factions into a far [more prominent role](#) (Hockenos 2016), and support the unleashing of an aggressive ideological offensive. In other words, what is often construed as a manifestation of internal struggles, may in fact have been the result of a conscious strategic wager by the party leadership itself under the leader Tomislav Karamarko.

In summary, the rise of the far right, together with the loss of electoral support for the main left liberal party (SDP), defined the context of the emergence of left political actors such as NL, RF and ZJN, particularly in four urban areas: Zagreb, Split, Pula and Rijeka. It seems to us that the importance of the left coalition's electoral results for the development of the left in Croatia may turn out to be much greater than that suggested by the nature of local elections and the number of seats won. While taking the step from activism to electoral party politics has been on the cards for many of the involved individuals for several years, specific reasons for its occurrence in 2017 can be identified. Right wing actors have

² The conservative organization called In the Name of Family, supported by high-ranking members of the Catholic clergy as well as the right wing of the main conservative party HDZ, war veterans' associations and the newly established Independents for Croatia party.

escalated their activities over the last couple of years both from within government institutions, as well as through non-transparently but generously funded civil society organizations (CSO), which have achieved a significant influence on [Croatian law-making](#) (Kikaš 2013). They have attacked left and left liberal individuals in positions of influence and public prominence, slashed funds and positions, issued threats and orchestrated the public vilification of individuals and organizations. In the interviews, our actors continuously kept raising the issue of the ascendance of the far right and these attacks, both as their motivation and as a worrisome development that impedes their ability to act and speak openly, both in the public sphere and in their political activism. All of this contributed to a new sense of urgency which prompted many actors on the left and left-liberal end of the spectrum to engage directly in political electoral processes. It resulted in the formation of new left collective actors and in their joint electoral campaign.

Furthermore, both the Zagreb city budget, disproportionately high in comparison to the rest of the country, and the importance of political power in the capital city, transcend the mere 'local' character of elections. While Croatia is divided into twenty counties, the capital city of Zagreb has the unique and special status of being a city that additionally has county powers. Several factors, including a high level of centralization in the country, resulting in a high percentage of the population and socio-economic activity being concentrated in a single city, contributed to the size and importance of the city budget. Since Croatia has become an independent country, the central government has been downplaying the importance of regions and has been decreasing their autonomy through the introduction of twenty counties as the primary subdivision of the country in 1992. This was de facto gerrymandering imposed by the HDZ to secure itself long-term control over governance at the county level. Regional political powers have always existed in Croatia, but their destinies have differed. In the most extreme case during the 1990s, state oppression was deployed to shut down a regional political party called *Dalmatinska akcija* (Dalmatian

action) based in Split, and present in parliament at the time (Ljubić Lorger 2014). On the other hand, there is also an example of long standing rule by a regional liberal party called the IDS (Istrian Democratic Assembly), who have ruled the county of Istria since the 1990s (Jurcan 2013). These are exceptions to the overall centralization of the country. The mainstream media followed this pattern, centralising ownership and coverage, gradually reducing the number of local reporters and the topics covered even by the public broadcasting system (HRT) (Vejnović 2014) and public news agency (HINA) (Ministry of Culture 2015). A highly centralised and Zagreb-centric media exerts a strong amplifying effect on anything happening in Zagreb, including the activities of the actors covered by this study.

3.1. Elections and Electoral Results

Along with two other parties³, New Left, Workers' Front and Zagreb is Ours formed a coalition in Zagreb, participating in the elections for the mayor, city assembly and district councils. The coalition won 7.64% which gave them four (out of fifty-one) seats in the city assembly, twenty-one district council seats and forty-four local committee seats. The electoral lists had gender parity, and nearly 500 candidates stood in the elections across Zagreb (Voxfeminae 2017). Each of our three actors received a Zagreb city assembly seat.⁴ Some of the parties tabled candidates in other cities as well, with the most notable results and local organizations being in Pula (RF, 3.8% for the city assembly and 4.2% for the mayor) and especially in Split, where an NL/RF coalition came closest to entering the city council with 4.36% of the votes (the electoral threshold for entering a legislative branch on the local and national level in Croatia is 5% of the vote). Critics viewing this study as overly Zagreb-centric are correct. The over-representation of Zagreb actors in this study is mostly

³ *Za grad* (For the City) and ORaH (Sustainable Development for Croatia).

⁴ The fourth Zagreb city assembly seat went to the For the City party, which contributed significantly to the campaign with their previous electoral experience. ORaH were fifth on the list and thus missed out on a place.

due to their electoral success, which have provided them with institutional abilities and experiences most valuable for the topics discussed here. Focusing on three actors in a coalition acting in the same geographic area also provides better ground for comparative analysis.

4. Timing and Methodology

The methodology consisted of participant observation at party meetings, group and single interviews with the actors and an analysis of the actors' documents and media appearances. In preparation, throughout the first half of 2017 we followed actors' media appearances, party websites and social media, both during and after the campaign, focusing on key questions for this study. Our insights into this material, along with prior knowledge from our own past and present participation, and from discussions taking place regularly on the left scene in Zagreb energised by this new burst of political activity, allowed us to prepare for the interviews and for sitting in on the meetings. The interviews with party members and supporters, combined with participant observation of the meetings form the most important body of material which helped us write this study. Over a period of four months, from early September to late December 2017, we conducted approximately twenty interviews with members of different hierarchical status in and around the parties, from those who instigated the process, to decision makers and lower-ranked party activists and supporters. Special attention was paid to gender and age parity where possible, with meetings and interviews with local organization members conducted in Zagreb, Split, Pula and Rijeka. Most interviews were formally arranged and were unrelated to the meetings, in which we assumed a role as mostly passive observers. The first batch of interviews were mostly unstructured, following up on issues emphasised by the interviewees themselves. Later interviews developed into a semi-structured format, which we structured around four intertwining areas of inquiry as research progressed.

Initially we feared that the timing of the study might not leave us with enough time to develop a relationship of trust with the actors. To some extent, this indeed proved to be the case, as in certain instances we were not allowed to participate in the actors' meetings. Some of the actors feared that our presence at merely one or two meetings could only result in a partial and inadequate impression of the processes taking place. Thus, they were worried about being misrepresented. In addition, one interviewee in a less formal interview argued that participative research, and especially ethnographic fieldwork, could unintentionally intervene in the party and coalition building processes, which were still in the making. This suggested to us that during their current phase of development, some actors may have considered their own position at that time as not yet sufficiently stabilised, thus fearing that even ethnographic participation may have unpredictable or negative effects. On the other hand, another interviewee from the same organisation praised the participatory aspect of the research, expressing his hope that the discussions and interviews would have a positive impact on the interviewees themselves. We were present at several local organization/branch (LO) meetings of two of the three parties, in all but one case as strictly passive observers during the meetings.

We consider it entirely understandable that actors had different views on the possible effects of being exposed to outside scrutiny at such an early stage of development. The decision on whether to allow our presence at their meetings was reached by each organization differently: through members' internal voting (they voted to allow us to come to weekly LO meetings); the leadership making their decision together with the local organization councillors and members (allowing us to attend some meetings); the leadership deciding after long internal deliberation and negotiations with us, and without systematically consulting their councillors or members, with the result in this case that access to meetings was denied. Some actors stated that they considered it unproductive

and “unfair”, given the short time that they had been in existence, to be judged on organizational matters at this premature point.

In response, we argued that we understood that all actors faced a lack of resources to even carry out the work they deemed essential for their own internal functioning, given that this was repeatedly mentioned to us by party activists in most of the interviews. In addition, we argued that a study of this kind may be useful for their own development, since it would contribute a body of material with concrete perspectives and insights. No party at this stage has the resources to commit a small team to engage with the topics we researched in a systematic manner over a period of several months. We also argued that it may be useful for actors to learn about each other's challenges and solutions from a perspective that only a specific kind of engagement can provide i.e. our past and present activist experience in combination with a certain distance from the processes under study.

