

From Grassroots to Government: Greens Leading Reform in Zagreb

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Municipalist movements are among the most promising developments in recent years for progressive politics in Europe. In Zagreb, the green-left movement Mozemo! has led the city administration since 2021. Growing out of grassroots democratic initiatives, the movement has already achieved important successes, from fighting corruption to improving services for citizens.

Three weeks into his new job as the first Green mayor of Zagreb, Tomislav Tomašević was starting to unpick the legacy of his notoriously corrupt predecessor. City finances were in trouble and employees were in danger of not being paid. The former mayor's right-hand woman was still in post as the head of the "legal and expert service of the mayor", until she was arrested for corruption close to Tomašević's office – she was one of many arrests in the first few months across the city government and city-owned companies.

Tomislav Tomašević was drawn to activism for social change from a young age. "I was always political, but I entered party politics only in the last five years," he explained on a call. At 16, he joined Zelena akcija (Green Action), Croatia's largest environmental NGO. "I was already, even when I was in high school, an activist," he said.

It was at Zelena akcija that Tomašević met Boris Ivčić, who remembers him as a bright and energetic young activist. "It was visible from the beginning that he is ambitious, but also really responsible," Ivčić said. During meetings, Tomašević, then around 19 years old, would be holding his own with confidence in discussions with people twice his age.

That energy and leadership were channelled into his next project, Mreža mladih Hrvatske (the Croatian Youth Network), an alliance of national and local youth organisations of which Tomašević was co-founder and later president, before returning to Zelena akcija as its chair. "Some people around Zelena akcija were a bit concerned because of his age, but very soon they stopped being worried and became impressed," Ivčić recounted.

One of the key moments that marked Tomašević's transition from activism to party politics was Zagreb's campaign Pravo na Grad (Right to the City). Emerging from a mix of youth, cultural and environmental activism, *Pravo na Grad* opposed the commercial (and often corrupt) sale and development of space, enabled by its populist mayor Milan Bandić, while youth venues were marginalised or shut down. Tomašević and Teodor Celakoski became the leaders of the campaign early on, using the art of humour and spectacle to get their message across. When a powerful local businessman avoided planning regulations by classifying his newly built mansion as a hotel, *Pravo na Grad* supporters turned up en masse to book a room.

The big showdown between *Pravo na Grad* and Tomašević on one side, and the local elites including the mayor on the other, came when a developer applied to tear up a pedestrianised part of central Zagreb to build a shopping mall with an underground car park. What had until then been an activist

group became a mass movement, with 55,000 people signing up to support the campaign. “This was one of the biggest ever NGO-led campaigns in Croatia,” said Ivčić. The organisers were keen to translate that support into action.

The campaigners used classic nonviolent direct action methods to disrupt the planned development and draw attention to the corruption of the municipality. They were met with mass arrests by the police. Ultimately, the campaign failed to halt the construction of the shopping mall, but it showed the stark differences between the public and the political leadership of Zagreb, and *Pravo na Grad* groups started to emerge throughout Croatia.

“I was quite active at international level as well,” Tomašević said. “I was an honorary youth advisor of the United Nations Environment Program. I was still working as a consultant in many countries abroad,” Tomašević said.

Tomašević then attended a master’s course in sustainable development at the University of Cambridge. Shortly after returning to Croatia, he moved from Zelena akcija to the Heinrich Boll Foundation office (later to be transformed into the Institute for Political Ecology), which was more focused on policy and research.

While much, if not all of Tomašević’s work had been political, it wasn’t until 2017 that he decided to enter party politics. “I and many of my colleagues decided that these things that we were fighting to change would not change,” Tomašević said, because no political party would implement the policies called for by civil society.

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Zagreb is Ours!

The party *Zagreb je NAŠ!* (Zagreb is OURS!), was formed in February 2017, just a few months before the city assembly and mayoral elections. The newly founded party was one of the biggest electoral surprises, winning almost 8 per cent for the city council. As a mayoral candidate, Tomašević got as a candidate for the mayor around 4 per cent of the vote. That result translated into four elected councillors, including Tomašević, and an opportunity to take their activism and policy experience into opposition at the political level.

The elected group continued to draw on their activist background to attract attention and ensure their political work was visible to the public. Most people saw them as the main opposition to the incumbent mayor. Elected councillors are not paid as full-time representatives, so Tomašević kept his role at the Institute for Political Ecology, conducting policy and scientific work on issues of democratisation and the ecological transition.

In 2019, Tomašević and the activists of *Zagreb je NAŠ!* brought together like-minded groups across Croatia and launched the national political party *Možemo!* (We Can!) a few months before the European elections. While it failed to secure a seat in the European Parliament, *Možemo!* ran again in 2020 for the

Croatian parliamentary elections. The green-left coalition it led managed to secure 7 per cent of the vote and seven MPs, including Tomašević. In March 2023, Tomašević and Sandra Benčić have been chosen as party coordinators by the general assembly.

