

Will Zagreb be Ours? The prospects for a left-green alternative in Croatia's capital and beyond

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With local elections due to be held in Croatia on 16 May 2021, a left-green political platform Zagreb je Naš (Zagreb is Ours - henceforth ZjN) stands on the brink of a historic achievement. [1] Its candidate for mayor, Tomislav Tomašević, holds a strong lead in the race and is predicted to defeat by a large margin whoever his opponent will be in run-off elections to be held two weeks later. ZjN was formed in early 2017, by a group of activists from social movements and NGOs, working on issues of public space, the commons, environmental concerns, independent culture, human rights, and in women's groups, LGBTQ initiatives, on workers' rights, and more. They introduced a broad green-left perspective - ranging, crudely speaking, from eco-socialist to left liberal world views - into the sphere of institutional politics in Croatia. Frequently presenting themselves as having "one foot in activism, the other in electoral politics", the motivation for fielding candidates in the 2017 Zagreb local elections was to advance a genuine alternative to the corrupt, clientelist, nationalist-populist politics that had defined local government in Croatia's capital. Milan Bandić, originally elected as the candidate for mayor of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) but later operating through his own political party (MB365), embodied these politics. During his two-decade tenure, he presided over a clientelist network involved in rent-seeking and resource-extraction through real estate, city holding companies, and much more, [2] until his sudden death on 28 February 2021.

In the local elections of May 2017, ZjN entered into coalition with a number of existing green and left parties including Radnička fronta (Workers' Front - RF), Nova ljevica (New Left - NL) and others and, despite having few resources and little time, gained four seats in the 51-seat City Assembly, winning almost 8% of the vote, as well as winning seats in smaller units of local government. In 2019, leading members of ZjN joined with another group of NGO activists to form Možemo! (Yes, we can - M!) and, with coalition partners, contested the European Parliamentary elections held in May 2019, polling under 2% of the national vote but with a strong showing in some urban centres. By the time of the Croatian Parliamentary elections held on 5 July 2020, the Možemo!-led coalition confounded pundits who had predicted that they would be no more than a "here today, gone tomorrow" grouping and, despite not having national coverage, won 7% of the vote returning seven Members of Parliament, to become the fifth largest grouping. Disagreements, more to do with ways of working and intra-coalition communication than policy, led to a decision in December 2020 to no longer work with RF. Možemo! and ZjN continue to exist as separate but linked platforms with M! operating across Croatia, usually where localized groups with a history of activist engagement already existed.

The origins of ZjN and M!, in terms of the trajectories of their leaders and the evolution of their policies, are complex and sometimes contested. Many of the leaders of ZjN came of age as activists in what I have termed the 'third wave' of social movements in independent Croatia involved in

struggles against crony capitalism, commodification, and the enclosure of the commons and privatization of public space, [3] and with a structuralist understanding of resource misuse in the European periphery. Although there were also linked struggles in Dubrovnik, Split, Pula and elsewhere, the main focus was in Zagreb, notably in terms of a protest against a shopping centre, luxury flats and car park in a pedestrian area, Cvjetni trg/Varšavska in the centre of Zagreb. It is also important to note a nation-wide campaign against the proposal to privatise motorways introduced by the then SDP-led government, with social movement activists working alongside trades' unionists. In addition, a wave of student protests and occupations, against fees for higher education, across the region, including in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb, were also a formative experience for many. A number of those involved in *Možemo!* had worked in 'second wave' NGOs, albeit in those that, whilst project-focused, combined technocratic and more openly politicised approaches to their work and, indeed, some, particularly from NL, had a track record in the anti-war, anti-nationalist, and women's networks that grew up in Croatia during the wars of the early 1990s.

In terms of reference points and inspirations, although the European Greens, Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn, *Podemos* and *Syriza* should all be mentioned, it was the new municipal movements in a number of Spanish cities, notably the citizens' platform *Barcelona en Comú* and similar platforms in Valencia and Madrid, that were most significant, together with transnational *Right to the City* initiatives. The biannual summer *Zelena Akademija* (Green Academy) held on the Croatian island of Vis since 2008, originally organized by the German Green foundation *Heinrich Böll Stiftung* and now by its local successor in Croatia the Institute for Political Ecology (IPE), has been of immense importance in terms of both the personalities and politics behind ZjN. Mayoral candidate Tomislav Tomašević was employed in IPE and one of the candidates for Deputy Mayor, Danijela Dolenec, an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Zagreb, served as Chair of the IPE Academic Council for many years. Along with issues of degrowth and green transformation, themes such as municipal socialism and the experiences of *Rebel Cities* have featured strongly in recent years, and the event has been of immense significance in fostering exchanges across the region of South East Europe and beyond.

