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**We are civil society! Strategic practices  
of the Croatian Feminist Movement in response  
to growing conservatism**

Intersections. EEJSP

10(2): 132–150.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i2.1273>

<https://intersections.tk.hu>

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### **Abstract**

The study expands on the current debate about post-socialist civil society and social movements, specifically in Croatia. Taking the strategic practices of the Croatian feminist movement in relation to the right to abortion in the last decade as the research unit, it employs the conception of post-socialist civil societies, focuses on the practices of civil society, and differentiates between contentious and compliant practices regardless of the form of organisation or engagement. The study examines whether the strategic practices of the Croatian feminist movement have changed in the last decade and, if so, which factors have played the most significant role. The study is based on a critical content analysis of interviews with the actors themselves and draws on their interpretations of the strategic practices. It finds that the Croatian feminist movement has, in the last decade, rethought the dominant compliant strategic practices inherent in the nonprofit sector and the organisations within it and has turned more towards contentious practices. The research described in the paper finds that there are three dominant factors behind the rethinking of the strategic practice: two external – the growing prominence of the conservative movement and the new expected abortion law – and one internal: a generational shift.

**Keywords:** post-socialist civil society; strategic practice; feminist movement; Croatia; right to abortion

## **1 Introduction**

The 2013 referendum on the definition of the family, initiated by the neoconservative civic organisation In the Name of the Family, was a crucial event regarding the growing influence of the neoconservative movement in Croatia (Petričušić et al., 2017). Its goal was accomplished, and the legal regulation of marriage remained purely heteronormative (Juroš et al., 2020, pp. 1523–1524). This event marked a change, with new arguments and strategies entering the debate in Croatia. The conservative movement abandoned its morally oriented argumentation and shifted to framing its agenda in terms of human or civil

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rights, democracy, the promotion of pluralism and, last but not least, arguments based on science (Juroš et al., 2020). The literature uses the term 'neoconservative movement' to refer to the change in conservative mobilisation over the last decade. Since the 1990s, civil society has been perceived as the domain of liberal, secular initiatives and organisations. Many intellectuals who opposed the ruling authoritarian conservative HDZ party found a place in the civil sector where they can hide and realise themselves (Petričušić, 2015, p. 26). Over the last decade, voices challenging the status quo have started to emerge, with disagreement that civil society involves only the liberal stream. At the same time, several neo-conservative civic initiatives that classified themselves as part of civil society began to appear. This change was cemented in 2017 when the National Foundation for Civil Society Development awarded grants to the first organisation categorised as a part of neoconservative civil society (Sutlović, 2019, p. 40).

Over the last decade, we have seen an escalation of culture wars across Europe. Neo-conservative movements around the world have received increasing attention within social science studies (Kuhar & Patternote, 2017; Datta, 2017). Several authors have analysed the development, form, instruments and strategies of the neoconservative movement in Croatia (Petričušić et al., 2017; Čepo, 2017; Juroš et al., 2020; Lavizzari & Siročić, 2022). Contrariwise, my research aims to contribute to the debate on the Croatian feminist movement and to complement pre-existing studies about post-Yugoslav feminism. Branka Galić (2018) and Jadranka Anić (2015) focus on the culture wars and the rise of clericalism in Croatian society and the role of (religious) feminist mobilisation in it. Leda Sutlović and Jill Irvine (2019) focus their attention on the changing dynamics of the women's movement in relation to broader political processes from the 1990s to the economic crisis of 2008. Zorica Siročić (2015), who has produced a comparative analysis of the women's movement in Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia between 1978 and 2013, argues in her study (2019) about the particularities of the feminist mobilisation of the millennial generation in the post-Yugoslav space, similarly to Leandra Bias (2019), that research on contemporary feminist movements (since 2000) in the post-Yugoslav space is limited.

In her study, Sanja Kajinić (2015) traces the activity of the Croatian women's movement from the 1990s until 2013, when domestic violence was removed from the Criminal Code as a criminal offence. She suggests that the movement's significant diversification, which led to positive changes even at the legislative level, may have been dampened by enormous pressure from the state after 2013 (Kajinić, 2015, p. 85). My research builds on Kajinić's work and thus updates the analysis of the contemporary Croatian feminist movement since 2013, which also includes the study of Josip Šarić (2022), who analysed the #metoo movement in the Croatian context.

