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## Gaining Political Power by Utilizing Opportunity Structures: An Analysis of the Conservative Religious-Political Movement in Croatia

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### *Summary*

This paper explores a connection between religion and politics in Croatia by analyzing the conservative civic initiative “In the Name of the Family” (*U ime obitelji*). It is a part of a broader religious-political movement, which emerged over the course of the last decade, that is connected to other international conservative organizations and initiatives. They advocate for a decrease of secular influence on the family, oppose sexual and reproductive rights, and insist on the primacy of religious freedoms. The political nature of the movement manifests itself through multiple attempts to scrap the legislation and practices of both state and private institutions that are contradicting the value system of the Christian (Catholic) majority. The religious-political nexus of the movement is confirmed by its continuous involvement in policy-making, here manifested through the use of direct democracy institutes.

*Keywords:* Religious-Political Movement, Contentious Politics, Opportunity Structure, Referendum, Same-Sex Marriage

### **Introduction**

The referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman,<sup>1</sup> held in December 2013, was the first successful national referendum in Croatia initiated by a citizens’ initiative. “In the Name of the Family” (*U ime obitelji*) argued that the traditional values of Croatian society must be protected through enshrining the traditional, heteronormative, definition of family. The

<sup>1</sup> The same definition already existed in the Family Law, but the referendum initiative claimed it was necessary to constitutionalize the definition, as in this case it cannot be amended through a simple majority voting procedure, but amending the definition, once it is part of the constitutional text, required a so-called organic majority, i.e. two thirds of all Members of Parliament (hereinafter MPs).

religious-political movement leaders, in public debates in the period prior to the referendum, argued they are not homophobes and that their intention is not to restrict the rights of the LGBT\* community.<sup>2</sup> On the other side, the liberal part of civil society, gathered in the initiative “Citizens Vote Against” (*Građani glasaju PROTIV*), was taken aback by the establishment of the religious-political movement and its claims.<sup>3</sup> The referendum results proved that citizens can be successfully mobilized on their social conservative value orientations, since 66 percent of those who voted backed the initiative to restrict marriage to heterosexual unions.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, by initiating the constitutional referendum, the citizens’ initiative “In the Name of the Family” had shed a light on a societal cleavage between the liberal and conservative-nationalist segments of the society, revealing not only that the Croatian society is socially conservative, but that it also manifests a high level of intolerance and homophobia. The referendum initiative effectively established the movement and its prominent figures as new political actors, who have managed to secure a significant political capital and power.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the first, theoretical part, the paper will present two social movement concepts: the political process theory and the theory of contentious politics. They shall allow us to establish which political opportunities contributed to an emergence and rise of the religious-political movement, as well as to explain the indigenous organizational strength of the moment, the mobilizing structures and cultural framing processes the movement applied, and how the movement has developed its contentious repertoire.

After a short overview of methods, we synthesize the findings of the interviews conducted in the field, and connect the findings with the relevant academic literature. In the conclusion, we synthesize our findings and determine if a repertoire of contention that pursues institutional avenues of social change can be considered a successful tool in contentious politics.

<sup>2</sup> They argued that the LGBT\* citizens are already endowed with an array of rights in accordance to the Croatian legislation that was regulating same-sex partnerships at that time.

<sup>3</sup> There were no indications that the government was planning to legalize gay marriage. It only announced the intention to amend the Same-Sex Civil Union Act passed in 2003, by expanding the rights of same-sex partners. Issues of equality and prohibition of discrimination for this, traditionally activist-oriented and, until recently, prevalent segment of the civil society, were considered not only as enshrined in the legislation, but also as widely embraced and consolidated in the hearts and minds of the citizens.

<sup>4</sup> The constitutional ban on same-sex marriage has not, however, prevented the passing of a new legal framework for same-sex couples, as the centre-left ruling coalition, along with several other leftist and centrist MPs, passed the Same-Sex Life-Partnership Law in July 2014, equating a same-sex life-partnership to a heteronormative marriage in all rights and obligations, except the access to adoption.

## Framing the Theory on Social Movements

Social movements are “rational attempts by excluded groups to mobilize sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through noninstitutionalized means” (McAdam, 1982: 37), as well as “collective challenges to existing arrangements of power and distribution by people with common purposes and solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities” (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998: 4). Research on religion and politics “highlighted the role of religious organizations in the mobilization of various movements and the ways in which religious resources and institutions have been appropriated by movements with secular goals” (Aminzade and Perry, 2001: 115). Keddie (1998: 697) argues that religious-political mass movements either argue in favor of religious nationalism, or promote conservative religious politics. Whereas a mission of the first category of religious-political movements is directed primarily against other religious communities, the second type is directed primarily against internal enemies.<sup>5</sup> Applying Keddie’s terminology, a religious-political movement turns into a political actor by responding to disillusionment with secular government whom they perceive as incapable of representing properly its value system.

Aminzade and Perry (2001: 160-161) argue that “[t]he central way in which religious-based political movements differ from secular ones concerns claims to an other-worldly, transcendental ontology. [...] The issue is not whether such a supernatural world actually exists. As long as people believe it does and act accordingly, invisible spirits can shape political life.” Religious politics is a term that refers “to any social interaction that relates beliefs regarding sacred objects to the interests and actions of a political community” (Chow, 2012). Religious-political movements, like any other social movement, tend to result in a social change that redistributes power (McCarthy and Zald, 1977: 1217-1218; Tarrow, 1998: 4-6; Meyer and Tarrow, 1998: 4), and, obviously, the nature of a collective claim-making which defines their contention challenge might also be political. Consequently, along with ideological messages, religious-political movements convey political messages as well.