The insights we gained at the meetings proved to be essential for the development of the study, as it improved our understanding and ability to shape the content in several ways. Above all, we gained a much better sense of the complexities and difficulties actors face in their work as party members and activists, and of their vulnerabilities as political activists. Furthermore, it allowed us to make better judgments on what aspects to leave out of this study, and what to formulate with caution and consideration, in order to protect the actors. Most importantly, the first-hand experience of meetings and talking to activists afterwards in less formal settings instilled in us a heightened sense of solidarity and responsibility. Similarly, we learned which aspects are of central concern to the actors themselves, thus justifying their prominence in this study.

5. The Structure of the Text

The rest of the study is divided into four sections, followed by concluding remarks. First, we address the supporter base and its strategic orientation with regard to identity and class politics. We continue by examining organizational policy and political communication, finally tackling the issue of countering right-wing populism and authoritarian nationalism. The internationalist and European versus nation state orientation questions do not play a prominent role, since the context of local elections did not require our actors to explicitly position themselves on those issues. The sections do overlap, sometimes to a significant degree, as we found that the topics of the study required the interweaving of narratives and arguments.

6. SUPPORTER BASE AND STRATEGIC ORIENTATION WITH REGARD TO IDENTITY AND CLASS POLITICS

Differences in understanding what the supporter base consists of are significant, both between and within the three parties. Some of them understand the supporter base to be their voters, others consider it to be their activists and supporters, while there is also a view that casts the net wider, understanding the base as the network of supporting organizations, groups, and individuals who contribute in some way to the organization. The impression we received is that the supporter bases of our parties overlap significantly, with some major differences that seemingly complement one other. From our observations, Workers' Front activists and members come from diverse class and other social positions, including manual and low skilled workers, students, the unemployed, [citizens with blocked bank accounts](#) (Blocked 2014), teachers, lawyers, doctors, nurses, engineers, accountants, trade union activists, and small business owners, who are accepted, we were told, as long as they respect the party programme. While we did not gain the impression that Zagreb is

Ours and New Left had significantly less diverse supporter bases, their activists, actively engaged members and supporters, did seem to come from slightly less diverse and less disadvantaged backgrounds. In the Croatian context, this means little however, as even families with above average earnings and people with high levels of education typically struggle to make ends meet. In other words, the standard of living is precarious for most, and typically significantly below levels suggested by official statistics. Access to jobs is limited, with employment prospects most often decided not on the basis of merit, but on the basis of the strength of one's social network. This situation creates a widespread sense of uncertainty, deprivation and of a lack of prospects. Hence, apart from a small minority that can be classified as wealthy and privileged (Bićanić 2017; Nezavisni sindikat znanosti i visokog obrazovanja 2017), it is safe to assume that for the vast majority of the Croatian population, social issues are of immediate and existential concern. Therefore, we believe that all three parties should be able to maintain and extend their supporter base with a programmatic emphasis on social issues.

However, we also gained an impression that a central issue that ought to be dealt with by left political parties – namely, addressing the immediate material needs of the majority of the population – has remained overly in the background so far, both in their public communication and in terms of resources devoted to this issue. One significant aspect of the context which largely determines this is the phenomenon of the specific morphing of public sector, social support and governance institutions - on all levels, and in general - into a support network utilised for leading political actors to build, develop and maintain their own base and have a stronger and more direct influence over people's lives. With rare exceptions, this is the case for Croatia as a whole, and is amplified in smaller cities and rural locations, where the opportunities for ensuring one's material needs are met independently of the network run by the party and church are practically non-existent. Dalmatia and Istria are somewhat of an exception, due to the explosion of tourism which

provides a certain amount of minimal material independence for the local population, despite the long-term problems that a reliance on tourism as the main source of income brings, both locally and for the nation as a whole.

For the Zagreb actors, given that their focal point was the Zagreb local elections, the existing situation significantly influenced their strategic decisions. Zagreb has had the same mayor, Milan Bandić, since the year 2000, and he is currently serving his sixth term. His public image is dominated by two opposing aspects. On the one hand, he has been involved in [a long history of controversies](#) ('Milan Bandić' 2018) and is often accused of having built a far reaching [network of corruption and clientelism](#) (Filipović and Galović 2014) as the base on which his power rests. On the other hand, he has successfully built up an image of being a «hard worker», who takes care of the common people, listens to people's concerns and tackles social issues. Until 2009 he was a member of the SDP (Social Democratic Party), which was also at the time beneficial for his image of being a politician sensitive to social issues. At this point it is important to note that the image of the Zagreb mayor Milan Bandić as being a socially sensitive leader, regardless of all the controversies and obvious deficits in the way he addresses social issues, has proved to be a significant strategic challenge for our actors. This continues to limit and frame the terrain open to critical positioning with respect to Bandić. It also limits the available, let alone varied, options for new political actors in tackling social issues. We describe Bandić's strategy in more detail below.

When asked directly how did they address the material needs and in general the material reproduction of the people they are appealing to - in the sense of engaging as a party on concrete issues that affect and trouble families, the nearly unanimous answer was surprisingly frank: they did not do it at all. However, our actors identified several objective reasons for this. First, this is a difficult task, requiring significant organizational and financial capabilities with a membership committed to long-term, uncertain, often poorly

visible and thankless hard work. Second, our actors are recently formed organizations and thus have not developed the required capacities to seriously engage in such matters. Third, in addition to the above-mentioned issue, all municipal budgets have relatively small portions allocated for social programmes and public-sector services – the majority of which is funded nationally. Therefore, gaining seats at the municipal level appears to bring with it only limited abilities to address social issues. However, opinions on this are divided, as some of our interlocutors pointed out that the Zagreb city budget allocates significant funds to social issues (Institut za javne financije 2016), subsidising heavily, among other services, kindergartens (Grad Zagreb 2016; Radnička fronta 2017c).

Simultaneously, a smaller number of our interviewees insisted that addressing material needs is a crucial step that has to be taken if the parties wish to resonate, and let alone build trust with people who in turn may end up becoming their activists, supporters and electoral base. Some considered this the most important step that will determine the ability of the actors to grow, emphasising the necessity for actors to move out of the main urban centres, and into areas where nearly all of the available institutional networks – public education, health, local administration – are already in the hands of mainstream political forces. To this must be added the paramount importance of the Catholic Church, lavishly funded by the Croatian state and implanted into the state education system through a series of contracts and laws signed between the state and the Church (Marinović and Marinović 2006, 44–50). This was a key component that contributed to the Catholic Church having become one of the most powerful economic, social and political actors, often being in a position to decisively influence public discourse and all major political actors in the country. Mainstream political actors and the Catholic Church possess a long-established monopoly over addressing the material needs of their own supporters, often through elaborate clientelist networks, in a way that both uses and undermines public sector functions, thereby allowing them to stabilise their influence over their base (Becker 2016).

As one of our interlocutors underlined, while the prospect of building up their own supporter base outside of urban centres seems difficult and the obstacles insurmountable, he views no alternative to nevertheless attempting to transcend the left's current confinement to urban centres.

6.1. Political Communication and Social Justice Issues

On the level of political communication, there is a largely implicit separation of topics covered by the three actors. The sections of the population to whom they appeal overlap to a certain extent, but cannot be considered entirely identical. It is important to notice at this point that at least two of the three actors developed their programmes and statute over a very short period of time, immediately before the local elections, and should thus be regarded as works-in-progress. Despite this, it seems to us that the main programmatic direction of all three parties has to a significant extent already been broadly defined.