My research draws on the work of Leda Sutlović (2019), who aims to assess changes in gender politics and the state's shifting position in relation to neoconservative and women's movements. Among other areas, she examines the impact of the neoconservative movement and its mobilisation on the women's movement in the region and the changes in their strategies; my research intends to focus on gaps in this field. The study traces the response of the feminist movement to the growing conservatism in Croatian society and to the neoconservative movement as reflected in its strategic practices in relation to the specific case of abortion rights. A crucial research question is whether, according

to the actors themselves, the strategic practices of the feminist movement have changed in the last decade and, if so, regarding which factors and how. I chose the topic of the strategic practices of the Croatian feminist movement in relation to abortion rights in the last decade for a number of reasons. The transformation that accompanied the Croatian War of Independence dramatically affected all spheres of society, including the structure of civil society. The feminist movement itself has a vibrant history in the former Yugoslavia region and a visible continuity until the present – the evolution of civil society can be traced through the changing form of this movement and the strategies it has deployed. Another reason for choosing this case is the approach that the Croatian feminist movement has adopted regarding the abortion issue, which is supported by all initiatives across the movement. The practices used by the feminist movement to address the conflict under study are diverse, and given the involvement of several organisations, a wide array of strategies are employed. Finally, scrutiny of the issue is relevant given the frequent thematisation of the right to abortion in Croatian society. Currently, the whole of society is awaiting a new law that guarantees the right to abortion, which will replace the Yugoslav law from 1978 that is still in force. This waiting period opens opportunities for new practices and the transformation of the feminist movement and the strategies it employs, but it also instils a fear of yet tighter restrictions and further threats. Efforts to impose further restrictions or a full abortion ban have periodically occurred since the 1990s. The issue is taboo and stigmatised in Croatian society; conscientious objection legislation, in force since 2003, is referred to by the vast majority of gynaecologists (Håkansson et al., 2021) who refuse to perform abortions following the conscience clause. Access to abortion is hampered not only by the limited number of hospitals where abortion can be performed but also by the high price women must pay for the procedure itself and the travel costs involved.

The study first introduces the concept of post-socialist civil society research, whose principles and approaches are applied to the subject matter. The subsequent section describes the analytical method used in the research and outlines the data collection and analysis process. The final section discusses the findings and the conclusions of the study.

## 2 Theoretical background to post-socialist civil society research

The Croatian feminist movement can be understood as a part of post-socialist civil society. Therefore, the study applies post-socialist civil society research, as proposed by Bojan Baća (2022), who developed a differentiated model of civil society to that created by Tsveta Petrova and Sidney Tarrow (2007), which differentiates between transactional and participatory activism. Baća (2022) introduces a new perspective that takes the practices of civil society, which he distinguishes as contentious and compliant, as a research unit, better capturing the concept of post-socialist civil society. The notion of contentious practices is part of a conceptualisation that encompasses all kinds of extra-institutional participation (Baća, 2022, p. 2), regardless of the form of organisation or engagement. Unlike contentious politics, it includes collective actions that direct their claims at the government and those not directed at official political actors (Baća, 2022, p. 14). His conception of post-socialist

civil society involves a shift from a normative prescription to an analytical description (Baća, 2022, p. 15). Thus, it is not subjected to the dominant normative conceptions about civil society and does not exclude actors or engagements who do not fulfil its criteria (Baća, 2022, p. 12). What differentiates contentious from compliant practices is the attitude towards conducting, initiating and settling disputes (Baća, 2022, p. 14). Compliant practices use formal and institutional strategies to resolve disputes, as opposed to contentious practices, which are characterised by strategies that reject institutional forms of action (Baća, 2022, p. 14). Thus, my research focuses on the practices of the feminist movement, which combine a variety of strategies that can be classified as compliant and contentious practices.

Applying Western conceptualisations often results in analyses that reveal the weakness of post-socialist civil society and the low level of individual civil participation. However, doing so also marginalises the specific measures and conditions inherent to the local civil society in which actors mobilise (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007; Čisař et al., 2011; Gagyı, 2015) as well as the second dimension of participation, which is relational, focused on relations among transactional organisations and between these organisations and public officials (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007, p. 78).