In order to be able to explain the emergence of the Croatian religious-political social movement we opted for theoretical concepts that allow the study of social movements in a broader economic and political context and that take into account political opportunities, mobilizing structures, framing processes, protest cycles, and contentious repertoires (Caren, 2007; McAdam, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> The latter is the case with the movement researched in this paper, as this movement appeals to a religious tradition, which is evoked as a means of solving problems exacerbated by secular government; applies populist rhetoric in attempting to gain political power; and predominantly advocates conservative and traditional social views.

*The Political Process and the Contentious Politics Approaches  
to Understanding Social Movements*

The political process (or political opportunity) approach, developed by McAdam (1982), introduced a challenge of the political opportunity structure and the institutional political power as the context of social movements' political action. By focusing on political opportunity structure and context, the political process approach places analytical attention "to the contours and dynamics of the wider society in which the movements operate" (Williams, 2000: 95). A recipe for insurgency, explained by the political process perspective, is made from the following three factors: political opportunities, indigenous organizational strength, and cognitive liberation. The concept of opportunity structure can be described as the threatened interests of governments and other groups to the actions of a challenger pursuing the group's interests (Tilly, 1978: 11). It could also be seen as the "consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure" (Tarrow, 1994: 85).

The political opportunity structures is the basic idea of the framework as exactly this influences "the choice of protest strategies and the impact of social movements on their environment" (Kitschelt, 1986: 58). Similarly, political opportunities result from "any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured" (McAdam, 1982: 41).

In addition to changes in the political opportunity structure, the political process theory takes into account organizational strength and insurgent consciousness as reasons for the emergence of collective action. Indigenous organizational strength presupposes the pre-existence of political and potentially political organizations that existed among the aggrieved community. Finally, cognitive liberation among potential social movement participants emerges out of perceived illegitimacy of the current political system, convincing the participants in the social movement they are able to contribute to a meaningful social change (Tilly, 1978: 135; McAdam, 1982: 38).

A proponent of the political process approach Sidney Tarrow (1994: 1) argues that social movements are "triggered by the incentives created by political opportunities, combining conventional and challenging forms of action and building on social networks and cultural frames". Tarrow furthermore argues (1998: 71) "that contention is more closely related to opportunities for and limited by constraints upon collective action than by the persistent social or economic factors that people experience". However, "changing opportunities must be seen alongside more stable structural elements like the strength or weakness of the state and the forms of repression it habitually employs" (*ibid.*).

Tarrow, thus, recognizes an opportunity as a crucial variable in the emergence of social protest, emphasizing that social movements are both able to seize pre-existing opportunities, but also envisage a strategy that will allow them to create new opportunities in which they will increase their power. Tarrow claims that along with politics, i.e., political opportunities, two additional factors are crucial for explaining “[h]ow movements become the focal points for collective action and sustain it against opponents and the state” (1994: 189): mobilizing structures and cultural frames. Of the two, the one more important for our research is the concept of mobilizing structures. They are resources, which “bring people together in the field, shape coalitions, confront opponents, and assure their own future after the exhilaration of the peak of mobilization has passed” (Tarrow, 1998: 123).

The political process approach was expanded and consolidated by the concept of contentious politics. Tarrow (2011: 16) argues that “contentious politics emerges in response to changes in political opportunities and threats when participants perceive and respond to a variety of incentives: material and ideological, partisan- and group-based, long-standing and episodic”. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly define contentious politics as “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants” (2001: 5). In contentious politics, a variety of interactions takes place among a multitude of contenders. Consequently, the outcome of interactions among groups of challengers and between them and authorities is demonstrated through a dynamic of the cycle (Tarrow, 2012: 201).

Since the nature of the contentious politics is dynamic and interactive (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001: 73), Tarrow holds that the best way to conceptualize it is to observe it as a process (2012: 200). He claims that “people engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and constraints change, and then by strategically employing a repertoire of collective action, creating new opportunities, which are used by others in widening cycles of contention” (Tarrow, 2011: 28-29). Therefore, a successful cycle of contention can be explained through four elements of the contentious politics: (i) the expansion of the political opportunity structure; (ii) the construction of contention; (iii) networks and mobilizing structures; and (iv) the repertoire of contention (Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1978).

## **Methods of Research**

In order to establish which societal trends favored the emergence of religious politics in Croatia we draw upon the political opportunity approach that argues that a causal significance of political opportunities is prevalent for a social movement to emerge, and that collective action needs to be studied by the systematic cataloguing

and analysis of contentious events (Tilly, 1978: 41-85; McAdam, 1982). Furthermore, we were interested in establishing what the motivation behind choosing legal mobilization as a means of pursuing a movement's goals is. We will, therefore, explain why legal norms were deployed by the religious-political movement as the movement's repertoire of contention. In this way, we will show that legal norms might play an important role not only in the inception of the social movement, but also in its recruitment and the building of its organizational resources, as well as in the mobilization and demobilization of its constituents.

In order to explore the growth of a conservative religious-political movement in Croatia, the referendum initiative that resulted in the constitutional amendment on the definition of marriage, and the ways in which institutions might be deployed as means of achieving social change, we used in-depth interviews. By conducting ten semi-structured in-depth interviews, with scholars and civil society activists from both the liberal and conservative spectrum of Croatian civil society, we managed to collect data on the social movement repertoire. We were interested in their opinion about the rise of conservative activism in Croatia. We especially focused on understanding their intention to define marriage through the Constitution. We also wanted to understand how changes to the legal and institutional framework contributed to the referendum initiative that demanded the valorization of the conservative-Catholic values in the constitutional text. In the end, we wanted to know all we could about the possibility that the referendum initiatives served as a means for positioning new political actors in the realm of Croatian politics.