Workers' Front is the only actor that continually sends out explicit anti-capitalist messages. This is in accordance with their [programme principles](#) (Radnička fronta 2015) and [party statute](#) (Radnička fronta 2016) where workplace struggles and struggles of the oppressed are strongly emphasized, along with the goal of bringing about long-term changes to political and economic relations. Civil rights issues are discussed in close relation to social justice issues. For example, [LGBTIQ and women's rights](#) (Radnička fronta 2017b) are discussed in relation to systemic injustices in labour relations, while issues of nationalism, chauvinism, racism, sexism and xenophobia are addressed as ideologies of disunification of the oppressed. Workers' Front defines its own approach as based on unity and equality, standing in explicit opposition to these ideologies of disunity (Radnička fronta 2016). However, we are under the impression that the way in which Workers' Front communicates its political messages is not based on a clear delineation and systematic exposition of various topics (see screenshot of RF Instagram posts). This is particularly visible in their

Screenshot of RF Instagram posts, December 2017



social media communication, which is high in volume but thematically undifferentiated, often tending towards sloganeering, and thus may have an off-putting effect even for those who in principle agree with the messages' content. Therefore, we see space for improvement in the development of a more disciplined and reflective media approach, focused on fewer but more strategically selected topics, with less reliance on slogans and more emphasis on analytically based argumentation.

New Left, on the other hand, which was [founded to an extent as a reaction to the rise of the right wing](#) (Markovina 2016), addresses a variety of topics, including social justice issues.

Class, social justice and civil rights issues are discussed under the umbrella term of citizen deprivation. The discourse that formed during the 1990s was their starting point for discussing minorities, other identity groups and workers' rights today. In a [public debate on tourism](#) (New Left 2017), an event organised by the NL Split branch in December 2017,

mass tourism's devastating [effects on public space](#) (Magdić 2017) and the rising costs of living were discussed with a special focus on housing. This brought into focus an otherwise overlooked aspect of the explosion of tourism: the significant negative impact on the increasing cost of housing, the single most expensive expenditure in material reproduction. Importantly, it is acknowledged that tourism became the primary means of subsistence for many citizens of Split, to a large extent due to the devastation of industry and industry related jobs during the nineties, which led large sections of the population to being on the brink of poverty. Another recent event that we found encouraging is New Left's participation in a [public debate on pension funds](#) (ZG-magazin 2017) in October 2017, unfortunately neither featured on their website nor on their Facebook page. This is a pattern that we find in general to be problematic for the New Left (and also for Zagreb is Ours): when social issues are addressed, such discussions have poor visibility in their main public communication channels. Overall, we gained the impression that in the New Left's public debates, media appearances and press releases, the issues of identity politics, class and social justice are not always convincingly integrated. Topics such as labour issues, social deprivation and poverty, anti-nationalism, anti-fascism, women's rights, freedom of speech, and corruption are often debated as single issues, often without being clearly related to one other, suggesting the lack of an overarching media strategy.

In the case of Zagreb is Ours, social justice and class questions are framed through municipal governance issues, opposition to the privatization of public utilities and services, and through advocating for an anti-neoliberal city – the central topics that at this stage define their identity. Two aspects appear to be the main contributing factors. First, the party is identified with the city of Zagreb, both at the geographic and administrative levels, a very different position to that of Workers' Front and New Left, who from the outset aimed to operate at the national level. Second, ZJN's [goal](#) (Zagreb je naš 2017d) is to create a broad platform that would ensure active citizen participation, inclusiveness and transparency in

governing the city, inspired by the “new municipalism” of Barcelona en Comú and Madrid. Their [programme](#) (Zagreb je naš 2017c) was created accordingly, by consulting experts and also by inviting the general public to participate in the writing of the programme via their [web platform](#) (Zagreb je naš 2017a), by proposing and commenting on policies. The programme covered sixteen topics, from ecology, urban planning, housing, healthcare, education and the social policies of the city to the [specific local issues](#) (Zagreb je naš 2017b) of city districts. Although [social issues were among the most commented ones](#) (Zagreb je naš 2017e) on their web platform (the second most popular topic in terms of web page visits was social issues and healthcare for the elderly and disabled, with demands for better social integration of vulnerable groups and the establishing of day care centres), in ZJN’s public communication they were overshadowed by the critique of the widespread corruption and incompetence regarding the management of public resources and funds in Zagreb, to the detriment of public interest. Social justice messages were addressed mostly through the latter, by opposing privatization and stressing the importance of the universal and egalitarian availability of public services and utilities. According to one of our more left-leaning interviewees, a ZJN activist, this indirect rather than explicit treatment of social justice and class issues, i.e. the focus on communal issues and public services and utilities, was not a problem for them, due to the coalition partners addressing a range of complementary areas and topics in the campaign. Broadly speaking, with Workers’ Front’s focus on covering class and social justice issues more directly, and New Left’s focus on anti-nationalism and anti-fascism, a broad variety of issues were covered.

The long-standing Zagreb mayor Bandić has succeeded in nurturing an image of being a politician highly sensitive to social issues, thus effectively monopolising such issues as a key aspect of his political identity. This made it difficult for our actors to position themselves on these matters whilst maintaining an openly critical stance towards Bandić’s policies, and at the same time projecting a distinctive political identity of their own. The

imperative of communicating a recognizable political identity which clearly differentiates you from the dominant actors is particularly vital for newcomers to electoral politics. Taking all this into consideration, we are still left with the overall impression that issues such as [poverty](#) (Kapović 2017), social deprivation and a lack of opportunities for human development typical over [vast areas of Croatia and Zagreb](#) (Svjetska banka 2016) ought to be addressed more assertively and brought more clearly to the fore. Addressing this point of critique, many of our interviewees replied that it is difficult to deal comprehensively with these matters on the level of local elections, primarily due to relatively low funds being allocated to social issues on the local level. However, cities across Europe and even [boroughs and districts in large cities](#) (Lambeth Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership 2011) have implemented their own modest measures tackling those issues. We believe that future local elections should be used as opportunities to put forward demands and proposals for Croatian cities to follow such examples, putting [poverty and social deprivation](#) (Stubbs et al. 2017) on the political map even on the local level.

6.2. The Role of Media in the Actors' Activities

A mainstream media presence largely defines the scope of activities of all the actors. Overall, all three parties find it very difficult to break into the mainstream media through their own issues, little dictating new topics covered. For the Workers' Front, who also practice a [rotation of members in media appearances](#) (Kosić and Milošević 2014), the focus on media is strategic because it brings new members, supporters and financial aid. Protests, public stunts, and public appearances in general are debated, assessing their potential to gain visibility in the mainstream media. The prevailing view seems to be that it is not useful to utilise very limited resources and capacities if public actions do not result in any media coverage. This is why, although actions are planned in accordance with the strategic goals of the party, the timing of those actions on most occasions depends on what issues constitute the mainstream media focus at that time. The media strategy of Zagreb is Ours,

though different from RF in many ways, faces similar problems. As they only operate locally in Zagreb, their presence in the media to a large extent depends on topics debated in the city assembly that get picked up on by the mainstream media. However, ZJN have placed far more emphasis on both the content and the form of how their messages appear in the media, using theatrical setups and performances. This was a calculated move designed to gain media attention and convey messages with greater precision. It is difficult to ascertain in the context of the campaign as a whole whether this strategy was to their benefit, or not. On the one hand, it brought visibility and distinctiveness to the campaign. On the other hand, it arguably resulted in an overemphasis on the media related aspect of political work, while we uncovered that some activists found this off-putting.

