



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:

Croatian Me Too Movement: massive protests against domestic violence

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Summary

Croatia's political powers were surprised by two democratic citizens' interventions. Firstly, citizens gathered around the citizens' initiative Save me after the terrifying case of children thrown from the first floor in Pag, demanding better protection of women and children from domestic violence. For the second time, citizens rallied more and more around various initiatives and associations, most notably the same Save Me Initiative, the leading citizens' initiative of the civil movement for the protection of women from male violence, after the release of suspected young men for repeatedly raping a 15-year-old girl in the Zadar area to legally defend themselves outside the . Government institutions have shown that they are poorly performing their primary functions and that they are the seat of incompetent people. Citizens' Initiatives in Croatia, such as the Save Me Initiative, believe that their actions can bring about significant changes in society. However, ordinary speeches, slogans and peaceful protests cannot be the method for creating progress in social relations. After all the speeches and polite protests within the limits of the law, does not bring about changes in society, because the authorities are not forced to implement change. Without a form of serious pressure towards the work of state institutions, nothing will change significantly, and the Save Me Initiative will become another in the archive of civic initiatives that appear from time to time and quickly disappears, like a falling star which disappears and shines once again on our dark sky completely contingent and without a changing effect.

Introduction

Until recently, indifference and apathy towards the bad decisions of judges seemed to prevail in the Croatian society. Like the rest of the ruling actors in society, judges were perceived by public as one of the untouchables. When Zadar's Criminal Court Judge Ivan Marković released five young men accused of repeatedly raping a 15-year-old girl on bail, there was public outcry. Within a very short time, a mass protest against the institutional violence of the judiciary against women under the name 'Justice for Girls' was announced. Tens of thousands of people across Croatia announced that they would attend the protest. Soon after the

announcement of protest, accused young men were again taken into custody and remained in custody for a month and Judge Marković opened sick leave due to received dead threats. The 'Justice for Girls' protest has revitalized the issue of the position of women in society, right at a time when women's reproductive and social rights are being narrowed down to a conservative, Catholic measure. The protest was organized in all major Croatian cities and was very well media-covered. Tens of thousands of rebel citizens have requested the responsible institutions to realise the following demands: to take disciplinary action against a judge who freed the suspects and thus endangered the safety of the victim; to move the trial from Zadar to Zagreb to eliminate bias during the trial; moreover, that the relevant and responsible services (police, social welfare centre and judiciary) do their utmost to protect the victim of sexual abuse; to urgently adopt amendments to the Criminal Code which will include definition that any sexual intercourse without consent is an act of rape and introduce more severe penalties for rape. These four demands were articulated by the *Save Me Initiative*, which co-organized the protest and could be characterized as the Croatian version of the originally American Me Too movement.

Save me Initiative: Croatian Me Too Movement

At the end of February 2019, a senseless act of domestic violence took place that stunned the public to such an extent that citizens finally began to seriously question what the institutions were doing to prevent domestic violence in society. In Pag, father threw his four young children from the six feet high balcony on the solid concrete, and then reported himself to the police. The family was evidently living in inhumane conditions and has been under the supervision of the social service for years. However, the social service did not respond on time. Minister of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy Nada Murganić found in the Pag case that there were major mistakes in the work of the Centre for Social Welfare Zadar and requested the dismissal of the director of the responsible Centre. To the public, however, this was not enough, as the Pag case was the case after the series of cases of domestic violence that forced the public to no longer tolerate the government's decisions with staff reorganisation and empty promises. Citizens rebelled and part of them organized themselves into new initiatives and associations. The most famous of these is the *Save Me Initiative*, which is mostly presented in the media by the famous Croatian actress and columnist Jelena Veljača.

The day after the terrifying Pag case, Jelena Veljača posted a Facebook status announcing that she, as a citizen, will seriously take political actions in the newly formed initiative *Save me* with other citizens in the campaign against male violence against women and children, causing

the creation of the Facebook group *Save me* which had gained 33,000 members in just four days. Shortly after Facebook's status, the citizens' initiative *Save Me* organized a protest in front of the government's residence, which resulted in the government accepting the Initiative's demand for even greater span of regulations for protection of women and children against domestic violence. The Initiative proved to be very successful in its first action, but the challenges which it set out to resolve showed that there is still much work to be done for the Initiative to be satisfied.

The case of the multiple-raped girl: a new protest of the Save Me initiative

In mid-October, the public was shocked by the new monstrous case of male violence. According to media reports, near Zadar five young men, aged from 17 to 19 raped a 15-year-old girl multiple times over the course of a year, filming her and blackmailing her that they will publish the video recording in public. Shortly after the discovery of this frightening sexual violence, the suspects were taken into custody and even more quickly the judge decided for them the bailout solution. The anger of the public has never been greater, since it has again been shown that state institutions are not doing their job, in this case, they are not protecting the victim from violence of the perpetrators. There was a reasonable suspicion that victim and rapists would meet again in a small place such as the area around Zadar. The general public expressed that amount of anger and dissatisfaction with the work of the Croatian judiciary on social networks that it had reached the level of danger in sense that citizens might take justice into their own hands. Judge Marković immediately reported sick leave, and the suspects were quickly taken to the pre-trial detention centre in order to save their lives.

The *Save Me Initiative*, in co-operation with other initiatives and associations, again organized a protest, but in this case on a larger scale and throughout entire Croatia. The protest, called 'Justice for Girls', took place in all major Croatian cities and created enormous pressure on the government and the judiciary to do something urgent to protect women and children from domestic, typically male violence, and to eradicate corruption within the judiciary. A large number of people took part in the protests, with only a few thousand protesters in Zagreb alone. However, nothing happened after the protest. Everything remained solely on speeches and paroles, and the suspects for rape were released again in a month.

Conclusion

Citizens' initiatives may produce good results, but they have their limits. Unless political authorities show the political will to change what citizens' initiatives request, it is very difficult to achieve the desired goals in the format of civic activism. Citizens' participation in the form of activism is a common and a positive phenomenon in a democratic system, but one should not be led to the misconception that significant changes in social relations will be achieved through simple speeches, slogans and peaceful protests. If political parties are disinterested, it is necessary to create even more pressure on them or to form a new political party with a program that will include the demands of the rebel citizens. The *Save Me Initiative* just contains this shortcoming that is common in civic activism in the world, an especially in Croatia. Namely, with the position of moral authority, politically they seek to change the social relations that are being regulated, among other, by the power relations among the main actors of the dominant political structure. Interests in politics are usually more powerful than any moral position. Therefore, the movement led by the Citizens' initiative *Save Me* will fade away over time, like many other Croatian civic activism have disappeared, because they do not know that (direct) coercion is a tool in politics, not a taboo from which peaceful and decent citizens should avoid at any cost.