The ten interviewees were researchers and scholars (4), representatives of liberal civil society organizations (3), and representatives of conservative civil society organizations (3) that form the core of the religious-political movement. We found leaders and lawyers of the religious-political movement particularly important as interviewees as they had outlined the referendum initiative question and requested a review of the lawfulness of governmental decisions on behalf of the movement's organizations. The other respondents' active participation in Croatian civil society or scholarly interest in it has legitimized them as a valuable source of information.

### **Structure of Religious-Political Actors in Croatia**

Mobilization of the religious right emerged in the United States in the 1970s, as a response to a plethora of progressive laws (Chow, 2012: 1471; Wilcox and Robinson, 2010; Shields, 2009; Amenta and Caren, 2004; Green, Rozell and Wilcox, 2003). Afterwards, and as a response to the secularization process in Western European and in the majority of Central and Eastern European countries (Ančić and Zrinščak, 2012: 22; Pickel and Sammet, 2012), the socially conservative organizations demanded the safeguarding of Christian values in the legislation and so-

cial policies of European institutions and national governments. They framed their claims around three sets of ideas: the necessity to preserve traditional family, the right to life, and religious liberty (Hodžić and Bijelić, 2015).

The Croatian religious-political movement is comprised of a dozen of conservative civil society organizations that came into being over the course of the last decade. They promote traditional or Catholic values, advocate for active citizen participation in the society and in politics, pursue pro-life activism and oppose abortion; assert that the right to marry and found a family should be solely entrusted to one man and one woman; and negate the autonomy of the state to prescribe educational curricula that touch upon sensitive issues such as contraception, education on gender roles, etc.

The first manifestation of a conservative mobilization can be traced back to 2006, when the association “Voice of Parents for Children” (*Glas roditelja za djecu – GROZD*) openly objected to the introduction of a curriculum for sexual education program in schools (Bijelić, 2008). “GROZD” was established to advocate an abstinence-based program, built on the Catholic view on family, sexuality, and gender roles. Two other associations, the “Association for a Comprehensive Sex Education Teen Star” (*Udruga za cjeloviti spolni odgoj Teen star*) and the “Reform – Association for the Promotion of Ethics, Morality, Family Values, and Human Rights” (*Reforma – udruga za promicanje etike, morala, obiteljskih vrijednosti i ljudskih prava*), have both had Ladislav Ilčić as a connecting, prominent figure. The association “Teen Star” promotes a specific program on responsible sexual behavior that is offered to teenagers in schools or parishes aiming at the maintenance of the virginity of its participants or the discontinuation of sexual activity of previously sexually active participants. The “Reform” opposes the introduction of sex education in school curricula. The association “Teen Star” is a member of an international association “TeenSTAR International” that is associated with the “Natural Family Planning Center” in Washington, D.C.

The association “Vigilare” (Latin expression for ‘vigilant, watchful’) is registered as an association that “promotes citizens’ participation in the civil and political sectors of society and the preservation of dignity and rights of the individual, family and values of life”. “Vigilare” mostly pursues internet activism, by calling its supporters to send emails to politicians and the heads of institutions when they believe a violation of traditional values has taken place. By doing so, “Vigilare” introduced a form of civic activism that Croatian citizens and institutions were not used to.

The citizens’ association “Center for the Renewal of Culture” (*Centar za obnovu kulture – COK*) is established with the goal of educating and training future conservative leaders, guided “by the belief that if the culture can be renewed then the

political landscape can be healed” (Bartulica, 2013: 22). The Center for the Renewal of Culture’s mission resembles the one of the “Center for European Renewal”, a pan-European conservative association that describes itself as “an independent, non-profit, non-partisan, educational and cultural organization dedicated to promoting and protecting the Western ideal of a civilized, humane, and free society”.

The mission of these conservative civil society organizations is often multiple, as some of them, e.g. “GROZD”, “Vigilare”, and the “Center for Natural Family Planning”, also present themselves as pro-life advocates. Several other pro-life associations established the umbrella organization “Croatian Alliance for Life ‘CRO-VITA’” (*Hrvatski savez za život ‘CRO-VITA’*), that “brings together associations, initiatives, movements, projects and individual members with the idea and implementation of a primary goal: the protection of endangered or unprotected human life and human dignity from conception to natural death”. The “Croatian Alliance for Life ‘CRO-VITA’” served in 2013 as a local expository of a European citizens’ pro-life initiative “One of Us”, organized and coordinated by the non-profit “European Federation for Life and Human Dignity”.

Apart from advocates of Catholic values and pro-life activists, there is a group of conservative civil society organizations that place protection of marriage and traditional family as the core of their activism. These are the “Association for Promoting Family Values ‘Blessed Alojzije Stepinac’” (*Udruga za promicanje obiteljskih vrijednosti ‘Blaženi Alojzije Stepinac’*), the “Center for Natural Family Planning” (*Centar za prirodno planiranje obitelji*), “Family Enrichment” (*Obiteljsko obogaćivanje*), and the “Reform”.