Petrova and Tarrow (2007) differentiate between participatory and transactional activism in the post-socialist context. They understand participatory activism as ‘individual and group participation in civic life, interest group activities, voting, and elections’ (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007, p. 79) and transactional as ‘the ties—enduring and temporary—among organised nonstate actors and between them and political parties, power holders, and other institutions’ (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007, p. 79). Baća’s (2022, pp. 12–13) conceptualisation goes beyond this thesis of a strong civic sector and opposes the notion of political participation, which ignores the distinction between compliant practices of transactional activism and contentious practices of participatory activism. Focusing on (shared) practices allows one to zoom in on their diversity, regardless of the form of the organisation or engagement or recipient of the claims. This conceptualisation better reflects the social reality of the post-socialist region, which stands out from the mainstream trend in the examination of post-socialist civil society, which is often reduced to NGOs only (Baća, 2022, p. 16). Another problem with the application of Western trends in the study of post-socialist civil society is the prevailing understanding of civil society as a normative concept. As a result, post-socialist civil society is understood as an ethical project that promotes liberal principles through democratic instruments. Organisations that are a legacy of the socialist era or various forms of action that are labelled ‘uncivil’ (Kopecký & Mudde, 2003) and fail to conform to the normative concept are marginalised (Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2017, p. 3).

Examination of the strategic practices of the Croatian feminist movement using Baća’s analytical framework might lead to the conclusion that, even though the Croatian feminist movement takes the form of NGOs, their practices often go beyond compliant ones. In the specific case of the abortion rights controversy, we observe that broad coalitions are formed involving formal or informal organisations. These coalitions share strategies that can be classified as compliant or contentious practices.

### 3 Background to the Croatian feminist movement

The Croatian feminist movement has a rich history from the Yugoslav era to the present. Feminism has been labelled a Western ideology since the socialist era (Bluhm et al., 2021), but this narrative homogenises the global feminist movement and overlooks local particularities. The following section maps individual events and processes that have contributed to the contemporary form of Croatian civil society, including the role of women in it, with an emphasis on the feminist movement's strategic practices that address the conflict under scrutiny.

### 4 From global transformations to a post-Yugoslav experience

A milestone that affected the form and structure of the Croatian feminist movement was the breakdown of Yugoslavia and the transformation from socialism to liberal capitalism. The process coincided with an armed conflict (Zarkov, 2003), and this accelerated certain processes. In Yugoslavia, during the period of war, women also played a significant role in the nationalist ideology, which began to perceive women primarily as mothers responsible for child-rearing (Irvine, 2013, p. 1). The conservative backlash became manifest through the rising influence of the Croatian Catholic church, going hand in hand with the ideas of the conservative party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), concerning the need to reinforce the traditionalising narrative and the development of the neoconservative movement (Čepo, 2017, p. 18). In the early years of the armed conflict, the feminist movement grew more robustly owing to the increase in the number of women joining the peace movement and the aid provided to women affected by the war on a massive scale (Zarkov, 2003, p. 3). In post-war Croatia, with its socioeconomic plight, the feminist movement joined in with efforts to provide help to women and thus created space for direct emancipation (Popović, 2017, pp. 68-70). Despite President Tudjman's inimical conservative politics, the movement found plenty of opportunities to act, which resulted in the development of networks and coalitions associated with various groups and organisations. Many see this phase as the time of the emergence of a women's emancipation-oriented grassroots movement (Irvine, 2013).

The feminist movement initiated a protest campaign, which resulted in the coalition successfully collecting 20,000 signatures against a proposed legislative restriction on abortion. This was in response to the potential introduction of legislation following the National Demographic Development Program in 1996. The campaign achieved its goals, and eventually, the law ceased to be discussed at the state level (Shiffman, 2002, pp. 636–637). Partisan politics and ideology, to which particular ruling parties subscribe, determine to a large extent the responses, selected strategies and tactics that social movements employ. Responses also vary depending on location. Císař and his co-authors (2011) point to a trend in the development of social movements in East Europe, which suggests that the more left-wing or right-wing politics become institutionalised, the less visible social movements support the same views by taking to the streets (Hutter et al., 2018, p. 326) – a phenomenon that can also be observed in the Croatian case. The year 2000 saw the victory of the Social

Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP, also enabled by a broad coalition with the feminist movement). This party also brought about changes in the structure and form of civil society (i.e., the feminist movement) in Croatia (Irvine, 2013, p. 6). A period of robust advocacy campaigning ensued for the feminist movement: it professionalised, a competitive environment emerged, and feminist organisations shifted from an anti-government position to that of the government's ally (Kesić, 2007, pp. 71–72). On the other hand, the neoconservative movement took advantage of the change and succeeded in strengthening under SDP rule. At that time, the Croatian neoconservative movement aligned with HDZ, which was in opposition, as well as made use of the rise of populism identified in the global political context (Čepo, 2017).

