

New Momentum for Climate Politics in Croatia

An interview with Lea Šmigmator, Luka Gudek, Marija Mileta, Vanessa Lošić

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In Europe, as across the world, youth mobilisations have shaken up the political landscape. Climate strikes, Extinction Rebellions, and youth-led organisations have put climate change at the forefront of discussions, as well as helping secure significant gains for Greens in many parts of Europe. But many countries in eastern and southern Europe saw smaller and fewer mobilisations, unable to unmoor political debates from traditional issues.

Croatia is one of these countries. The newest EU Member State, its population is on average older than the rest of the region, and it has low voter turnout, especially among young people. While it did see relatively significant youth mobilisation through the Fridays For Future movement, environmental issues did not move that far up the political agenda. So it was unsurprising when the country lost its only Green MEP, Davor Škrlec, in the 2019 European elections. Škrlec was from the Green List party, which later became ORaH, one of the country's many small Green parties.

Climate politics in Croatia

The country has long struggled with a range of environmental issues. A March 2019 report by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Energy showed energy production is currently the largest CO2 emitter in the country, followed by traffic, industry, agriculture, and waste. Public demonstrations and local groups have pushed back against projects such as the liquid natural gas terminal on Krk Island and air pollution in the city of Slavonski Brod from a coal plant across the border in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Though mobilisation against harmful energy projects has been only partially successful, it has demonstrated that the citizens of Croatia care about their environment. Indeed, it is at the local level that environmental activism is most visible, where it appears to originate from so-called “ordinary” people. The country's numerous environmental groups remain largely focused on holding the Government – currently led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) – to account for individual local projects, rather than looking at bigger-picture problems such as climate change.

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The only organisation focusing on climate change is the youth movement Fridays For Future Croatia (FFF). They have managed to capture the public interest and elicit a response from the Government. FFF has mobilised hundreds of teens and young adults nationwide, but their success has been concentrated in larger cities rather than towns and rural areas. Part of the reason lies in the somewhat classist nature of green political movements. Climate activism requires a certain awareness as well as basic scientific literacy, and while this is more accessible to the

educated middle classes in large cities such as Zagreb, a large part of the population has little access to this type of education and information.

Nevertheless, with FFF there is a real sense of a new political player coming onto the scene – with new methods of self-organising, with a new model of political engagement, and strengthened by its links to a global movement. Their zeal has allowed them to gain some recognition from existing environmental organisations, as well as parts of the public. To explore the potential of Croatia’s youth movements and their capacity to bring political ecology into the mainstream, we speak with two young activists, Lea Šmigmator from Fridays For Future Croatia and Marija Mileta from Zelena akcija, an environmental organisation with decades of experience.

What are the aims of your organisation and the main issues you work on?

Marija Mileta: The core aims of Zelena akcija (ZA) are environmental protection and sustainable development. The main issues we deal with are energy and climate change, waste management, the protection of natural resources and the commons, transport, and environmental law, but also topics such as public space governance. We encourage the public to assert their constitutional right to a healthy environment and nature, and campaign for citizens to play an active role in environmental policymaking.

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Lea Šmigmator: The main goal of FFF is political change. Our aim here in Croatia – which may be different to other countries – is to educate the public, especially young people, on the impacts of climate change. We want to politically engage young people and say loud and clear that we want to participate in solutions, not remain passive. FFF has been active since March 2019 and cooperates with most of the organisations acting on green issues, animal rights, and equality in Croatia. We consist mostly of high school and university students.

Are you a political organisation?

Marija Mileta: ZA is not a political organisation in the sense of party affiliation. We are a non-governmental, non-party, non-profit, and voluntary citizens’ association. However, the work we do is definitely political.

Lea Šmigmator: Absolutely not. We want to participate in decision-making on existential matters – such as climate change – but we are not a political organisation. FFF groups in different cities are autonomous, but have some basic rules: protests must be non-violent, non-profit, non-religious, and apolitical. For me, being apolitical means not affiliating with parties, but just acting for the public wellbeing. It means not taking sides. We will never be a part of any party – Left, Right, or centre.

What type of activities do you conduct?

Marija Mileta: ZA achieves its goals through direct non-violent action, campaigns, education, joint action by volunteers and staff, and cooperation with other organisations on public engagement. In the last 30 years, we have conducted around 30 campaigns locally and nationally. These have included the “BLJAK” campaign against genetically modified food products, “Ne damo Varšavsku” against the devastation of the centre of Zagreb and corruption in city governance, “SOS za Jadran” against surveying the sea bed for oil and gas, and campaigns for

bike lanes in Zagreb.

The biggest problem in Croatia is education, so besides protests, we organise lectures. We try to make these as accessible as possible and use quizzes, workshops, and banner-making activities to make them interactive.