Finally, it is impossible not to acknowledge that all the prominent actors of the Croatian religious-political movement had been or are still active first in the party “Croatian Growth – HRAST” (*Hrvatski rast – HRAST*) that was registered as a political party in 2010, or in the party “Hrast [meaning ‘oak’] – the Movement for a Successful Croatia” (*Hrast – Pokret za uspješnu Hrvatsku*) which was founded following the break up in the party. In spite of being a political actor, the party “Croatian Growth”, founded by several conservative Catholic NGOs, joined by several marginal conservative parties, politicians and public intellectuals, advocated itself as “a Croatian political movement that brings together political parties, civic organizations, civic initiatives, and prominent individuals” that are traditionally conservative.<sup>6</sup> Its president was Željka Markić, a leading figure of the conservative civic initiative “In the Name of the Family”. The party “Hrast – the Movement for a Successful Croatia” is led by Ladislav Ilčić, conservative civil society activist that emerged through promoting Catholic morals and values in health education and

<sup>6</sup> “Hrvatski rast – Hrast: Vrijednosna programska polazišta”, *Portal hrvatskog kulturnog vijeća*, 28 June 2011, at <https://www.hkv.hr/izdvojeno/vai-prilozi/ostalo/prilozi-graana/7810-hrast.html>.



later as local politician in the city of Varaždin and then shortly as MP in the Croatian Parliament elected from the list of the Croatian Democratic Union in 2015. Whereas the first version of “Hrast” ceased to exist, the later party is politically active, and is aligned with the European Christian Political Movement and currently has one representative in the Parliament.

The citizens’ initiative “In the Name of the Family” arrived on stage once the center-left coalition announced its intention to legislatively arrange the rights and responsibilities of same-sex partners (such as social and health insurance rights and inheritance rights). The initiative “In the Name of the Family” was presented, by its (informal) leader Željka Markić, as an initiative that “brings together individuals, families and numerous civic organizations aimed at promoting marriage between a man and a woman as the fundamental value of the social order and the guarantee of the permanent legal protection of children, marriage and family” (Stanić, 2013).

The religious-political movement’s framing process has set the protection of the values of the (Catholic) majority and the dominance of the Catholic identity in Croatian society through preserving the traditional family as its master frame. Up to now, the neo-conservative agenda in Croatia tackled three issues: the protection of the traditional family, the resistance to the introduction of sex education, and the prohibition of abortion. Such a thematic cluster demonstrates their alignment with a wider European neo-conservative agenda.

The first goal of the protection of the traditional family was successfully articulated through the citizens’ initiative “In the Name of the Family” that managed to include the definition of marriage into the text of the Croatian constitution as a union between a man and a woman. In this way they were able to create a constitutional prohibition of same-sex marriage and the impossibility of marriage equality for LGBT individuals. Amending legislation requires a simple majority of votes in the Parliament, whereas amending the Constitution requires three quarters of all Parliamentary votes. However, the citizens’ legislative initiative becomes the text of the Constitution if in a nation-wide referendum the majority of the votes were cast in favour of the referendum initiative. For the initiative to be valid, ten percent of all voters in the country need to back it initially. However, in spite of the referendum’s success for the citizen initiative “In the Name of the Family”, the conservative civil society organizations continue to oppose the Civil Partnership Act. They argue the Act is unconstitutional, because it recognizes the same right to the institution of civil partnership as the one that is enshrined in the institution of marriage (Radelj, 2014). Thus, the ideological battles over marriage and the traditional family seem far from being over.

Secondly, the religious-political movement objects to the introduction of health and civic education programs in school curricula on the grounds that learning about

sexuality in elementary and high schools is contrary to parental rights and interests of educating their children in accordance with their own value systems. They argue that parents should have a freedom to opt for a variant of health education that is in line with their parental value system.

Apart from submitting open letters to ministers of social policy or education, the “GROZD” and “Reform” associations submitted in December 2013 a proposal for a constitutional review of the governmental “Decision on the introduction, monitoring and evaluation of curriculum implementation of health education in elementary and high schools”. After the Constitutional Court struck down the provision on introduction of health education in elementary and high school curriculum since the procedural requirements were not met, a representative of the “GROZD” argued that “the [Constitutional] Court recognized what parents, conservative NGO groups, the Catholic Church, initiative ‘In the name of the Family’ and other major religions in Croatia, had been saying all along – that the Minister of Education had forcibly and undemocratically introduced the sex-education program which was a beachhead for introducing gender ideology and indoctrinating Croatian children against the will of their parents and against article 63 of the Croatian Constitution and other European directives and laws which state that parents have the sole responsibility and freedom to bring up their children in line with their values” (LifeSite, 2013). Although the Constitutional Court had not based its decision on the grounds evoked by the social movement organizations, but merely on inadequate procedural requirements, the movement presented the Constitutional Court’s decision as a victory. The influence of conservative actors in the modeling of a future educational curriculum is seen in the interest those actors are pursuing in the modeling of the educational reform the Ministry of Education has been implementing. Open proponents of the traditional and Catholic values have occupied some of the leading positions in the expert team for the implementation of the educational reform. Moreover, recent changes in the draft Law on Primary and Secondary Education show that the current government is willing to take into account parental value preferences by assuring parallel educational content on topics that might have influence on the formation of personal attitudes, values and behavioral preferences.

The initiative “In the Name of the Family” used the legal mobilization by submitting a request for a constitutional review of the Family Act after a comprehensive reform of family law was passed in 2014. Interestingly, the constitutionality of the Family Act was challenged by a number of organizations and individuals from both the liberal and conservative spectrum, and was eventually suspended by the Constitutional Court.