Photo: Performance, Zagreb is Ours, spring 2017



Several prominent New Left members have a long history of involvement and expertise on various issues (e.g. on women's rights and peace activism), and they were frequently invited to discuss those issues in the mainstream media. Another advantage as regards their visibility in the mainstream media is the weekly newspaper column of a New Left leader, in

which he comments on daily politics, placing a focus on anti-nationalism and [historical revisionism](#) (Markovina 2017). However, similarly to Zagreb is Ours, where communal issues and the opposition to privatization of public utilities seem to dominate, an overly exclusive emphasis on a few selected topics can act as a double-edged sword. It risks tying their identities to single issue politics, which can lead to a simplified image of the party constructed through mainstream media framing.

The consequence of all three actors' inability to dictate topics is that most of their work is reactive, putting forward critiques and pointing out weaknesses and inconsistencies within existing media coverage. Some of our interlocutors did state that reacting to daily news, events and current affairs is not necessarily negative, since such topics have the potential to engage more people who in turn may become their supporters. However, we see this as a problem, as it prevents the parties from focusing on medium and long terms goals, and from building up topics and whole policy areas in which their left political argumentation acts as the foundation of the debate. As it stands, their appearances in the media can leave an impression of being short-term reactive criticism. This opens up a space for ideological opponents to dismiss it as a purely opportunistic position, not dissimilar to how mainstream political actors are seen to act. While several interviewees told us that exceptions to this rule have been rare so far, it seems to us that the actors are developing capabilities that may change this in the medium term.

The first and more obvious example of this is their work in the Zagreb city assembly, where they are gradually learning the intricacies of institutional processes and informal rules. This enables them to start escaping their role of being reactive actors, rather exerting influence on the processes of the city assembly (Zagrebancija 2017; HINA 2017), which otherwise runs, as all actors told us in the interviews, as a well planned and executed theatrical performance.

However, it is important to note that the hyper-centralization of Croatia makes this strategy nearly impossible for the rest of the country, where even the burning issues of other large cities get little to no attention in the national media. Their possible increased impact in Zagreb is especially the case for the coalition as a whole, where actors have gained more media coverage after having won seats in the city assembly and having started to act together in the formal assembly group called the Left Block. On the downside, this kind of visibility results in a media-imposed personalization of politics, with representatives being either the only recognizable person in the party, or even of not being recognized as party members at all. For example, when representatives have been invited to comment on political issues, the media often presents them purely through their representative function in the assembly, without the name of the party, coalition, or assembly group that they belong to. All three actors have struggled in various ways to combat the personalization imposed by the media. Reflecting their commitment to direct democracy, Workers' Front decided before the elections to [rotate their seat in the Zagreb city assembly](#) every six months (Radnička fronta 2017a), while other actors do not exclude this as a possibility if other attempts at establishing the presence of other activists in the mainstream media fail.

The second example of actors' developing capacities to build up and perhaps at some point dictate topics in the mainstream media are their activities in building up their own base of supporters and members through their [work as local councillors in Zagreb](#) (Vuković 2017). This is not so visible to those not directly involved at this stage, but we were much encouraged by the impression we gained. Over the period in which they have been active as councillors – a mere few months (the summer cannot be counted, as it is a rest period in the Croatian political calendar) – they have succeeded in addressing mostly minor issues. However, we can see signs of possible medium- and long-term activism and campaigns that may both appeal to people more broadly and be able to capture the attention of the mainstream media. This is important for building up their grassroots foundations, especially

if they manage to address aspects relating to the material reproduction of families in specific city districts. In other words, we see the question of building up their own base of members and activists and their current inability to dictate mainstream media topics as related.

6.3. Social Media

Social media, especially Facebook, are widely used by all three actors. This is their way of bypassing their lesser visibility in the mainstream media and of broadening their typically narrow media focus. Facebook shined for them as a tool used during the local election campaign, while the mainstream media largely ignored the coalitions in Zagreb and Split as well as the parties in other cities. This changed to a significant extent once the coalition had announced its mayoral candidates, highlighting again how the media approach politics through personalization. Another reason for their intensive social media usage during the campaign was its accessibility and the possibility of gaining a larger reach at a far smaller price than using billboards, TV and radio commercials, options which are currently beyond the reach of their budgets. As concerns uneven access to social media dictated by social and economic circumstances, the actors stated that Facebook access is much broader nowadays, with the caveat that young people have moved onto other networks, while Facebook dominates among people aged from thirty to sixty-five years plus. However, the actors highlighted that in order to attract attention through social media, a specific mode of presentation is necessary: messages have to contain less text and involve graphic content. Another way of informing the supporters is through the actors' websites, which offer more static content and basic information about the party and the program. However, social media are not only seen as tools for informing the supporters about the activities, but also as a basis for the organization of party working groups and local citizens' groups in city districts.

6.4. Critique of Capitalism and Alternatives Offered

To various extents, all three actors' programmatic declarations suggest an implicit anti-capitalist stance and a broadly socialist orientation. However, only Workers' Front makes this explicitly a central point of their programme and day-to-day political communication. Some activists from the other two parties told us that they believe that a pro-socialist discourse, integrated with demands for ecological sustainability, can and should be expressed in a different, new language that will not alienate people who from 1990 onwards perceive the word socialism almost exclusively pejoratively. That the New Left and especially Zagreb is Ours were simultaneously undergoing a process of internal formation parallel with the coalition negotiations may also have contributed to the presence of an overall systemic critique being implicit. Additional problems arose due to the character of elections that changed significantly after the 2009 reform of local election legislation and the introduction of direct mayoral elections. Following this, the mayor became by far the most important contested position and almost all media coverage has been concentrated on the mayoral candidates. This extreme personalisation forces small parties to present a mayoral candidate and accept an asymmetrical focus on their candidate in order to ensure a relevant media presence and public visibility. Since Zagreb is Ours contributed the largest portion of activists and resources to the campaign, it was agreed that they provide the mayoral candidate. The candidate, Tomislav Tomašević, often focused on Zagreb problems with poor and neglectful waste management in his public appearances. This has been a burning problem for the city for many years, inadequately addressed, and carrying a vast financial burden for the budget, as well as being a sphere of widely alleged mismanagement, criminal and corrupt practices. Despite this, we believe that the question has to be raised of whether such a choice of topic may have backfired, as it proved tactically easy for the large parties and their mayoral candidates to adjust their own political communication, by either adding a policy addressing the issue, or by merely rhetorically

appropriating it ('Otvoreno - Lokalni izbori: Zagreb' 2017)⁵. To the extent that ZJN's strategic calculation based its distinctiveness on emphasizing this subject matter, the desired outcome was compromised, despite the prominence this focus ensured for this topic in public debates. Issues more explicitly related to social justice and class entered ZJN's and NL's activist work and political communication more prominently after the end of the election campaign and their entering the city assembly. Zagreb is Ours has thus been placed in a position to argue against the privatization of utilities and in favour of equality of access to health and education services, while New Left has been placed in a position where they can address women's rights from various angles, affecting even how other councillors voted on those issues.