Lea Šmigtor: We have organised five protests, four of which were part of the global strikes for climate. In April and September 2019, we presented our list of demands to the Government, the Prime Minister's office, and Parliament. The biggest problem in Croatia is education, so besides protests, we organise lectures. We try to make these as accessible as possible and use quizzes, workshops, and banner-making activities to make them interactive.

Do you receive any institutional support?

Marija Mileta: If we're talking about the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Energy, the answer is no – not since 2013. However, state support has come through the National Foundation for Civil Society Development and the Office for Cooperation with NGOs, for example. We have cooperated positively with cities such as Samobor and institutions such as the Information Commissioner.

Lea Šmigtor: We did not receive much support in the beginning; our relationships with other organisations developed later. Now we cooperate with a large network of people, such as schools and university professors, though many tell us their hands are tied when it comes to giving us space for our activities. ZA and Greenpeace, followed by TERRA HUB and WWF Adria, have provided the most support and we have been promoted publicly by many green organisations and media outlets.

Who are your main allies?

Marija Mileta: Our main allies are other progressive NGOs – not only environmental ones – and citizens' initiatives. For example, ZA is part of the national network of environmental associations Zeleni forum as well as SEENET, the South East Europe Network for Energy and Transport. Furthermore, ZA is a member of Friends of the Earth, the world's biggest network of environmental organisations.

Over the years, we have taken part in other campaigns, such as supporting the campaign against the 2013 referendum on redefining marriage as between a man and a woman. This kind of intersectional action and mutual support is key to our work.

Sadly, political parties are little help as they rarely even mention environmental concerns. It is more often the case that parties in power actively harm the climate and the environment. In one recent TV debate between presidential candidates, not one question touched upon the climate crisis or environmental protection.

Lea Šmigtor: Besides the organisations mentioned above, we are supported by several unions. They invited their members to attend our protests, as one of our demands focused on the rights of workers in the transition to a green economy and the creation of a fund to retrain workers for new sectors.

Are your aims achievable in the current political context?

Marija Mileta: There has probably been no ideal period in independent Croatia to work on environmental protection. Ten years ago, awareness of climate change was non-existent. Today, things are better. What is

worrying is that the political and economic situation has destabilised, opening up a space for new right-wing and populist movements. These are trying to reassert traditional values and threaten basic human rights, as well as silence the critical voices of civil society and the non-profit media.

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Many NGOs working on human rights – especially refugee rights – have found their work increasingly difficult and there have been attempts to criminalise them. This is a hugely dangerous trend – we can see where it has led countries such as Hungary. Attacks against ZA have not been as harsh, but they still happen. In 2017, a company called Razvoj golfa sued us for 160 000 HRK (about 21 000 euros) and called for us to be banned from public space after our campaign to stop them building a golf course. The legal case has not yet been concluded. The biggest obstacle is the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Energy and the current Government itself. Not only is the ministry closed off to any dialogue, but Minister Čorić actively promotes fossil fuel projects, new oil and gas field surveys, and harmful waste management projects.

Lea Šmigmator: All our goals are achievable, but some more easily than others. Some can be taken individually, and some are part of a wider shift from a carbon-based to a low-carbon economy. The shift to a circular and sustainable economy will be difficult as it will require the transition and retraining of workers and wider systemic change. I believe that such a transition is possible. We do not need to invent new solutions and already have countless positive examples. If we cannot effect change in Croatia directly, perhaps we can affect the EU level which can, in turn, have an impact here.

How would you rate the success of youth climate organisations in Croatia?

Marija Mileta: Fridays For Future is a new movement and will continue to grow – and we will continue to support them. This movement has been successful in that a group of young people, mostly girls, self-organised because of environmental concerns. They recognised climate change as an existential matter and mobilised a section of society in a way that existing organisations had not yet managed. They pushed this issue into the media and encouraged the scientific community to enter the public debate. There have been successes but it would be great to see a more united environmental movement in Croatia. Unfortunately, we still cannot say there have been political results. The Government pays no mind to the urgency of the situation.

Lea Šmigmator: Protests are our main activity, and we try to make them accessible to everyone. In the Croatian context, I see them as very successful. There was a media and government response and they had a real-life impact. We received an (unsatisfactory) answer to our demands from the Government and were invited for a discussion, at which we spoke with representatives responsible for the Croatian strategy for our presidency of the Council of the EU. The strategy was not that impressive, but I am glad they invited and recognised us.

What are the main challenges in mobilising youth in Croatia?

Marija Mileta: The first climate strike in Zagreb in March 2019 was attended by over a thousand people. After

this, the number of participants kept falling. It is difficult to identify just one reason for the failure of large mobilisations in Croatia compared to some other countries.