During the preparatory phase preceding the country's accession to the European Union, the rapid development of transactional activism occurred since the accessibility of new sources of funding brought about a change in strategies and tactics, and more radical measures were replaced by tactics associated with liberal feminism, such as advocacy campaigning and lobbying (Siročić, 2019, p. 2). The very process was accompanied by NGOisation (Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2013), which involved the bureaucratisation and professionalisation of emerging organisations in the nonprofit sector and was reliant upon financial support and Western grants.

The arrival of the economic crisis in 2008 influenced the form and strategies used by civil society actors throughout post-socialist Europe, including the Balkans (Zunneberg, 2019). The crisis further fuelled the already profound mistrust of state and political institutions, often ravaged by corruption scandals (Sutlović, 2019, p. 34). Many people all over Europe felt a deepening sentiment that neoliberal democratic institutions and their representatives were failing to keep citizens' rights and best interests in mind, mobilising many to join mushrooming protest actions (Vasiljević, 2018). This process, referred to by many as the 'crisis of liberal democracy' (including socioeconomic, political and cultural crises), incited a conservative backlash throughout Europe (Kováts, 2017, p. 185). Austerity measures and the results of the economic crisis led to student strikes in 2009 (Sutlović, 2019, p. 34), radicalising many from this generation. Even more critical and radical positions emerged within the radical wing of the women's (feminist) movement, which shifted from addressing identity politics to socioeconomic problems and issues (Siročić, 2015, p. 50).

#### 4 Research design

For the study, I applied qualitative methods of data collection and analysis and critical content analysis (Johnson et al., 2016), which allows for a thorough examination of the field with an orientation towards the attitudes and perceptions of different actors in the feminist movement and emphasises the broader context in which the research subject is situated. I aimed to understand the behaviour of the actors and strategic practices in relation to the specific situations they find themselves in and what these very choices mean for them. This approach does not mean isolating the issue, but it does include embedding it in a network of relationships with an emphasis on external influences (Boudon, 1986, pp. 55–56). I also draw on supplementary materials available on websites and in the documents collected during the research stage. The documents served to supplement and clarify the respondents' individual statements.

The study is based on a data set consisting of 15 semi-structured interviews with respondents from the local feminist movement; three were conducted in 2020, before the pandemic, and the other twelve in 2022, which were used as the main source of data. The time gap was due to the inability to travel abroad. The interviews from 2020 were essential for the initial mapping of the research problem and the subsequent narrowing of the research field. The selection of organisations for the study was determined by their explicitly feminist identity and involvement in the debate about abortion rights, the use of diverse strategies, or their commitment to generational or ideological diversity. For the purposes of tracking strategic practices and the impetus for changing strategies, it was important to categorise respondents according to their experiences. I distinguish between the first generation, who were active even in the 1990s (six respondents), and the second generation, which includes those who became active within the last decade (nine respondents).

**Table 1** Identification of Respondents

Organisation name	Foundation year	Place of activity	Year of interview	Identification	Generation of activists	Ideological identity of interviewee
Zelena akcija <sup>1</sup>	1990	Zagreb	2022	Z	2nd generation	Ecofeminism, queerfeminism
Rosa <sup>2</sup>	1992	Zagreb	2022	R	1st generation	Antimilitarist feminism
Ekumenska inicijativa žena <sup>3</sup>	1992	Croatia	2022	E	1st generation	Religious feminism
Babe <sup>4</sup>	1994	Zagreb	2022	B	1st generation	Nonspecific
Centar za ženske studije <sup>5</sup>	1995	Zagreb	2022	C	2nd generation	Nonspecific
Centar za ženske studije	–	–	2020	K	2nd generation	Marxist feminism
Cesi <sup>6</sup>	1997	Zagreb	2022	CS	1st generation	Nonspecific
Mama centar <sup>7</sup>	1999	Zagreb	2020	M	2nd generation	Marxist feminism
Prostor rodne i medijske kulture K-zona <sup>8</sup>	2011	Zagreb	2022	V	2nd generation	Nonspecific
Udruga pariter <sup>9</sup>	2014	Rijeka	2022	U	2nd generation	Anti capitalist feminism
Faktiv <sup>10</sup>	2016	Zagreb	2020	F	2nd generation	Anticapitalist feminism
U dobroj vjeri <sup>11</sup>	2016	Zagreb	2022	L	1st generation	Religious feminism