All three actors, as one of our interlocutors noticed, thus far lack a socioeconomic model of development for the country. On the one hand, this is typical for the Croatian political scene as a whole, largely devoid of debates of this kind. On the other hand, as a deficit specific to the left, it is not unique to this country. As the clash between the EU Commission and Greece has brought to the surface, beyond a softening of the blows imposed by capitalist development, the international left [in general lacks a vision of socioeconomic development](#) (Lapavitsas 2015). Some of our actors cautioned against a non-critical and nostalgic relationship towards the achievements of the historical left, embodied in the welfare state and in socialist states respectively. The conundrum of the left, as [expressed by Danijela Dolenc](#) (Dolenc 2017b), can thus be summarised as follows: while the left is in dire need of a utopian horizon and ambitious goals, it is liberals who have successfully appropriated and monopolised the rhetoric of modernisation and optimism towards the future. Regardless of the stance on the socialist legacy taken by our three parties, mainstream political actors and the mainstream media in Croatia make debates on positive aspects of the socialist legacy extremely difficult, outright dismissing any positively inclined

⁵ See for example (34:30 to 57:30) how nearly all the mayoral candidate came out in favor of resolving the waste management, supporting their case often by offering solutions and highlighting experts in their teams.

discussants on an ideological basis. A new approach seems necessary for the left in Croatia to be able to initiate the process of re-evaluating the socialist legacy and to debate future socialist perspectives.

The actors' relationship with leftist and Marxist theory is difficult to discuss publicly without leaving actors open to attack by the right-wing and other political opponents. All three parties include members and supporters who are – to different degrees – grounded in strands of Marxist and leftist theory. However, with the exception of Workers' Front, in the context of party work and public debates, Marxist conceptual frameworks and interpretative approaches are rarely present. Our impression is that Zagreb is Ours gathered the broadest and largest group of experts from various fields that could potentially formulate a theoretical left platform sensitive to the Croatian context. At the moment, their approach and understanding of what makes their position politically left seems to be grounded in their use of concepts such as the [commons, participatory governance, anti-privatization and anti-neoliberalism](#) (Dolenec 2016). Capitalist production as such and a systemic critique of capitalism seem present only in traces. Given the ideological climate in the country, this is no surprise. We also acknowledge that Marxism is not a necessary theoretical foundation for political actors on the left. However, it seem to us that the set of questions that Marxism typically raises must be addressed in one way or another: how does capitalist commodity production, the dominant social form of wealth production, operate and systematically impact our lives; how do workers, left movements and political actors counter the often antisocial logic of capitalist imperatives; what is the role and potential scope of the public sector as an egalitarian alternative to market solutions; and finally, the question of how to conceptualise and offer lasting and viable alternatives. Given the membership composition of all three parties, we believe that there is potential for these issues to be addressed and made politically effective. Subject matters which have already been politically operationalised, such as the commons, participative governance, resistance to privatization,

feminism, and equality, could and should be broadened to address fundamental issues of wealth production, i.e. questioning the predominance of capitalist commodity production and opening up debate on alternative forms of social wealth production, such as the public sector, CSOs, and so forth. This should also open up a space for the critical re-evaluation of the desirability of Croatia's [specific trajectory of peripheral, deindustrialised, financialised capitalist development](#) (Becker and Jäger 2010).

All three parties emphasise participation as an important aspect of any emancipatory politics. For the Workers' Front, it is emancipatory for the least privileged strata of society to be able to engage in organized political activity, especially through directly democratic internal processes which the party keeps developing and practicing. For Zagreb is Ours, emancipatory perspectives are found in their focus on members' and supporters' participation, in addition to their activities in various city districts, aimed at involving the local population. New Left has also been attempting to develop their own participatory procedures. New Left activities in Split and Workers' Front activities in Pula are also encouraging in that regard. In summary, all three actors stand in defence of public spaces, public services and all resources held and used communally. These are all of great importance for the development and broadening of practices relating to participatory politics. These commonalities should provide the base for the development of an even broader and more comprehensive platform, struggling for the commons, and against capital and private interests.

In the period covered by our research, activities focused on political education were rare, but these did include internal workshops for members (ZJN), reading groups covering important theoretical works (RF), and round table discussions with experts and activists (all parties). All three actors were very conscious of the need to devote more time and resources to educational activities in the near future.

6.5. Pula, Rijeka, Split and the Left Critique of CSO's

As previously mentioned, Croatia is a highly centralised country with a heavily Zagreb-centric national media. This creates a false image of politics as a game played exclusively in the capital. Countering that cliché, interviews conducted with actors in Rijeka, Pula and Split revealed the presence of lively political activity among new left actors outside of Zagreb. Both Rijeka and Pula have [political situations](#) (Mrakovčić, Matija 2014) similar to that in Zagreb. The two parties and their long-standing mayors, (Rijeka – SDP; Pula - the regionalist liberal IDS), have been able to build and sustain their own clientelist networks. RF members in both cities highlighted this, expressing frustration as regards how the rest of the country mistakenly identifies their mayors and political elites as less nationalistic, non-corrupt and non-authoritarian. This vast discrepancy between the national image of these cities and the actual local operations of the politicians in power, activists told us, limits their ability to critique and to position themselves in relation to the ruling parties and local issues. Outside of Zagreb, the funding for political work has been scarce. Several interlocutors from Split, and even some from Zagreb, believe that the additional small funding required for extra paid advertising in the week preceding the election would have ensured the missing 0.6 percent of votes required to push the NL/RF coalition in Split above the threshold and into the city assembly. In some of the discussions we were left with the impression that while the branches have their own local political identities distinct from Zagreb, their level of autonomy and mode of cooperation with the most influential local organizations (located in Zagreb) was not clear.

Many of our interlocutors in Pula and Split had spent years addressing local social and political issues through civil society organizations. However, they ended up disillusioned, either losing confidence in civil society organizations as alternative vehicles for social and political change, or finding that there were hard limits to what can be achieved politically

through such work. This had pushed them toward direct political and electoral engagement. With regard to their experiences in CSOs, several interviewees told us that the terminology that the funders' tenders imposes on the organizations with whom they worked entailed a particular type of [politically impotent, EU driven language](#) (Bauman and Briggs 2003). This terminology frames social issues in ways that prevents them being understood as consequences of systemic social relations. In addition, CSO funders have been increasing the amount of administrative requirements, imposing stricter project based patterns of work, with only a small portion of total budgets allowed to be spent on CSO workers' salaries. In order to be able to pay its staff small wages, in almost all cases well below the average wage, CSOs have had to take on a large number of projects. This has resulted in increasing portions of their time being spent on administration and project management, rather than on the primary project content. Furthermore, they are regularly obliged to anticipate all of their annual activities well in advance and provide a detailed and precise budget plan, which severely limits their flexibility and capacity to adapt their activities to changing circumstances.

Such constraints have only exacerbated the ambivalences of the role of the civil sector in general, resulting in a seemingly paradoxical situation: the existence of CSOs covering important social issues leaves the impression that these issues are being adequately addressed, while no true improvements or satisfactory effects are noticeable. This begs the question of whether the limits imposed on CSOs are done so by design in order to limit their potential political impact, i.e. whether or not their political impotence is an aspect of [an overarching strategy](#) (Wickramasinghe 2005) which has developed gradually with [the rise of neoliberalism](#) (Eisenstein 2010, 160–65), reflecting the decreasing power of the left and its influence.

Additionally, one of our interlocutors emphasised that in comparison to Zagreb, the opportunities to raise funds for CSO work in Split are significantly fewer. In such a situation, and sick of play-acting participation in engaged citizenship and mimicking politics through CSOs, she told us that she would lose little by leaving the CSO sector entirely and turning to direct political engagement. To some extent, we encountered [similar views present](#) (Benčić 2017) among Zagreb activists too. Despite this, our impression was that for many of our Zagreb interlocutors, the civil sector remains an effective vehicle through which to address social and political issues.