However, some activists were not happy with the merger of Zagreb je NAŠ! into Možemo!. “I am a real believer in new municipalism, and Možemo! is a national party but has no national base,” said Paul Stubbs, a sociologist originally from the UK involved in Zagreb je NAŠ!.

One of his concerns was that the “spirit of direct democracy” that had characterised the movement would be lost as it became a national movement without strong local democratic organisations in each municipality. The regular consultations with members and supporters that had preceded the [2021 elections](#) ceased almost completely in the following year, Stubbs noted in an [article](#). However, it is normal for a new administration taking over a troubled local government to struggle to retain the level of engagement with the grassroots that they had in opposition, because of the pressure to deliver on political promises.

Stubbs sees Zagreb je NAŠ! as part of the wave of municipalist movements in Barcelona, [Graz](#), and Berlin. Part of his concern about Možemo! as a national party is that the lack of grassroots support in other towns and cities in Croatia could make it similar to all other political parties in terms of structure.. “I’m being told that there’s a new leadership that wants to reinvigorate that spirit [of direct democracy], so we’ll see,” Stubbs said.

With Možemo’s support and Tomašević’s public platform growing, the activists of Zagreb je NAŠ! were optimistic about their chances at the 2021 local elections. After Milan Bandić, the populist mayor who had been in office since 2005, died of a heart attack shortly before the election, Tomašević topped the poll in the first round with 45 per cent of the vote. In the run-off against a far-right candidate, Tomašević was elected mayor of Zagreb with 64 per cent of the vote.

The second-round campaign was “really dirty” according to Ivčić, with the far-right accusing Tomašević of being part of a global conspiracy that included Zagreb’s NGOs. While nearly 200,000 people voted for Tomašević, the fact that over half as many chose the far-right is something that still concerns Ivčić. In the Zagreb assembly, Možemo! and its allies were one councillor short of a majority. They formed a coalition with the Social Democrats to govern the city.

Entering the (rotten) institutions

Being in office is “a very, very different sport” from being in opposition, said Tomašević. While in the assembly he has a group of 23 councillors (26, including coalition partners) to count on, in the city hall – the seat of executive power – it started out as just him and his two deputies.

The main challenge for the new administration was to make Zagreb “normal” again. Tomašević’s predecessor Milan Bandić had spent 20 years building and maintaining his power by awarding contracts and appointing friends to influential positions. Croatia is one of the [worst-performing EU countries](#) when it comes to corruption. Transparency International gave it a score of 50 out of 100 in its 2022 [Corruption Perceptions Index](#).

In Zagreb, the issue was particularly acute – and it is not limited to politics. In 2018, a scandal involving the football club Dinamo Zagreb resulted in the [imprisonment of several top football officials](#). Mayor Bandić was arrested (twice) and suspended from office between 2014 and 2015 over a corruption scandal that was still under investigation at the time of his death. That legacy of corruption and

dysfunction still hangs over the city. “Every day, I find something new, which is so bizarre and absurd that I can’t believe that it functioned like that for decades,” Tomašević said.

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The system of local government in Croatia provides that while the mayor is directly elected, along with the deputy mayors, the “city ministers”, i.e. the heads of the directorates, are appointed for a four-year term. That meant that Tomašević inherited his predecessor’s deputies, people whom he had criticised and opposed. “It’s a quite bizarre situation, to say the least. And I can appoint new ministers only through a very slow and bureaucratic process,” he said. Tomašević did manage to reduce the staggering number of city ministries (“Zagreb was world champion,” he joked) from 27 to 16.

Adding to the difficulties was the fact that Zagreb had been hit by an earthquake in March 2020 which had caused an estimated 11.5 billion euros of damage to the city and the surrounding area. The world was also emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic. Since his election, Tomašević’s administration has also had to deal with the impact of the war in Ukraine, including a rogue military drone.

“The city was in really bad shape in terms of governance,” Tomašević claimed. “When we came to office, we could not pay the monthly salaries for the city administration and employees because there was simply no money in the account,” he said. The new administration had to take a liquidity loan to meet expenses. One of the reasons for this was the city’s deeply indebted public utilities company Zagreb Holding, which had over 8000 employees. There were also issues with payments to the hundreds of institutions run or supported by the city, from kindergartens to cultural institutions. In the course of 2022, the city managed to stabilise the financial situation and bring it under control.

The other major project, launched in October 2021, was a reform of waste collection modelled on “cheap but effective” systems used in Austria, Switzerland and Germany. The amount of mixed waste has been reduced by 27 per cent, more than in any other city in Croatia, although Tomašević says there is still work to be done to improve the service for people in apartment blocks.