Table 1 (continued)

Organisation name	Foundation year	Place of activity	Year of interview	Identification	Generation of activists	Ideological identity of interviewee
U dobroj vjeri	–	–	2022	D	2nd generation	Religious feminism
Platforma za reproduktivnu pravdu <sup>12</sup>	2017	Croatia	–		–	–
Hrabre sestre <sup>13</sup>	2020	Croatia	2022	H	1st generation	Secular feminism
Researcher and independent activist	–	Zagreb	2022	J	2nd generation	Queer feminism

<sup>1</sup> <https://zelena-akcija.hr/en/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.czzr.hr/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>3</sup> <https://eiz.hr/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>4</sup> <https://babe.hr/en/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>5</sup> <https://zenstud.hr/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cesi.hr/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>7</sup> <https://mi2.hr/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>8</sup> <https://voxfeminae.net/udruga-k-zona/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>9</sup> <https://pariter.hr/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/fAKTIV/about\\_details?locale=cs\\_CZ/](https://www.facebook.com/fAKTIV/about_details?locale=cs_CZ/) Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.inbonafide.org/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.reproduktivna-pravda.hr/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

<sup>13</sup> <https://hrabra.com/> Accessed: 28-02-2024.

Following a thorough analysis of the context in which the feminist movement and the conflict that has formed around the right to abortion is embedded, I approached more than 20 feminist organisations relevant to the abortion issue in an attempt to represent their diversity. When selecting the organisations to approach, I did the following. During the mapping phase of the research, I identified the main actors of the local feminist movement. Next, I searched social media and websites for organisers of major relevant events, whom I approached via email to ask for interviews and recommendations about relevant actors. Building on the initial responses from organisation representatives, I obtained additional recommendations for approaching particular individuals. On completion of the primary data collection, I used open coding to assign codes to each section of the text. I identified specific strategic practices used by the Croatian feminist movement and changes to them over the last decade. The interviews were preceded by obtaining informed consent to record and work with the data and a promise to anonymise the respondents.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UKFHS/618998/2023; the number of statements: 072023/Wil



## 5 The Croatian feminist movement as part of the right-to-abortion controversy and its dynamics over the last decade

Section 3, 'Background to the Croatian feminist movement,' describes the broader context in which the feminist movement evolved, not only in terms of the controversy surrounding the right to abortion but also as regards the developing civil society in the region. The feminist movement's limited use of contentious practices (as used in the feminist movement in the 1990s) and its dedicated efforts involving advocacy campaigning, lobbying and other compliant strategies, all of which followed the transformation, were measures leading towards the accession to the European Union and the receipt of financial support from abroad. The economic crisis determined the shape and the strategies used by social movements all over the world. This experience in the Croatian case laid the ground for more radical voices to emerge that criticised the liberal approach that the feminist movement had adopted and clamoured to accentuate socioeconomic issues.

## 6 Analysis of the feminist movement's strategic practice

The paper understands the Croatian feminist movement as a network of organisations and initiatives which openly identify themselves with feminism and are visible in the conflict connected to the topic of abortion in public. Contrasting the diverse views on pornography, trans people's rights and the generation gap, which I aim to examine later, along with the variety of issues and preferred strategies, the approach to the abortion issue unites the feminist movement as a whole. The Croatian feminist movement is robust. In terms of structure, the feminist movement mainly consists of NGOs, and according to the respondents, this feature stems from the transformation as well as from the considerable support and influence of the West. The repertoire of strategies employed by particular organisations or initiatives varies significantly, including direct aid offered to women who seek abortions, information dissemination on websites, research and brochure publications, educational workshops and discussions for the general public. Organisations with greater visibility deploy compliant practices, such as advocacy campaigning or lobbying, and they are an integral part of open panels on abortion as well as actively advocate their agenda to the government. Formal organisations actively collaborate with informal ones, forming broad coalitions in which various repertoires of compliant or contentious practices are intertwined – for example, rallies, demonstrations, and direct action in the form of counterprotests or happenings and performances held in the streets.