Even though Croatia is in the grip of a political and economic crisis, people are not speaking up in the streets. The sights we have seen in France, Spain, or Chile, with millions of people protesting against neoliberal policies, are hard to imagine here. There are several exceptions and FFF Croatia is one of them. They emphasise education: young people do not learn anything about climate change or environmental protection – not to mention critical thinking – at school.

Lea Šmigator: It used to be university students who we were this critical mass, coming out to protest on the streets. Now it is 15-year-olds. A major problem is that our education system is outdated, and much is left to the initiative of individual teachers. Students are taught that protests are like a battle against the government but, as citizens, we have the right to ask for the government to do what we think is right.

Where next for the movement

Both new movements and older organisations in Croatia have a clear sense of their political context. The climate movement in eastern Europe faces a vastly different political scene to that of western Europe, starting from a position of little debate on the climate and increasingly authoritarian governments which have even criminalised human rights organisations in some cases. While there is currently no fear of the criminalisation of environmental organisations, there are efforts to limit their work through lawsuits, the withholding of structural funds, and public delegitimisation.

Both Zelena akcija and FFF Croatia enjoy significant support from the international networks they belong to, with the EU also seen as a significant partner in dealing with oft closed national institutions. These organisations are keenly aware that they need to act politically, either by direct action or by providing youth with a platform to become engaged. However, both movements are quick to distance themselves from any political affiliation. There is a belief that aligning an organisation with a political party delegitimises it, revealing a deep distrust for political parties across the spectrum – a wider Croatian issue, as we can see from low voter turnout.

With or without a desire for cooperation, the question remains whether genuinely progressive and green-minded parties exist in Croatia. There are none in the national parliament. Parties with parliamentary seats that label themselves “green” or “progressive” have yet to follow up with policies. The Social Democratic Party of Croatia announced in 2019 that they would become “a red-green party”, but what that will mean in practice for their priorities remains unclear.

There is much work to be done to build trust and place environmental topics on the national agenda. These interviews demonstrated the warm spirit of cooperation between environmental organisations – and building on this will be key. While organisations like Zelena akcija have had some political influence through campaigns, they struggle to grab the attention of the wider public. If they provide the ideological background and institutional knowledge, new movements like FFF can inject fresh messages, direct action, and the public appeal they possess as newcomers. The proof of their success was FFF Croatia presenting their demands to the Government.

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More work is needed to tap into the potential for collaboration. This could be done by connecting green NGOs and

activists with government officials through participatory planning processes, raising awareness on environmental issues, and publishing information about the environmental effects of economic and everyday activities. Local successes could also be scaled up to the national level. A national platform with two clear tasks would be beneficial. First, to facilitate the exchange of ideological, logistical, and recruitment knowledge between organisations and, second, to share often-isolated environmental activism success stories and shift public debate. There is also space for environmental, human rights, and workers' movements to work together on a more meaningful level, and youth environmental movements seem to be particularly aware that they need to expand their networks of allies and have a clearer idea of their role in the political process. For while both ZA and FFF have to hold the Government to account through protest, they also need to be able to position themselves as expert partners with a seat at the table when it comes to drafting environmental policies.

The year 2019 saw some real, positive change in environmental activism in Croatia. The freshness and novelty of grassroots youth movements, combined with the theoretical knowledge and experience of older institutionalised organisations, might give green issues the momentum they need to reach the national agenda.

Lea Šmigmator, a final year student at the Fifth Gymnasium in Zagreb, has been involved with environmental and other related issues since childhood. She got involved with Fridays For Future when the initiative started in Croatia last year. and became the initiative's coordinator in autumn 2019. Lea is a member of the "Green Deal for Youth" online project, which brings together young activists from all over the world.



Luka Gudek is a graduate student in the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb. He is a co-host of the environmental radio show "A gdje su kitovi?" on Radio Student, the University's student radio station, and a member of the youth environment organisation FORa Zeleni prozor. He has been active within the international young green movement since 2018, through CDN – the Cooperation and Development Network Eastern Europe. His main interests are the role of cities in climate transition and degrowth.

Marija Mileta is head of communications and climate change programme assistant at Zelena Akcija. She has been part of ZA since 2010, and has worked there since 2014. In the last decade she has taken part in many campaigns and activities, including leading the campaign against the LNG terminal project on Krk Island. Apart from climate change and fossil fuels, her topics of interest are migration and human rights. She has been a member of the co-ordination group of the "Dobrodošli!" ("Welcome!") initiative for several years.



Vanessa Lošić is a graduate student in the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb. She is the editor and co-host of "A gdje su kitovi?" on Radio Student. Her interests are sustainable design, media studies, and critical theory.

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