ZjN has translated many elements of democratic decision-making, not least the idea of concentric circles of co-ordination and support, from *Barcelona en Comú*. Crucially, it has a similar concern with process as inseparable from, and equally as important as, the content of its political programme, modelling ideas of direct democracy and horizontal communication within its ranks, with its partners and, crucially, with citizens. Its programme for the local elections was drawn up by some thirty-three working groups, both thematic and area-based, involving some 200 people. [4] The needs and priorities of citizens have been gathered systematically through consultations at local level and an online questionnaire completed by some 10,000 people. ZjN has presented its programme as a unique opportunity to build a different Zagreb through planning in partnership with citizens, transparent accounting and budgeting, employment and contracting based on competence not connections, through competitive, green and socially just recruitment and procurement practices,, and an end to the selling off of city assets.

Crucially, the vision is of a revitalised, eco-friendly, city with an emphasis on energy efficiency, including solar panels, safe waste disposal, improved water management, and recycling, as well as a more integrated and low-carbon transport system. Another priority is balanced, polycentric, development across the city, affordable public housing, more public spaces, and improved, and more equitable, health, pre-school and social services, with priorities being improved accessibility for people with disabilities, and improved services for older people, people with mental health challenges and survivors of family violence. Each neighbourhood is meant to be transformed through opening cultural and community centres and ensuring sport and recreational opportunities for all.

The nature of local governance will change profoundly, away from the model of the mayor/sheriff deciding everything to more devolved decision making, a stronger role for smaller units of local government, and active consultation with citizens and service users. Tomašević has suggested that his immediate priorities on becoming mayor will be to commission an independent audit of the city's finances, ask for the resignation of all section heads and open competitions for employment in a reformed city administration, and develop an urban plan.

ZjN's programme seems to want to strike a balance between what might be called 'normalisation' of the governance of the city and its 'transformation'; between a radical politicization of structures, a belief in the power of technocracy and expertise, and a faith in direct democracy and citizens' good sense; and, ultimately, between a genuinely progressive green left agenda and a more liberal one. A few days ago, a proposed 'Advisory Council' was presented to the public that, perhaps, was meant to counter accusations of a lack of experience and which, whilst not skewed towards neo-liberal technocratic governance, hardly exuded revolutionary, anti-capitalist, zeal. Another concern, perhaps, is the relative absence of the involvement of those with a radical left perspective on economics and finance that, indeed, makes the critique "how will you pay for all you propose?" resonate in some quarters.

Although much can change in the run up to the elections, Tomašević is currently polling at around 37%, more than 20 percentage points above his nearest rival. It is far from clear who will come second and, therefore, be Tomašević's opponent in the run off, most likely either the candidate of the right-wing ruling party (HDZ) Davor Filipović [5], SDP's candidate Joško Klišović [6] or even BM365's candidate Jelena Pavičić Vukičević [7]. Tomašević has a healthy lead over all of his potential opponents in a run-off, however. Crucially, even though polling up to 30% in some polls, ZjN is highly unlikely to be able to gain a majority, on its own, of the 47-seat City Assembly. The hope is that a workable majority can be secured through a formal or informal coalition with SDP and a small centrist party GLAS – currently, this is possible but by no means certain and, given that all other parties likely to be represented in the Assembly would be unacceptable to ZjN, and the fact that ZjN will not engage in any kind of political horse-trading, the possibility of having limited room for manoeuvre remains.

In the run up to the elections, personalised attacks and dirty tricks from HDZ and other right-wing groupings, as well as fabricated scandals perpetuated by sections of the neo-liberal, nationalist and/or clientelist mass media, are likely to grow apace. The shape of the discourse has already been forged: Zagreb cannot be surrendered to radical activists who hate Croatia, have no governance experience, and are undoubtedly financed from abroad (Soros has been invoked more than once) and/or by mysterious domestic donors with their own agendas. There has also been criticism, often but not always constructive, from the left. Part of this concerns the platform's base amongst urban, highly educated, members of a new professional middle-class and lack of representation of the working-class. This is complex, not least in terms of the nature of class, precarity and inequality in a post-industrial city such as Zagreb and in terms of the need to be clear whether the problem relates to the platform's founders, activists and/or supporters and the extent to which the platform is concerned to reach out to the most oppressed, as it surely is. ZjN is, more or less, a kind of 'new left' that does not ignore material structures of class but neither sees them, in a narrow sense, as prior to, determining of and, hence, more important than structures of oppression based on gender, ethnicity, disability, age and sexuality. Another criticism is that there is little or no positive reference to Yugoslav socialism: although some key figures in the platform have an interest in remembering the socialist period and, in particular, legacies of workers' self-management, this is not in focus of many who have no lived memories of the very different conjunctural phases of socialism that ended, to all intents and purposes, more than three decades ago.