Some common features of the Croatian feminist movement must be mentioned. Currently, the movement is antinationalist and antifascist. Secularism, inherent to feminism, was stressed by all the respondents, and the Croatian feminist movement shares this feature with transnational feminism. However, due to Catholicism's dominance in the country and the tight relations between the Catholic Church and the state, there is a more pressing need to emphasise this properly and, in this way, to explicitly oppose the Church and the linked neoconservative movement. The interviewees perceive the feminist movement as a political actor that politicises the conflict studied in this paper and articulates claims and goals targeted at the state but in the direction of the public.

## 7 History and strategic practices surrounding the right to abortion from the feminist movement's perspective

What follows is an analysis of the strategic practices of the feminist movement, the aim of which is to demonstrate major changes in the strategic practices of the movement and their causes. The selected examples and events were identified by the respondents themselves. After a significant change in the strategies of the global neoconservative movement starting in 2010 that became apparent in Croatia when the neoconservative movement initiated the referendum on the family, the feminist movement was taken by surprise and in a state of shock: 'We didn't react at that time. And then we noticed that there were more and more problems in hospitals' (R).

## 8 The March for Life is not all there is: From compliant to contentious strategic practices

In 2016, a network of neoconservative organisations led by *U ime obitelji* (In the Name of the Family) held the first March for Life, and since then the protest has continued. Between 2016 and 2022, the feminist movement has responded by blocking the march. The choice of this confrontational strategy (an example of a contentious practice) was by no means random. The respondents frequently pointed to a desire to gain media visibility for the pro-choice position as the main reason for this choice of strategy: 'I think it is more important for the media to see these counter strikes to the protest' (C). Respondent L mentioned the counterprotest intended to block the March for Life in relation to the tendency of the feminist movement to take reactive measures: 'We worked very much reactively. March for Life happened, and we organised a counter-march'. At the same time, she points to the ability to mobilise and hold a street protest as a turning point in the movement's history, when activism returned to the streets, and a conspicuous opposition emerged that is set on continuously engaging with the issue: 'The beautiful thing is that the initiatives of women's organisations were going from the grassroots to the organisations, the NGOs, and [now have] gone back to the grassroots'. Each year, the counterprotest took on a different form, but the goal remained the same: to make it evident that the neoconservative movement does not speak for all of society. The repertoire of contention ranged from physical blockades to holding a mass protest against 2019 and 2022's March for Freedom in Rijeka, attended by two thousand demonstrators. Respondent U described the surprise at the interest in the protest: 'We expected, like, three hundred people and then three thousand people just came'. *Crveni otpor* (Red resistance), an initiative launched by the Platform for Reproductive Rights,<sup>2</sup> established in 2017, held protest actions from 2019–2021. The events were accompanied by a call for the general public to join by sharing photos of support on social media. Respondent L sees such measures as important as they aim to mobilise the majority of the general public.

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<sup>2</sup> Hereinafter referred to as 'Platform'.

The neoconservative movement also entered civil society and started taking the form of nonprofit organisations and adopting their language. The respondents see neoconservative organisations as part of civil society: 'Ultraconservative organisations are actors in civil society too' (Z). According to the respondents, changing the narrative in the neoconservative movement has led to less space for dialogue between the two parties, and more aggressive utterances have entered the debate on multiple occasions: 'It's very hard to confront them because we are using the same human rights discourse'. Respondent J sees the problem as the failure of the feminist movement to find an alternative narrative to that which has traditionally come out of the years-old civil society discourse. One of the important factors prompting reflection on the strategic practices of the feminist movement and its change was the growing visibility of the neoconservative movement in Croatian society and the use of contentious practices through mass mobilisation. The feminist movement failed to go beyond the established human rights discourse, which narrowed the space for dialogue between both sides of the conflict. This, coupled with the perceived need to respond to the neoconservative movement and its public practice, prompted the increase in the use of contentious practices, such as more massive protests or the physical blockage of marches. As the neoconservative movement began to be included in the form of civil society organisations, this change prompted reflection on the previously dominant compliant strategic practice and the need for a more proactive approach, not just a reactive one. Another factor in this reflection was the emergence of a new generation in the feminist movement.