6.6. Depoliticization and Distrust of Politicians

A key question for any new political actor in Croatia appears to be how depoliticization and the widespread distrust of politicians can be addressed. All three parties share the idea of appealing to disgruntled SDP (Social Democratic Party) supporters, who are the largest group on the left that have lost faith in their political representation. This is therefore an entirely reasonable strategy. Another point common to all three parties, and especially Zagreb is Ours during their campaign, is that they have addressed this problem of depoliticization by focusing on Zagreb's long-standing mayor Milan Bandić and on his widespread and intricate network of corruption. On its own, this is a valid critique. However, one of the activists we interviewed pointed out the problem with this reasoning, insisting that nothing is solved by talking about corruption alone. Bandić gains most of his votes in the city's periphery and among the working class. This is to a significant extent due to generally positive perceptions of his small-scale social programmes through which he addresses the material needs of particular sections of the population. These programmes are strategically used to develop and secure loyalty via a clientelist network, thereby becoming primarily a means of maintaining power. He takes care to provide small funds to war veterans' organizations, the Catholic Church and its many civil society offshoots, as well as to various sports clubs and other civil sector organizations run by his supporters and

local councillors. In addition, Bandić seems to devote just as much attention to minute local interventions, such as minor road repairs, street lights, water utilities etc., ensuring that the resulting media coverage always emphasises the decisiveness of his personal initiative and his hands-on direct involvement. In such a context, moralistic arguments about corruption, our interlocutor argues, will not solve anything. Despite Bandić's quasi-monopoly on such issues, the left must find ways to contest him visibly and convincingly on social issues, starting by addressing the opportunistic selectiveness and inadequacies of his practices. A small example of this is the report by Zagreb is Ours activists on [the shocking state of Zagreb kindergartens](#) (Lupiga 2017), neglected by Bandić. As our interviewee continued, the people very well know that the small political parties on the left, with limited resources, have very limited means at their disposal to deliver on social promises, while the mayor commands the city budget. Any left strategies on these issues therefore have to start by acknowledging these constraints and then developing solutions around them, rather than competing with grand promises that the left cannot currently deliver on.

It seems to us that Bandić has managed to further develop and perfect – on the Zagreb city level – the selective use of public funds and resources for building a clientelist network for the management of consent and support. All the prominent mainstream political parties, but above all the HDZ, have practiced this as a very important aspect of their strategy on both the national and local level. It is of paramount importance for the left to both acknowledge and address these clientelist and corruptive abuses whilst resolutely opposing neoliberal wholesale assaults on the public sector as such.

7. ORGANIZATIONAL POLICY AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Discussing organizational structures with the actors proved difficult, to a large extent due to this study being conducted too early for at least two of the three actors (NL, ZJN). The formation of any political party entails the need to ensure a certain level of internal cohesion. For the existing mainstream parties in Croatia, this problem has frequently been solved by pursuing a unifying, intense pragmatic focus on gaining political power, regardless of internal ideological diversity. Insofar as this ensures continued access to funding, it provides a simple, yet powerful, internal cohesive force. The material interests of party members revolve around a host of paid positions and a broad range of decision-making powers in relation to a variety of public funds. Public perception of the political sphere is to a large extent determined by the assumption of the centrality of this opportunistic logic as being the true driving force of the dominant political parties. The predicament left parties face is to challenge this cynical view of political activity as such through their own practices, thus establishing trust among their supporters. However, insofar as they are devoid of this logic as a central factor of internal cohesion, our left parties have had to ensure cohesion by finding ways to work through and integrate a diversity of ideological positions. This is a task that requires the development of a culture of open democratic debate and deliberation within the parties, despite the associated risks of failure and fragmentation.

In the case of the New Left, as some of the interviewees acknowledged, there seems to be a generational gap between the older and more recent generations of civil sector activists with respect to political priorities (for more on this, see the introductory section on right wing populism). Croatia was a very dark place during the 1990s. It is entirely understandable that the generations of activists who came of age politically during that period were more concerned with anti-war, anti-violence, environmental, feminist and

human rights issues. However, more recent generations to a larger extent have come of age in a context where socio-economic issues have been in focus, galvanized from 2009 onwards by the student and right to the city anti-gentrification protests, as well as by an almost continuous socio-economic crisis. It is no surprise that these younger generations often found it difficult to connect to the way NL's leadership defined and justified its policy focuses and priorities. This has especially been the case with regard to NL's focus on anti-fascism, framed as a moral imperative and civilizational achievement, and yet also its peculiar relationship to the socialist legacy. In NL's initial statements, reference to the socialist legacy remained abstract and rhetorical, mostly emphasizing its anti-fascist and anti-nationalist character, seemingly disconnected from Yugoslav socialism's concrete social, political and economic achievements and failures. Yet it is precisely these that new generations of activists have researched and studied as a source of inspiration, whilst maintaining a certain level of critical distance towards them. This disconnect has proved to be a problem for New Left's recruitment of activists in their formative months. While the party has been growing and developing, both in terms of membership, supporters and structure (the photo below is from their strategic planning weekend), this disconnect, while now being addressed, still remains an issue.

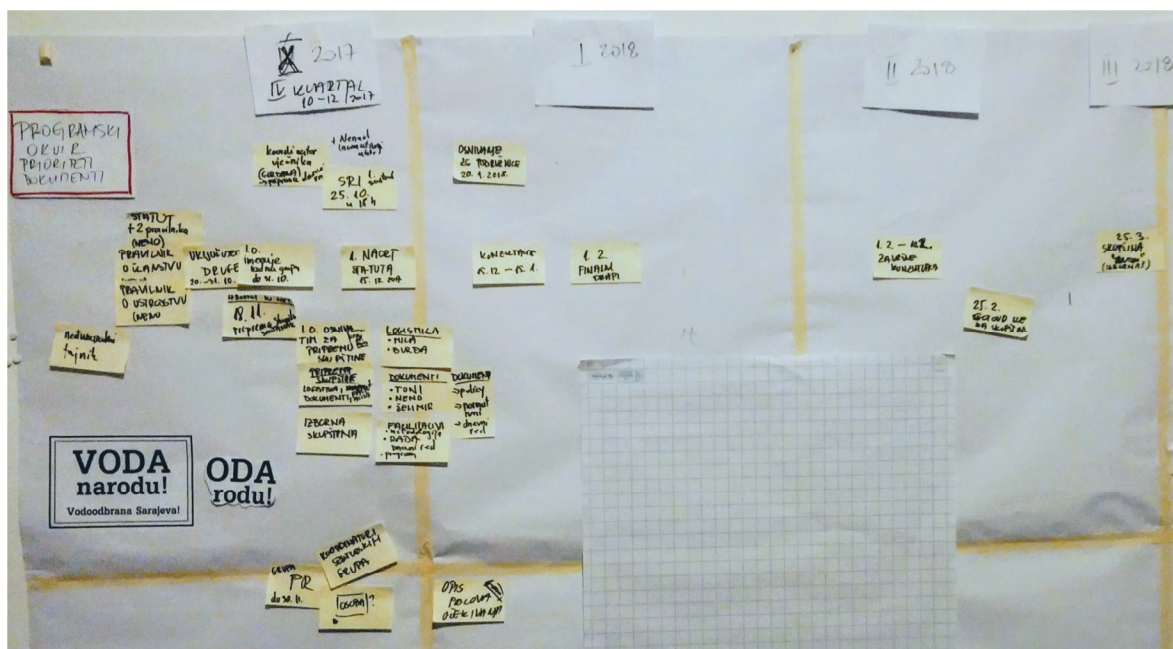
In the case of Zagreb is Ours, the objective difficulties facing new left parties mentioned in the introduction to this section have been amplified by two additional issues. First, the process was initiated and led by groups that brought with them their own organizational experiences and socio-economic topics that they had been working on. Second, they initially took a simultaneously broadly inclusive and strategically selective approach to inviting groups and individuals to join what at the time seemed like a very loosely defined and yet tightly managed process of organization forming. This carried its own set of challenges, especially so late in the run-up to the elections. This included supporters and members having to put a lot of trust into the current leadership's ability to shape the developing

