

Croatia: Freedom for Palestine in the backstage

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Croatia's largest protest against the genocide against the Palestinian people was held in Zagreb on Friday. H-Alter's associate spent the day with organizers who demanded: a clear and public condemnation of the genocide and a demand for a ceasefire, an end to Croatia's participation in the genocide, a severance of trade and diplomatic relations that enable the continuation of the genocide, an end to repression against movements in Croatia and other countries, a cultural and academic boycott, a cessation of scientific, research and cultural cooperation, a withdrawal of investments, and a strengthening of solidarity with the peoples of Palestine and Lebanon among academic, cultural and local activist groups.

Of the thirty or so people gathered in front of the Zagreb Faculty of Philosophy at four in the afternoon, a few are rubbing their hands without gloves. Others are keeping warm by carrying things, setting up equipment, or meditatively walking in circles reading printed speeches. The commotion in front of the building is taking place under the watchful eye of three police officers, and it is more intense than usual. The air, in addition to being fresh, carries anticipation; November 29th is the International Day of Solidarity with Palestine and has been designated as the perfect day to hold the largest pro-Palestinian event in Croatia in a year - the Solidarity March for Palestine.

The clues are everywhere. In front of the Student Club of the Faculty of Philosophy, dozens of posters authored by numerous students are piled up, young people in yellow vests are hurrying up the stairs, throwing questions at each other, and in front of them, a slightly older guard turns on speakers and spotlights. The time in front of Filozofski flows in the tone of a well-oiled machine, in equal measure represents the challenge of such an operation and the organizational capacity of all those involved in its realization. Over fifty people invested their effort, time and knowledge in one way or another so that the event could take place. Everyone contributes without expecting anything in return.

"Reporting to the police went well this time, but we still need to announce everything, organize banners and posters, ensure that student clubs are with us, prepare speeches...", **Ana Vračar**, a member of the Initiative for Free Palestine (ISP), enumerates in an interview for *H - Alter*. Due to lack of time, it is not possible to mention the tasks of sound system, transportation, maintaining order, planning the route, creating the atmosphere and documenting the entire event. It was Ana, a journalist specializing in healthcare, who struggled with the logistical coordination of the entire machinery. She accepted this task because she could no longer watch the horrors that healthcare in Gaza suffered, from the bombing of hospitals to the torture and murder of doctors. He hopes that, like last time, the March will lead to the spread of the movement in Croatia.

Judging by the number of initiatives involved in organizing the March, seven of them, the movement in Croatia is much broader than in the first month after the genocide began. Standing next to Ana is **Emina Bužinkić**, who, in addition to her membership in the ISP, participates in the Initiative for Academic Solidarity and Epistemic Justice (IZASEP). In an interview with *H-Alter*, she tells us that

the March has agitation as a key function: "With the kind of connection we made with the Strike for Gaza, the Zagreb Antifascist Network (MAZ), the ISP, Students for Palestine (SZP), IZASEP, the Center for Peace Studies (CMS) and Zagreb City of Refuge, we have made a step towards building a broader movement – we have included other populations, different social groups whose struggles are equally relevant. It seems to me that this has mobilized a larger number of people who will work daily to build solidarity with Palestine and other spaces."

Asked if the idea of the March is to spread the struggle to other fronts, Emina answers that these struggles already exist and the purpose is to connect them. Thus, harmonizing the initiatives regarding the demands and form of the March was not difficult, and the route imposed itself as a logical one: "The gathering is important, that's why we start from the college with IZASEP and SZP as a block related to education, and ŠZG related to culture, because this is where the academy is called for the first time. Then, at the city government of Zagreb-City, the refuge, as part of the block related to migrants, addresses the city government, and finally, MAZ and the Initiative come to the NSK to speak in front of the current seat of the government."

"Each organization has its own representative who will give a speech, and everyone was equally involved in the organizational aspect. SZP as a student force was formed in mid-May, and one of the big incentives for the route was that censorship, or the fact that our [study](#) was not an item on which the councilors could vote," **Sara Gurdulić**, the media contact for SZP, tells us on the south side of the stairs. As a journalist and student, she doesn't have much free time, and on top of that, she doesn't feel comfortable giving statements to the media, but after learning about the Palestinian issue, she put her engagement above her immediate needs. Like most people we ask about the goal of the March, she answers that the purpose is to motivate more people to get involved: "Ideally, we would get to the NSK, everyone would say we don't need genocide, and all ties would be severed. However, what could happen is that we encourage other students, because there are many of them among our colleagues who observe genocide and it is clear to them that resistance must come from all sides. This is a strong symbolic act of resistance where new connections can be built between organizations and their work."