The third topic the religious-political movement is pursuing is the protection of life from its inception until natural death. One of the first arenas in which the

religious-political claims became articulated was the legal regulation on assisted human reproduction. For example, in February 2012, representatives of the civic initiative “I Was an Embryo Too” (*I ja sam bio embrij*) formed by the civil society organizations “Vigilare” and “Fertility Care” presented a legislative proposal in the Croatian Parliament that would contribute to the solution of problems of couples with infertility by advocating natural conception and opposing the freezing of embryos for the purpose of artificial insemination. The liberalization of assisted human reproduction legislation was put for a vote in July 2013 and was not backed by the center-right parties. The Croatian Bishops’ Conference labelled the law “profoundly immoral and inhumane, because it will dissolve the fundamental values of family and marriage” (*Glas Koncila*, 2012). Damir Jelić, vice president of the Croatian Democratic Union, in that time the biggest opposition party, compared the new law to “the human tragedies of the Holocaust and the crimes of the Communist regime” (*ibid.*). Already in July 2012, the citizens’ initiative “I Was an Embryo Too” and civil society organization “Vigilare” issued a joint statement in which a retreat to the constitutional referendum was mentioned for the first time: “We are left with no other option but to take advantage of the rights enshrined by the Croatian Constitution that endow citizens with the possibility to call a referendum to bring down this law. This will certainly be possible because we are no longer a ‘silent majority’. The constitutional complaint and the referendum are the last line of defense left to the citizens, but our efforts do not end in breach of this bad law” (*ibid.*).

The social conservative and Catholic associations have recently undertaken a number of activities that oppose sexual and reproductive rights that have been legalized since the 1970s in Croatia. Interestingly, in the same period the number of medical specialists who provide abortions has decreased due to the expression of conscientious objection. For example, since 2014, during Lent, prayer vigils under the name “40 Days for Life” (*40 dana za život*) were organized across the country in front of public hospitals that perform abortions. The prayer vigils constitute a novelty in the repertoire of civic activism, and are likely inspired by, and imported from, American and Western European pro-life initiatives. The prayer vigils in Croatia are coordinated by the “International Ecumenical Prayer Initiative for Unborn Life” (*Međunarodna ekumenska molitvena inicijativa za nerođeni život*), which confirms international support for this development of the protest repertoire.

The opening up of the pro-life agenda by the organizations belonging to the religious-political movement can be explained merely as an import of the foreign repertoires, since the legislator has not announced any intention to promote abortion as a contraceptive means, and there were no prior announcements from the government to amend any law on reproductive rights. However, there was a pending constitutional review request of the so-called abortion law from the late 1970s

which was rejected by the Constitutional Court in February 2017. Conservative and Catholic associations “In the name of the Family”, “Croatian Movement for Life and Family” (*Hrvatski pokret za život i obitelj*) and “Croatian Catholic Congregation ‘MI’” (*Hrvatski katolički zbor ‘MI’*) as well as several citizens filed additional complaints to the Constitutional Court to back the original constitutional review request.

Thus, the movement, similarly to its organization of the Constitutional referendum on the definition of marriage, is acting preemptively, by trying to restrict the potential liberalization of the reproductive rights. This particular issue was announced back in 2013 as the movement’s future attempts to transform the legal system, since Krešimir Miletić, one of the leaders of the religious-political movement, stated that “discussion on all relevant issues in society shall be opened, including the one on the law on abortion that was passed during the Communist rule” (Ćurić, 2013).

Interestingly, in pursuing all these topics, the conservative civil society activists consistently use human rights discourse for the legitimization of their claims. Human rights discourse, referencing to pluralism and democratic principles and values, has been widely used as a repertoire of contention by conservative organizations and movements in the Western world.<sup>7</sup> One of our interviewees considered that “the discourse of human rights, normally used by the left-liberal organization, made them distinctive, even putting them farther away from the Church, which is traditional, conservative”. Secondly, they are claiming a concept of human rights as a reasoning discourse. For example, they manipulate the legal discourse and interpret the right of the parents to decide on the way in which sexuality and gender equality will be taught to their children, the right to marriage equality, the right to free and autonomous decisions regarding one’s reproductive life, and the freedom of religious conviction to fit Catholic teaching and values. Moreover, in the country that has a significant share of self-declared Catholic believers (almost 80% according to the 2011 Census) the religious-political movement claims the legitimacy of representing the moral, Catholic majority.

<sup>7</sup> In her research of the Christian right, Jennifer S. Butler (2006) noted, for example, that the Christian right social movement uses liberal procedures and rights, supported by human rights treaties and declarations, to advance conservative and restrictive policies. Cynthia Burack (2008) demonstrated that the Christian right uses the notion of pluralism, that diversity is a social good which prevents dominance of one particular idea, for its own political purposes against the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

## Discussion

### *The Expansion of Political Opportunity Structure: Lowered Referendum Requirements*

The Croatian Constitution was amended in advance to Croatia's accession to the European Union on 1 July 2013. Originally, the Constitution required that more than half of all registered voters vote in favor of the referendum question in order for the referendum to be valid. Political elites, being realistic that in a climate of significant voter apathy, the turnout would not satisfy that requirement, abolished the threshold for a nation-wide referendum (Butković, 2017; Gardašević, 2015; Horvat-Vuković, 2014). Moreover, the Constitution contains a provision that the Parliament needs to call a referendum on proposals to amend the Constitution when ten percent of the total electorate of the country request so and that decisions made in the referendum are binding.