organizational structures and processes into a transparent, participatory and sustainable model. The party has brought together a diverse set of groups and individuals, often with long-standing civil sector and other activist experiences, who volunteered in a very intensive campaign period that was crucial for gaining votes in the communities. Such resulting ideological diversity is not atypical for contemporary left parties in Europe (Rendueles and Sola 2015). Legitimately seen as a virtue from the standpoint of electoral success, it is however not only an advantage, but also a hindrance, and for some of the existing and potential party activists, a problem. Another challenge, and this to a large extent applies to New Left as well, concerns how to combine their principal political commitments to broad participation and internal democratization with the need for operational effectiveness. This is underlined by the statements of interviewed members, many of whom emphasised that their desire to get involved was to a large extent the result of their growing disillusionment with the effectiveness and sustainability of civil sector activism. The example of Barcelona En Comu, mentioned by ZJN on many occasions as a source of inspiration, should provide a useful guide in terms of [organizational structure](#) (Barcelona En Comu 2016), [transparency](#) (Guanyem Barcelona 2015) and [accountability](#) (Barcelona En Comu 2015). Additionally, there is a broader set of practices and useful political developments that can be drawn from Spanish municipal history (Rubio-Pueyo 2017). As we see it, ZJN is caught in two important predicaments: first, a predicament concerning the extent to which they will indeed make a commitment to broad participation and internal democracy a priority; and second, if and how they will reconcile this commitment with the desire to grow and possibly contest national elections in the future.

Workers' Front have been in existence for far longer and they have thus had more time to develop their organizational structure. Their use of direct democracy, the extensive use of internal web forums, e-voting on important issues, the detailed and systematic documentation of their decision making and an insistence on transparency are all features

they hold central to their development and identity as a left political party. However, such an approach effectively privileges members with more time on their hands and those in certain types of employment, namely those which allow for frequent and intense engagement with online tools. Several of our interlocutors acknowledged this as an issue, highlighting that the problem has been discussed within the party, but given that it would be counterproductive to put limits on those who can more extensively engage in party work, no satisfactory solution to the need to balance internal democracy and efficiency has been found thus far. The initial problem of bringing together individuals and groups of diverse left political backgrounds during the formative period, which led to internal struggles and a serious crisis, seems to have been overcome. In the several meetings we observed, the party members exhibited a culture of open and considerate political debate. In a situation where many civil sector organisations have been under pressure from the right-wing government, RF's development largely separately from civil sector organizations may yet prove to be an advantage, as these attacks will have no organizational effects on them.

Photo: Strategic planning, New Left, November 2017



All three parties have statutory membership fees, in one case defined explicitly (a minimal amount, followed by a percentage of income), with others annually deciding on fees through the party executive body. In all cases members can ask for permission to be excused from fees, which in some parties is a regular occurrence due to the poor financial status of many members. One of the parties allows all registered supporters to attend bi-monthly meetings, where they are informed on the activities of the executive body, asked for their views on planned activities and positions that the party is considering taking, and are occasionally asked to vote on issues that the executive body deems important. The other two parties leave decision making open to the members only, with participation in party activities open to supporters as well. One of the parties has issued a statutory ban on working with other parties that do not emphasize social and class issues, while all parties count on the involvement of activists of various kinds. In New Left, administrative boundaries define the reach of local organizations (LOs), but a member can join any LO. In Workers' Front, a new member belongs to the LO closest to their place of residence. In

terms of generational and other membership differences, as we witnessed on several occasions in LO meetings, especially in the case of New Left in Split and Workers' Front in Zagreb, generational, social and other differences play no visible negative role. Quite the contrary, our impression was that the more diverse the attendees were, the more interesting the discussions seemed.

8. RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND AUTHORITARIAN NATIONALISM

Many actors we interviewed asserted a recent wave of far-right «institutional violence» as being a decisive factor motivating their political engagement, which acted as a hard push towards establishing new political actors. ZJN and NL were founded in this political context, while RF (founded a few years earlier) succeeded in recruiting a significant number of new members through events and public actions challenging the rise of the far-right during 2015 and 2016. All three party-programmes embrace political values such as secularism, anti-fascism, the protection of human rights and feminism. Furthermore, all are directly opposed to nationalism, anti-communism, historical revisionism and the clericalism of the right. A large number of interviewed individuals cross-cutting all the parties mentioned verbal attacks and aggressive name calling by members of various right-wing organizations and media outlets. However, some of the prominent party members were already «used to» different kinds of public attacks, due to their frequent appearances in the media and their long-standing promotion of anti-fascism and human rights. One of those members complained that her public image of being a single-issue politician only addressing antifascism is dictated by the media framing and is not how she sees her work.

In terms of a strategic response to what is – in the left media – usually called the right-wing «counter-revolution», all three parties have addressed this using typical activities deployed by civil society organizations: public protests, media appearances, public talks and

advocacy. It seems reasonable to ask whether additional methods were warranted in the context of the right-wing recently intensifying their «march through the institutions». However, a similar approach from the left seems to be short of available options. In the process of the dissolution of the welfare state and the privatization of utilities, the only other institution in Croatia that has the infrastructure to gather their social base and respond to some of their material, social and cultural needs is the Catholic Church. NL activists in Split highlighted this as something noticeable in their communities. As one example, they mentioned a public lecture by leading conservative activists and the president of the organization «In the Name of Family», that took place in the pastoral centre owned by the Archdiocese of Split. The audience consisted mostly of younger people - high school and college students and the performance was highly scripted. Several members of the local NL organization in Split agreed they should put more effort into involving younger generations in their party. Other possible institutional channels for involving the youth and local population, schools and local municipalities, have also been to a large extent taken over by the right over the past two decades.

A prominent member of NL agreed that intensive fieldwork is a prerequisite for the struggle against the right. Comparing her experiences with those of her previous years of fieldwork experience, she insisted that a crucial part of that process was «changing the discourse». She continued, stating that most of the left consists of educated people whose language relates poorly to the common people. If the left wants to get people on their side, the left has to use language they understand. A member of ZJN responded similarly when answering the question of the further development of Zagreb is Ours and the left coalition: how can they change the material and social conditions of people that live on the periphery? Without answering this, there is no future for the left in Croatia, this member pointed out.

This has not been lost on our actors. Activists in all three parties gave us a very firm, positive answer regarding the necessity of approaching common people, who often vote for those who they perceive will address their material needs. This awareness and their activist experiences (mostly in CSO's and informal initiatives) suggest that these issues may be addressed in the near future through the parties' strategies and in their fieldwork. However, given that two of the three parties are very recent phenomena, and are therefore still spending most of their time creating party infrastructure, the impact of this state of affairs is a party wide strategic lack of concern with the above issues. Nevertheless, these processes - building the party infrastructure, developing a strategy against the right, and the creation of the party base – should be intermixed. RF as the «oldest party» in the coalition is perhaps the most aware of the necessity of taking such an approach to developing the base, but they are yet to implement it, largely due to their lack of resources.