Sara is nervous as she makes her first statement, but as the minutes pass, the nervousness becomes palpable in the others. The seemingly calm **Nancy Abdel Sakhi**, an actress by profession, also feels it. She tells us this as the students hold up the *G3N0C1D=G3N0C1D* banner that will be in front of all the speakers. However, it is normal to feel nervous, she says, when you care about something. The tension is also visible in the battalion of riot police of different ages who gather around the ramp. Among them is **Tin Levka**, a preschool teacher who does not look like he can incapacitate potential attackers on his own. He dared to act because the sight of dead children "broke his heart." He and the other riot police are reassured by riot police coordinator **Mihajlo Ćuk**, a philosophy student who joined the movement after attending the Initiative's first protest. Now he encourages and organizes others to act as the older members initially encouraged and organized him. If anything happens, he explains, other riot police should be called, because there is strength in numbers. Most of those present know this because they have been stewards before. They are aware that hate speech, anti-Semitism, flag burning and violence are not tolerated. They know that they should not use their hands and feet to resolve a situation, but their tongues.

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During Mihajlo's speech, darkness falls. The voices in front of the faculty are suddenly joined by the murmur of hundreds of citizens armed with Palestinian flags and banners. *Human pride, not*

Apartheid , one chants, *Anti-Zionism is anti-fascism* , another proclaims. **Vesna** , a physicist who came to support the protest, hands out several similar banners to those here empty-handed. She is over fifty years old and the first war she watched on television was in Lebanon and Palestine. Everyone we ask why they are at the protest gives a variation on the theme that they cannot just passively watch genocide, but Vesna sums it up best: "I came because I have a lot of frustration that I need to vent somewhere, otherwise I will explode."

The drumbeats then echo through the courtyard. The academic quarter is respected after five in the afternoon, and the crowd gathers in front of the steps. The pale light of the faculty on the asphalt in front of the podium mixes with the green, white and red, which come from instruments decorated with lights in the colors of the Palestinian flag. *The Drum 'n' Rage* collective quickly raises its energy, and then hands the baton to Ana, who takes the first step. By the end of the speech, the March lists the demands: clear and public condemnation of the genocide and demand for a ceasefire, an end to silence and censorship and Croatia's participation in the genocide, a break in trade and diplomatic relations that enable the continuation of the genocide, an end to repression against movements in Croatia and other countries, a cultural and academic boycott at all levels, a break in scientific, research and cultural cooperation that materially and culturally benefit the war machine, a withdrawal of investments in Israeli projects and institutions, and a strengthening of solidarity with the peoples of Palestine and Lebanon among academic, cultural and local activist groups.

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Eva Marija Jurešić then speaks before the SZP about the destruction of the educational infrastructure in Gaza and demands an end to the hypocrisy of our academic institutions, condemning the academic silence, while **Gordan Jelenić** presents a brief overview of the genocide and the Palestinian issue in Croatia before the IZASEP, starting with the solidarity stance of the SFR Yugoslavia, which would have turned 81 on the day of the March. He also deepens the academic aspect from the perspective of the professor, criticizing the positions of the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth of the Republic of Croatia and the European Commission. Each paragraph is accompanied by passionate "that's right!" from the protesters and frenetic drum beats. When the crowd falls silent, he concludes with the words of **Aaron Bushnell** , who set himself on fire in protest against official US policy: "Many of us ask ourselves: 'What would I do if I lived in a time of slavery? Or racial laws? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country committed genocide?' The answer is, you do. Right now."

By 17:37, they were supposed to head towards the German embassy, but due to the huge number of people, the plan was changed. Symbolic rebukes are directed towards the embassy, and fourteen members of *ZborXor* come in front of the banner . They sing *Red Poppies* , with a steady melody, not allowing the sign of the protest to fall on mere theory. The cultural block is continued by **Leonida Cris Manojlovski** , addressing the culturalcide in Gaza in front of the ŠZG, expressing the hypocritical silence of cultural institutions and workers in Croatia.

It is important to point out that it is evident on all speakers that this is not their natural habitus. Ana makes a mistake at the beginning, Emina has to whisper to Gordan to come closer to the microphone, everyone reads with more or less crumpled papers, and at the end there is also some microphonics. These are not media-trained politicians or mouthpieces for multinational corporations like those who instigate or perpetuate this genocide. A sterilized image of a non-existent hyper-reality is not something that a couple of civic initiatives can achieve at all, these are ordinary people with normal lives. Therefore, the scene in front of Filozofski is more real than any press conference designed to promote an artificial image of events in the Levant. Every mistake is followed by approving cheering from the audience, showing that each of these votes rests on the collective will

of the crowd, whose voice is reciprocally amplified.

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Lucija, the media contact for CMS, as well as Sara, is nervous while giving a statement. He concludes the thought of the first block of speech: "It is important to act on all fronts. Cultural actions, political actions, but it is important to continue to protest and go out into the streets, to disrupt reality and everyday life." She begins her engagement by volunteering with refugees, but points out that, in accordance with the collective nature of every struggle, the engagement must end on the streets. After the first set of speeches, a procession of a thousand people is directed there, to the disruption of reality.