Željka Markić, the religious-political movement's informal leader, stated that the initiative's activity was motivated by the French movement "The Protest for Everyone" (*La Manif Pour Tous*), who organized a massive march in Paris against same-sex marriage in November 2012. Markić argued: "having learned from the events in France, where millions of people have come out to the streets to send a message to President Holland that they do not accept equating the same-sex relationships and marriage, we think that it is good to resolve such an important issue peacefully, through the democratic process open to all Croatian citizens" (Ciglencečki, 2013).

The interviews with other representatives of the religious-political movement confirmed our starting assumption that they recognized the change in the referendum legislation as an opportunity structure. One of the respondents said that one local referendum<sup>8</sup> served as inspiration. Realizing that requirements for local referenda are much harsher than those for a national one, the religious-political actors decided to seize the opportunity, knowing the success in referendum both legitimizes their claims and makes them legally binding, as well as hard to overturn. The movement relied on the referendum as a model of participatory democracy, knowing that citizens would recognize it as a response to diminished opportunities

<sup>8</sup> The civic initiative "Srđ is Ours" (*Srđ je naš*) mobilized in April 2013 the residents of Dubrovnik to oppose the construction of a golf resort on the plateau Srđ above Dubrovnik, by calling for a local referendum. Though the initiative managed to collect a sufficient number of supporting signatures to call for the referendum, the referendum failed, since less than 50 percent of voters in Dubrovnik voted. Namely, only 31.5% of voters showed up at polling stations when the referendum was held, whereas the Law on Referendum set a threshold of more than a half of the total number of registered voters.

to participate in the policy-making processes. The movement thus recognized the niche of political dissatisfaction of voters, who were demonstrating their distrust in mainstream political institutions by electing not to vote at various elections.<sup>9</sup> This provided another opportunity for success of the referendum initiative, as they needed to mobilize just a certain percentage of citizens willing to cast their vote, as there was no threshold for the results to be binding.

The citizen initiative “In the Name of the Family” managed to collect 749,316<sup>10</sup> signatures in a two-week period in May 2013. The initiative was supported by conservative political parties (both parliamentary and non-parliamentary ones), the Catholic Church and the majority of other religious communities. The ruling left-wing coalition opposed the amendment, along with numerous liberal human rights organizations and the majority of Croatian media. The Constitutional Court did not discuss the constitutionality of the referendum question, because the Croatian Parliament did not request it from the Court.

The constitutional referendum was held on 1 December 2013 and 37.9% of eligible voters voted. The State Election Commission announced that 65.87% voted Yes, 33.51% voted No, and 0.57% of ballots were invalid.

However, this was not the only referendum initiative by the citizens’ initiative “In the Name of the Family”. The political nature of its activism was confirmed first in 2014, once the initiative started to collect signatures for a referendum to change the electoral system, and then in 2015 when “In the Name of the Family – Project Homeland” (*U ime obitelji – projekt Domovina*) registered as a political party and run in parliamentary elections that year, though without securing any seat. In 2014 the initiative attempted to change both the Constitution and electoral legislation in order to introduce preferential voting, so that voters, and not party leaders, would have a dominant influence on the candidates elected. Under the slogan “Let Us Elect Deputies by Name” (*Birajmo zastupnike imenom i prezimenom*), the petition was signed by 380,649 voters,<sup>11</sup> almost half the number the initiative gathered for the first referendum. The lower number of citizens supporting this initiative can be explained by the fact that all parliamentary political parties, including the largest,

<sup>9</sup> For example, the voter turnout at the local elections held in May 2013 was merely 13.55% in average (State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia, 2013). The voter turnout at the European Parliament elections held in May 2014 was 25.24% (State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia, 2014a). The last presidential elections held in December 2014, however, witness an increase of participation, as the turnout was 47.12% in the first round and 59.05% in the second round (State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia, 2014b).

<sup>10</sup> They needed just above 400,000 signatures for the initiative to be successful.

<sup>11</sup> The Constitutional Court found in December 2014 the initiative had not managed to collect a sufficient number of signatures to initiate the second referendum, as the Court established that in order to call for a referendum 404,252 signatures were required.

the Croatian Democratic Union, which was openly supportive of the first referendum initiative, were against the second initiative. However, popular support for the initiative's idea signaled political parties that citizens do favour preferential voting. The amendments of electoral legislation from February 2015 resulted in letting voters endorse one particular candidate from the party list in 2015 and 2016 parliamentary elections.

Other opportunity structures recognized by the religious-political movement were the public's high level of dissatisfaction with mainstream politics, and worsened economic situation. In a country that has widespread corruption<sup>12</sup> and substantial distrust in political institutions,<sup>13</sup> people turned to new forms of political activism that appears un-compromised and voices concerns over traditional values. The lack of trust in political institutions puts at risk the willingness of citizens to back new public policies (in the Croatian context those were the centre-left government's Minister of Public Administration announcements on the alignment of same-sex couples' rights and responsibilities to those of any other married couple, and the introduction of health and civic education in the school curriculum). In addition, an on-going economic crisis, which in the case of Croatia lasted for more than six years, and the austerity measures that followed, contributed to the unpopularity of the government.

### *The Construction of Contention: Framing the Family in Danger*

Tarrow (2011: 120) argues that the social movements "do not invent forms of contention out of whole cloth but instead innovate within and around culturally embedded repertoires". The religious-political movement had managed to gain support for its goal by using the concept of family, not heterosexual marriage, as their central frame. Our interviewee adds: "this was a matter of representation of values of the whole society. I think that people were not thinking only about marriage, as a definition. They didn't want to interpret it as a mere legal scope, but as a fight for what you believe in and what proved to be the right thing throughout history. This means that the family is the best place to raise children. Unfortunately, legal options were such, sense and simplicity in the presentation requires simplicity in question."