9. INTERNATIONALIST/EUROPEAN VS. NATION/STATE ORIENTATIONS

Overall, our actors had little to say about European integration. It seems to us that there are two primary reasons for this. First, two of the parties have not been in existence long enough for this to become a priority. Second, the existing integration of Croatia into the EU has been a disaster so far, with no signs of improvement. Following the pattern of many EU and Eurozone countries (Landmann 2011; Chan and Stark 2017), Croatia has been diverging, with a decrease in many key socio-economic indicators, rather than closing the gap with the more economically developed EU countries. This raises the question of the purpose of the Eurozone's existence and of further integration of this type. This is perhaps more important for the Workers' Front, due to their explicit anti-capitalist stance, as the EU and Eurozone integration revolves around catering to the interests of capital first and foremost. It cares little, as the example of the EU leadership's clash with Greece demonstrated, about human development and fiscal solidarity typical for federations, regions or nations united in larger

political entities. All parties have had contacts with various European left parties and networks, but to our knowledge nothing concrete has emerged from these networks and contacts as yet. Overall, the frequently heard and seemingly prevailing sense among the European left – that the EU is the only possible form of integration, and that left actors ought to accept this reality – may prove to be a significant problem for the local left parties. On the one hand, unless something drastically changes as regards the character of EU integration, it is difficult to see how the existing union can be presented to the local population as promising again, and how further integration with the EU might be casted as desirable. On the other hand, as one of interviewees highlighted, an anti-EU stance, no matter how well argued and analytically correct, faces the problem of a complete blindness on the part of the political mainstream to any faults in relation to EU economic integration. Additionally, an anti-EU stance has to be formulated with extreme care in order not to play into nationalists' hands.

The question of relationships between the European centre and periphery also came to the fore on a few occasions, in the form of questions concerning whether left political parties from the largest EU countries would ever be studied, mapped in a way commensurate with the way in which left actors in Croatia are being studied in this research. In other words, would the possibly intrusive methodology of this study ever be deployed in the core EU countries, and would more attention at least be given to this sensitive aspect? This was especially important for one of our actors, who expressed dissatisfaction that the party was not consulted during the design stage of this study, emphasising that such an approach is required for the study to be participatory. For this actor, this research could potentially be a source of problematic influences on the development of internal processes and on the individuals involved. The leaders of the party were worried that, like other left activists, they, their activists and supporters may be targeted by the right wing, and by conservative, liberal and libertarian individuals, groups and CSOs if they are in any way – even indirectly

and implicitly – exposed through this study. Fear of such attacks by ideologically different and aggressive political actors was a genuine concern and we did not need much persuading to include more on this in the study.

Another more generally problematic issue is the level of disconnect between European left actors and local left experts. This is not a coincidence. Most of the gifted young scholars on the political left do not progress in Croatian academia. Many leave the country, and those who remain often end up conforming to the academic and/or the CSO job market. With rare exceptions, this implies a radical toning down of left positions, topics and analytical frameworks. For this reason, the importance of external sources of funding for left research has been significant. However, small institutional actors and left research institutes, with one or two very partial exceptions, have not been established. The more targeted and focused funding of subject matters important for the assessment of socio-economic and political conditions in Croatia would enhance the ability of new left political actors to assess and strategize their own activities and policy stances. This would also enable them to present their own positions analytically to international partners. It is however difficult to see how such work can be managed, with those topics and authors selected externally. It is no less difficult to see how a politically left research institute that may play such a role might come into existence or be sustainable. A strategic rethinking of how public sector academic and research institutions are accessed appears to be one task with which political left actors in Croatia ought to engage, self-critically and collectively, with medium and long-term goals.

10. CONCLUDING REMARKS: TOWARDS A COMMON LEFT PLATFORM?

This study of the emergence of three new left political parties has uncovered numerous challenges and opportunities. It is highly encouraging that the overall impression we gained was one of a large number of activists devoting significant amounts of time to a broad set of new tasks brought about by the electoral success. It is equally encouraging to see the parties working together on all levels in Zagreb, from local district councillors to the Zagreb city assembly. However, our interviews and meeting observations revealed that the impression actors have of each other's political positions and internal procedures differ to a surprising degree from what we found to be the case. The differences between the parties seem to us smaller than how large the actors often assumed they appear to be. While on the level of actors' internal discourse, competition and distrust with regard to the other coalition partners seemed to play a prominent role. However, on the level of the actual practices we witnessed and analysed, it was cooperation, rather than competition, that was far more pronounced. This suggests that there is space for a further deepening of cooperation, which should organically lead to decreasing levels of distrust and inter-party competition.

One of the biggest challenges for all three parties seems to be how to keep developing party structures and processes, appropriate both for the work imposed by the electoral gains and the development of democratic, inclusive procedures in addition to the furthering of their core programmatic agenda. The biggest potential challenge, it seems to us, would be possible participation in national elections without the adequate development of the parties' capacities and supporter base preceding this. Local politics limits the range of important social issues that can be meaningfully addressed, given that most social funding is assigned at the national level. The desire to seriously consider contesting national elections is therefore understandable. However, in most policy fields, each of the parties has a limited

pool of experts, which will limit their ability to engage with policy work on their own, especially on the national level. Forming joint policy working groups could address this shortcoming. Another aspect where the parties could benefit from increased cooperation is in the sharing of knowledge about their own organizational processes and experiences. We believe that this should lead to the recognition and adoption of best practices that would improve participation of the rank and file, which is of great importance for all the parties.

Perhaps the greatest problem that all three parties currently face is how to extend their supporter base. In our view, it is highly improbable that this can be done by focusing on electoral processes and existing liberal democratic mechanisms alone. While the advantages of possible electoral gains in national elections are numerous, and are not to be dismissed – for example, additional funding, public visibility and a media presence, and the institutional support available to parliamentary parties – entering parliament would not resolve the structural limits imposed by the liberal democratic framework. Left parliamentary parties would still be at risk of repeating the destiny of any parliamentary opposition: ending up alienated from their base by the very character of parliamentary activities and without a means of addressing social issues at the grassroots level. The strengthening of the parties' grassroots, especially outside of urban centres - where the left operates almost exclusively at the present moment - would be even more important, but arguably harder to achieve. We believe that it is of central importance for the development of a viable supporter base for any left party to address the imperatives of the material reproduction of the popular classes and the needs and interests associated with them. This, in our view, requires a [class based](#) (Chibber 2017b) approach. If the responses of the popular classes to attempts to politically mobilise them along class lines are often disappointing for left activists, this should not be hastily attributed to the alleged incapability of the masses to recognize and pursue their own interests. As one party activist highlighted, rather than attribute political illiteracy, irrationality etc. to people, we should

start from the assumption that [their political behaviour is in fact rational](#). (Dolenec 2017a) given the options that are available to them.

Activist experience, as well as class theory, suggests that capitalist societies tend to individualise people, suppress collective action, and make it costly and risky for people to be politically engaged. The task of left political parties is to aggregate peoples' individual interest into collective interests and construct the reasoning and basic conditions for emancipatory political engagement. Thereby, an emancipatory class identity, which cannot be expected to arise on its own, can [be developed and sustained, demonstrating that what political activists are advocating is both possible](#) (Chibber 2017a) and preferable to the situation in which people find themselves. The centrality of truly participatory politics for all three actors addresses a central aspect of emancipation: the [development of human beings, of their capacities and capabilities, simultaneously alongside the changing of their own circumstances](#) (Lebowitz 2017). However, this cannot be achieved in separation from another central aspect of left politics - the need to meaningfully address issues related to the material reproduction of the popular classes, as these are the foundation on which viable participatory politics rests.

Finally, since the resources available to each of the parties are extremely limited, and the tasks ahead are daunting, we believe that increasing the level of already existing cooperation between the parties (local councillors, Zagreb city assembly) to a more comprehensive and strategic level should be seriously considered by all actors. Joint vehicles for action should also be considered, such as the formation of task-driven working groups devoted to matters such as policy and budget analysis, the building of a stable supporter base, fundraising, media strategies, etc. This might, in turn, provide the foundation for a more comprehensive future joint political platform, which would improve

the capacities of the left as a whole to act as a relevant social and political force on both the local and the national level.

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