Free free Palestine and *Viva Palestina* are alternately chanted before leaving the parking lot. By Vukovarska, the column was formed. Palestinian flags and banners calling for **Netanyahu's** arrest are flying everywhere. They shout, shout, some even cry. A van with mounted speakers accompanies the March. Nancy's voice is emitted from it, which additionally galvanizes everyone present. Traces of nervousness are no longer visible on her, she throws every sentence with the fullness of her being. "*In our thousands and our millions, we are all Palestinians*", they shout as any remaining fear evaporates. At the end of the column, *Drum 'n' fury* helps in this, while *the Evil Drummers* do it at the front. The cacophony is synchronized with the rhythm of the drum and steps, becomes harmonious and rises towards *the crescendo*. Car horns join in thanks to the activists who fly out near the road with "*Honk for Palestine*" signs. The ritual atmosphere erases all differences in the crowd, gives the rare privilege of losing our body in the crowd and our voice in the choir.

To the headship, the column is about four hundred meters long. The electrified energy falls in the middle where the drummers are not present, but that's why there are groups with megaphones that successfully take care of maintaining the atmosphere. On the one hand, there are masked anarchists who make some people uncomfortable. On the other side are the members of the RCI, a contemporary revolutionary communist alliance. **Luka Resanović**, a worker on the CMC machine, says through a megaphone: "Long live the intifada" and "Down with capitalism."

Upon arrival, Josipa Lulić takes the stage on behalf of *Zagreb City of Refuge*. She speaks about the suffering of many people who have been forcibly deprived of their refuge and how the City participates in their marginalization by favoring some refugees over others. Once again, the enthusiastic voices of the protesters fill the space, this time mixed with Arab voices playing from the loudspeakers. By the time NSK arrives, the spirit has not yet died, so **Irina Masnikosa** gives a speech for MAZ, connecting Palestine with the broader anti-fascist struggle, in this region as well as globally. She concludes by again listing the demands.

Finally, **Majd Nasrallah** takes to the makeshift stage. He is a Palestinian cultural worker, the only one who does not read his speech from a piece of paper. Majd's speech overshadows the rest of the event. Is it because of the rehearsal, the fact that it directly concerns him, or the content that, unlike other speeches, has not been seen before in one way or another:

"Fear. Fear is a very powerful thing. If we can figure out a way for fear to push us from behind, instead of standing in front of us, then that is where the power lies. Let me start by acknowledging that when I was invited to speak before you, I was filled with fear, because as a Palestinian I face the worst persecution. If I ask you to support a boycott, that could put me in a risky situation. If I ask you to support resistance - nonviolent, cultural or academic - I face a criminal charge. In fact, if I ask you to stand for Palestine, I face a charge of inciting terrorism that would prevent me from ever returning to my homeland... but together with you I find collective power and I think that if we do

not speak the truth, we stand for nothing, and if we stand for nothing, the road to emancipation and liberation will not be fulfilled. [...]

It is very important to say, as we stand here on Palestine Solidarity Day, that solidarity is not one day! Solidarity in this case is something we undertake every day, it is not a passive act or an extracurricular activity. It is something we do continuously to prove human values and to prove to the world that we will not be silenced in the face of one of the worst crimes of the 21st century. The fight for Palestine is not just for emancipation, it is for the soul of a nation, against mental colonization, not just physical or Palestinian, but of all free people around the world. It is a just fight. Standing here, I would like to invite you to see that you have the inherent power to change the course of history and that there is inherent power in our collective stances to end this genocide and apartheid regime. [...]

The last four hundred days have seen the Palestinians turned into tokens, their lives have taken on a symbolic existence. I am here to tell you - no. We are human beings and we are not appealing to your humanity, but to stand for the very rights that you claim as globally free citizens of the world at the core of your existence. We appeal to you to continue the struggle because Palestinians are dependent on the global movements of the world. I also ask you here to see that the power you have has a potential effect in stopping the drift into the growth of fascist voices around the world, the growth of fascist Zionist voices around the world, the brutal capitalist-imperialist infrastructure that holds us hostage globally to consumerism, the culture of individualism and comfort. I also warn you here that if we do not stand for this, we will soon face situations where our rights are being taken away everywhere. [...] In closing, I most sincerely promise you, Palestine will be free, but we must stand together."

Majd's inspiring speech ends. The audience quickly disperses, and the organization packs up. A strong wind begins to blow with a few drops of rain. We learn that everyone from the organization is satisfied with how the March went, that even the police praised the organization of the demonstration. We also learn that between the beginning and the end of the March, everyone briefly forgot about the cold.

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P.S.

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Translated from Croatian by Adam Novak