The literature on social movements suggests emotions might play a key role in mobilization processes (Aminzade and McAdam, 2001; Goodwin, Jasper, and

<sup>12</sup> Data of the 2013 Global Corruption Barometer, a public opinion survey on views and experiences of corruption, revealed that 72% of respondents in Croatia felt that political parties were corrupt or extremely corrupt, whereas 63% of respondents held that the parliament was corrupt or extremely corrupt (Transparency International, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Political parties, the parliament and the government are the least trusted institutions according to many recent surveys (Budak and Rajh, 2012).

Polletta, 2001; Summers-Effler, 2002). Indeed, citizens who expressed their support for the initiative were mobilized through the use of emotions, as the initiative systematically framed saving the endangered family and endangered values as a goal of their activism. It was visible from choosing the initiative's name ("In the Name of the Family"), through using arguments that the family is the best place for raising children, to claiming that children who live in families with one biological parent or with homosexual parents are necessarily sexually, emotionally and physically abused.

At the outset of the initiative's activities, its informal leader, Željka Markić, stated that the referendum has been chosen as a means of action, "in order to ensure that something so fundamental for a society as marriage, and thus the family, and all the rights arising from marriage, such as the adoption of children, cannot be changed just by changing the Family Act or any other law" (Stanić, 2013). Moreover, Markić repeatedly stated that referendum was chosen as the initiative's activity since the organizers expected "the referendum to ensure constitutional protection of marriage as a union between a woman and a man, and to show to the politicians, both in the present and subsequent Governments, what is Croatian society's view on such important issues as marriage, family and adoption" (Ciglenečki, 2013).

Part of the public was most likely deceived by the alleged scientific data the movement provided, including through public lectures by Judith Reisman, an American academic and social conservative activist who denounces the work of sociologist Alfred Kinsey. In her lectures in February 2013, delivered at the Faculty of Political Science and the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, as well as in the Croatian Parliament, Reisman attacked sex education and gay rights as an anti-family and pedophile-friendly agenda. Željka Markić often asserted that so-called Texas Research proved that the children living with homosexual parents are "on average at a significant disadvantage when compared to children raised by the intact family of their married, biological mother and father" (Regnerus, 2012). The latter research has been denounced by the Croatian Sociological Association, which stated this academic research was incorrect and biased (Croatian Sociological Association, 2013). But the members of the religious-political movement were undeterred. Vice John Batarelo, for example, stated that "it has been empirically proven that where you have a happy marriage and a happy family – there children are more successful, happier, more ambitious" (Hudelist, 2013).

Moreover, the initiative wisely used emotions, in public addresses and appearances of its leaders as well as in its campaign (e.g. by using a silhouette of a family with mother and father holding hands with their children as the central logo of the referendum campaign, or by picturing a happy young family with a small child as the web identity of the "GROZD" association). An example of emotional manipula-



tion was a poster of a girl who allegedly fell asleep in the drawing of her deceased mother, she drew herself on the street. The media discovered that the message the picture asserted was fake, as it was an artistic photo taken by an Iranian photographer of one of her nieces (V.Š. and R.J., 2013).

*Networks and Mobilizing Structures: Interconnectedness of Conservative Actors*

Tarrow (2011: 123-124) argues that it is possible to distinguish among three different meanings of movement organization: the organization of collective action at the point of contact with opponents usually controlled by one formal organization or a coalition of organizations; the advocacy organization which either promotes or resists social change; and “the connective structures or interpersonal networks that link leaders and followers, centers and peripheries, and different parts of a movement sector with one another, permitting coordination and aggregation, and allowing movements to persist even when formal organization is lacking”. In addition, he argues that social movements depend on three levels of organization: “the social networks at their base, the organization of collective action, and some degree of formal organization” (*ibid.*: 183). The third meaning of movement organization, i.e. the one that asserts the interpersonal networks between movement leaders, as well as the first level of movement organization, i.e. the social network, constitute the main connective structure of the Croatian religious-political movement. Representatives of liberal civil society gathered in the campaign “Citizens vote against!” argued that behind the citizens’ initiative “In the Name of the Family” is actually “one marginal political option”, i.e. the conservative political party “Hrast” (Gradani glasaju PROTIV, 2013). Similar messages were voiced in articles on portals and in magazines that were not sympathetic to the idea of the constitutional referendum (R.I., 2013).

It is impossible not to acknowledge that the movement is represented by just a few individuals that reappear in a dozen conservative civil society organizations, sometimes even being formally connected to the institutions of the Catholic Church. Željka Markić, as an informal leader of “In the Name of the Family”, was the former president of the political party “Hrast”. Ladislav Ilčić, president of the party “Hrast” at the moment of the referendum, was the former president of the civil society organization “GROZD”. Krešimir Planinić, who is the legal councilor of the citizen’s initiative “In the Name of the Family” is, through his wife, associated with the organization “Mary’s Meals”<sup>14</sup>. Krešimir Miletić, at the time associated with the association “Vigilare”, is also the president of the “Association for Promoting Family

<sup>14</sup> The civil society organization Mary’s Meals Croatia (*Marijini obroci*) is a branch of the international charity organization Mary’s Meals “that aims at providing a proper meal to the children in the world’s poorest countries every school day”.