The new waste and recycling policy also demonstrates the challenges of turning an election programme into actual policies. There are legal and political limits to what local government can do, as well as internal competition for the use of the administration’s resources. The chaos and corruption under the previous mayor were a catalyst for political change but also an obstacle to change and reform.

Progress rather than transformation

Zagreb’s new governing coalition also experienced internal disagreements and dissent. The classically “green” approach of the new waste and recycling policy was criticised by the left for not taking into account social concerns. The new system required people to buy their own recycling bags, and compelled some blocks of flats in the city centre to collectively pay for lockable storage. Both rules increased expenses for poorer households, even though the administration has so far refrained from issuing fines.

Public transport was also facing significant problems when the new mayor was elected. “We have a fleet of very old trams, some of them older than me,” Tomašević said with a laugh. The administration is currently procuring twenty new trams and has bought sixty-five new buses with EU funds. The aim is to

move to electricity- or hydrogen-powered public transport in the next stage. In addition, recalling the *Pravo Na Grad* protests, the administration is looking to expand the pedestrianised areas of central Zagreb.

In context of the city has so far rebuilt four schools, and two more are nearing completion. Six more schools have been newly built or extended, with more in the pipeline. The new schools are designed to be earthquake-resistant, energy efficient and able to generate their own renewable electricity, the mayor explained.

The city's bridges are also being strengthened to resist future earthquakes, along with cultural and other institutions. There is still a lot of reconstruction work to be done on private buildings, which is in the remit of the national government but has an impact on the city.

Another priority for Tomašević is meeting the demand for affordable childcare in the city, with an aim to build or open twenty new kindergartens by the end of his term of office. Zagreb is also one of the "leakiest" cities in Europe for its water supply, with half being lost in distribution. An investment plan worth 300 million euros hopes to turn this around. "There are huge expectations that we're supposed to meet, which is not always an easy task," the mayor admitted. "I say 2022 was stabilisation year and 2023 will be investment year," he added.

Stubbs hopes to see more radical and left policies from the administration but acknowledges the difficulties it faces. "They are an island of sanity in a big sea of corruption and right-wing nastiness, and anything they do, which can be deemed illegal, they will be taken to court for that," he said. While, in his opinion, the administration has done well in advancing human rights for the LGBTQI+ and the Roma communities, he believes it is still operating too much within the constraints of the neoliberal system.

An alternative model

Tomašević has demonstrated a skilled approach to communications as a governing politician too. After causing some initial consternation among leftists for criticising a wildcat strike by the city's waste workers, he quickly moved to meet the workers, negotiate, and meet some of their demands before donning their uniform and working with them on waste collection for a few hours.

While Tomašević's attention to detail has served him well in the past, Ivčić contends that the complexity of running the city requires him to delegate. Wherever the mayor has directly intervened, things have improved or have been resolved. But without his own cohort of city ministers, the mayor's ability to delegate is constrained.

"Participatory politics, to be quite honest, still remains a challenge. This is something that we will focus much more on this year," Tomašević said. The administration has already opened up the appointment of school board members to the public and introduced citizenship education in schools, and is actively looking for more ways to involve citizens in governance. The plan is to introduce participatory budgeting into city neighbourhoods.

Corruption is not the only troublesome legacy that Tomašević has had to face. Croatia's complex history of nationalism, fascism, socialism, anti-fascism, and democracy after the break-up of Yugoslavia is reflected in politics. According to the mayor, the wars of the 1990s are still present in the country's politics, but "Croatia is slowly becoming a more progressive and inclusive society, and I hope we are also contributing to that effect," he said. Early in his administration, Tomašević opened a memorial to victims of the Holocaust that acknowledged the role of the fascist Ustaša regime – a delicate issue in

Croatia, with nationalist politicians reluctant or downright hostile to revisiting that history.

“What he [Tomašević] does, very interestingly is combine the anti-fascist tradition with what I would call a new patriotism,” said Stubbs. Tomašević has been able to use the power of symbolic representation to lead by example on issues as divisive as the legacy of the Balkan wars. He was the first Croatian politician to attend the memorial for a Serb family killed in Zagreb during the war of independence. He was also the first mayor to attend the Zagreb Pride. “These kinds of things are symbolic, but I think they’re important for a society where everybody is equal no matter their ethnicity, religion, or background,” Tomašević said. His administration has also made moves to ensure that the right to abortion is respected after years in which it was guaranteed only on paper.

Perhaps one of the most encouraging signs for the movement is that others are looking for ways to emulate it. Moramo!, a green political coalition in Serbia, has modelled itself on Možemo! and has elected representatives to the Belgrade local government and the parliament. Where the prospect of green-left leadership will lead Balkan societies in the coming years remains to be seen.



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