There is, of course, a regional dimension to ZjN and its success, one that is a product of a revival in

left-wing ideas and a radicalisation of social movement activities in the last decade and a half. Perhaps even more importantly, however, the ability to mobilise through social media, combined with running a positive campaign and exemplary use of media exposure, as well as prioritising actively listening to residents' concerns across the city, is the recipe, provided it is clear that a good reputation takes time to build. ZjN has expanded in an organic, incrementalist, way, through building alliances and utilising interlocking networks and, crucially, has benefited from, and contributed to, gender equality in terms of political participation and a re-imagining of what political involvement should look like. In this sense, ZjN appears strikingly different from the usual political opportunism, and through hard work after the recent earthquakes in Zagreb and other parts of Croatia, as well as the COVID crisis, and through use of platforms provided by a presence in the City Assembly and in the Croatian Parliament, the movement looks to be here to stay. Indeed, building on the success in Zagreb, the local elections have seen the rise of a number of Možemo! groupings in other towns and cities, often led by figures with a respectable past as social movement activists. Victory in Zagreb could also result in a realignment on the left of Croatian politics, not least in terms of SDP becoming more radical or, at least, shedding its own clientelistic structures. Such processes could be a springboard for real change at the national level in Croatian politics with the next Parliamentary elections still three years away. In consultations in the city of Šibenik in September 2017, including with leading members of *Podemos* and *Syriza*, the difficulties of moving from movement activism to electoral politics and, even more importantly, the difference between 'winning an election' and actually 'taking power' were discussed at length with ZjN activists and others. Implicitly, if not explicitly, a focus on 'new municipalism' or even 'municipal socialism' suggests that radical change may be easier to achieve on an urban rather than a national scale, not least through building momentum by responding to citizens' needs in a direct, and relatively rapid, fashion. At the same time, of course, cities are embedded in variegated capitalist relations just as much as states; the same ratings' agencies use neoliberal metrics to determine the costs of borrowing on the same capital markets as those of states; and so on and so on. The gap between electoral success and real power in Zagreb is compounded, of course, by the murky nature of the city's finances and by the power to resist held by many key officials in place for two decades. A preference for 'domestic' and/or 'investment-oriented' capital over 'foreign' and/or 'predatory' capital will not be enough to secure lasting change. Working in a multi-scalar way, including regionally and internationally, building on the experience of radical movements and platforms, as well as engaging left-wing auditors and advisors with international experience, and learning from what has worked elsewhere, will be crucial to building a long-term, emancipatory, project that could have massive implications across the region and beyond.

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<https://lefteast.org/will-zagreb-be-ours-the-prospects-for-a-left-green-alternative-in-croatias-capital-and-beyond/>

Footnotes

[1] The author of this text has been a member of the Support Group of ZjN from its inception, regularly attending meetings and voting on issues including selection of candidates and choice of coalition partners. He has also worked on aspects of the platform's programme relating to social policy for the local elections of 2017 and 2021 and the Parliamentary elections (for ZjN-Možemo!) of 2020. He holds no official function within the platform and has no political ambitions!

[2] See Hoffmann, Dražen, Nives Miošić-Lisjak, Duje Prkut, Dragan Jelić, Paul Stubbs, Berto Šalaj and Siniša Zrinščak (2017) *Croatia's Captured Places: studies on the quality of local governance* for an overview of local state capture in Zagreb, amongst other sites in Croatia.
https://www.gong.hr/media/uploads/croatia's_captured_places.pdf

[3] Stubbs, Paul (2012) 'Networks, Organisations, Movements: narratives and shapes of three waves of activism in Croatia', *Polemos* 15 (2): 11-32, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/98573>

[4] The programme in full can be found, in Croatian, at <https://zagreb.mozemo.hr/program/>

[5] Filipović, a weak candidate chosen when the ruling party expected to be able to continue to work informally with Bandić as mayor, has led a campaign that consists almost entirely of attacks on Tomašević.

[6] Klišović was installed as SDP's candidate after a thoroughgoing shake-up of the party in the capital. He has not indulged in negative campaigning and seems ready to work with Tomašević and ZjN after the elections.

[7] Pavičić Vukičević, a close associate of Bandić, was a late entrant to the race, no doubt encouraged to run by clientelistic interests that fear their network of influence will be broken up. Her candidacy has recently been talked up by a leading national newspaper.