Values ‘Blessed Alojzije Stepinac’”, a member of the “Croatian Marriage and Family Alliance CRO-BIOS”, and a former member of the party “Hrast”. Vice Batarelo, who is the president of the association “Vigilare”, used to be head of the Office for the Pastoral Care of the Family of the Archdiocese of Zagreb. S. Bartulica, who is the president of the citizens’ association “Center for the Renewal of Culture”, used to serve as advisor to the former President Ivo Josipović on religious issues.

The interviewees from the conservative civil society organizations claimed they had not been initially coordinated and acquainted with each other. On the contrary, they argued that shared values and interest brought them together, and as a result of that they are acquaintances and friends today. Indeed, interpersonal networks that exist among the movement’s leaders (a dozen of associations and civil society organizations often share personnel in governing boards and bodies) are the driving force behind the movement’s identity development.

The interviewees from liberal civil society argued the leaders of the religious-political movement are closely related to the Catholic Church. However, the interviewees from the conservative civil society organizations repeatedly articulated that the nature of their initiative is non-confessional and apolitical, but nevertheless seeks partners across religious boundaries, and presented themselves as acting across religious divides. The proclamation of a non-confessional character of the initiative managed to increase participation opportunities to almost all religious communities. Such an outlook indeed had a strategic effect, as the initiative managed to mobilize support for a referendum on the definition of marriage of the Catholic Church, but also of other major religious communities.

### *Repertoire of Contention: the Role and Power of Law and Politics*

The Croatian religious-political movement uses the rhetoric of human rights, acts within the institutional framework, and relies on democratic tools such as the referendum. It transmitted conservative values mainly through institutional means, primarily through the attempt to influence the drafting of legislation and by addressing judicial institutions, predominantly the Constitutional Court, for a judicial review of the constitutionality of legislative provisions, but also, as it was shown above, by initiating the referendum. Such a repertoire of contention constitutes an exception to traditional social movement activities. The Croatian case demonstrates the ability to play within the existing framework and to use its norms strategically.

For example, the movement relied twice already on the institution of the civic referendum; and it addressed the Constitutional Court to decide on the conformity of regulations with the Constitution and to review the constitutionality of legislation. Reliance on the courts and referenda presents an organized effort to resist changes in the structure of the society. However, if law is to serve as an instru-

ment of social change, it necessarily requires the engagement of legal professionals who are associated with the movement and thus, as our interviewee points out, “(...) gaining credibility and seriousness. They have shown that they are serious people who acknowledge the rule of law – they are institutionalists; they respect the system and use everything at their disposal, but at the same time indicate that they want to change the system, the game rules.” By assuring the involvement of legal professionals, this relatively cheap repertoire of contention which legitimized the claims of the movement, not only before the authorities, but also in the wider public, increased the power of the Croatian religious-political movement.

## **Conclusion**

Social movements challenge the behavior or the legitimacy of specific social or political actors by engaging people who wish to redirect power. When political interactions occur between authorities and social movements that wish to impose traditional or religious values by challenging the political structure, the nature of such movements is religious-political. At the outset of this research we detected that the Croatian religious-political movement shares a number of features with social conservative movements arising and acting globally. The Croatian religious-political movement, similarly to its counterparts abroad, uses religious identity and values as a fuel for social change. Subsequently, by analyzing the roots, the evolution, and the goals of the religious-political movement that promotes social conservative values in Croatia, we established a relation between contentious politics and social change.

Our central goal was to reveal how the religious-political movement managed to utilize opportunity structures to leverage political power. We detected three distinct opportunities that were available to the movement. First, a crucial change in the referendum legislation, which generated a favorable political context for the religious-political movement to seize a political opportunity. The second opportunity was the deep distrust in mainstream politics, as well as the economic crisis, as instigators of change that were conducive to the claims of the religious-political movement. Supporters of the religious-political movement perceived it as an uncorrupted actor. Third, the leaders of “In the Name of the Family” had been stressing that their initiative was not Catholic, but was non-confessional, and that they are acting merely as citizens concerned about the society’s moral downfall.

The theoretical approach we opted for required the identification of the movement’s social and political adversaries, and the change in the structure of political opportunity; the movement’s framing processes; the movement’s network and organization; and a repertoire of contention that used referencing to law. We established that contentious politics can be used for the positioning of a novel political actor. We demonstrated that the movement organized the contention through the frame

of the endangered traditional family and values, though the family was not a matter of constitutional referendum at all. The movement's capacity for contention was strengthened by an impressive organization of volunteers and supporters who were willing to collect the signatures needed to initiate the referendum. The central organizational strength was positioned in the closely connected movement's leadership. The movement's leadership secured not only the internal organization of the activities, but also represented the movement's claims in media and in public. Although the interpersonal networks of the leaders served as the basic organizational structure of the religious-political movement, the support of some political parties, as well as of the Catholic Church, significantly contributed to the organizational strengths of the movement in the cycle of contention described above. The leadership had opted to use the strategy of referring to legislative provisions, particularly those on human rights, their interpretation, and to address judicial institutions (particularly the Constitutional Court) as the chief repertoire of contention. By using legal discourse as the repertoire of contention, the social movement entrepreneurs managed to position the movement as a credible and legitimate new political actor.

Groups and initiatives that advocate socially conservative and religious values have been on the rise both in Europe and in Croatia. They act in response to legislative amendments that "threaten" traditional family values by legalizing same-sex marriage, or by recognizing the right to adoption for homosexual partners, or by introducing educational curricula that are deemed contrary to parental value systems. As such, this is an issue that will be a major political cleavage in contemporary societies.

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