## 9 Generational change: Reflecting on strategic practices

The year the first March for Life was staged, an organisation, Faktiv, was created, which stemmed from the initiative 'Take Responsibility for Killing Women', which organised the first Night March on 8 March, International Women's Day. The aforementioned collective belongs to the younger generation, whose initiatives mobilised thousands of people and more frequently used contentious strategic practices. The first Night March, organised in 2016, was the largest protest action held by the feminist movement since the 1990s. Sutlović (2019, p. 57) links the enormous interest in women's rights, reproductive rights, violence against women and a number of other issues with the rise of conservatism and more visible political tension. Further, she relates the mobilising success to the arrival of a new generation and the shift to a different repertoire of strategies. This part of my paper buttresses Sutlović's conclusions on the generational conflict.

In the interviews, all the respondents mention the generational conflict and the points of contention. Faktiv comes from a grassroots background and openly subscribes to an anticapitalist agenda: 'We were soon moving towards broader noninstitutionalised feminist support for the anticapitalist movement' (F). This example shows the tendency among the younger generation in the feminist movement to subscribe more explicitly to the anticapitalist tradition and that of socialist Yugoslavia. Respondent M links this tendency to the greater visibility of social issues during the student strikes and later. Respondent U used a social strategic narrative in discussions revolving around the right to abortion and pointed to the impossibility of identifying areas for shared discourse between the two sides. Should one side focus solely on abortion and downplay social issues,

it will be impossible to find a common language: 'One in four children in Croatia lives in poverty or is at risk of it. How are people supposed to feed these children? You are trying to ban abortion and a woman's right to choose, but you are doing nothing to make the decision to have a child easier'. According to the respondents, the new generation has also stated the urgency of creating a positive narrative which would expand strategies that hinge upon debunking arguments and their reactive character: 'I think Pariter and Faktiv have been really important for pushing a positive message, not only responding to the conservative movement but also defending women's rights' (V). The appearance of the young generation has not only meant the re-emergence of a contentious practice or a more explicit thematisation of anticapitalism but also involves a certain tension within the feminist movement. The interviews reveal that the younger actors understand feminism in more intersectional terms, as the main agenda is no longer confined to women's rights but also approaches stemming from queer feminism and ecofeminism, with a stronger emphasis on socioeconomic issues and a leftist critique, which is explicitly anti-capitalist.

One visible contentious issue is the way transgender identity is approached: 'They exclude this gender dimension and even transgender women' (B). The rejection of queer identities is identified with radical feminism in the Balkan context, which stands in opposition to queer feminism (Bias, 2019, p. 7). This is also confirmed by the utterances of the respondents. The tension generated around queer issues and the language used when intergenerational misunderstandings arise are also observed in a range of other countries. One of the possible interpretations of this is the greater focus on identity politics throughout Western society. The younger generation perceives the historical experience and work done by older feminists as essential and admirable, but at the same time, they distance themselves from the older generation and blame them for monopolising the notion of feminism: 'We admire them for it, but they were still trying to somehow monopolise the discourse' (M). Respondent U, who assisted in the initial discussions while the Platform was being established, described the tension as being rooted in insufficient intergenerational solidarity, which manifested itself on both sides: 'It was very difficult because there was a lack of intergenerational solidarity, discussion and so on. So, it was wild, but we managed to create the Platform'. However, the younger generation also complained that the feminist movement is ageing. The respondents pointed to the inability of the movement to mobilise and involve younger people. Respondent U sees the need in strategic terms – it is necessary to offer younger people room to speak as they are the ones to be directly affected by the way the abortion issue is framed: 'If you have younger people, then it's their story'. On the other hand, according to the respondents, numerous organisations have taken up the issue and created strategies with this in mind and are attempting to use instruments which have the potential to reach the younger generation, including open calls in the media or more recognition of queer issues.

In summary, generational change has brought about reflection on the strategic practices and the conception of feminism. The younger generation is more social and openly anti-capitalist. In contrast to the older generation, it adds more intersectionality to the concept of feminism, including ecofeminism and queer feminism. The organisation Faktiv has proven to have a large mobilising capacity. Their mainly contentious strategic practices have complemented the until-then dominant compliant practices of the feminist movement. Nonetheless, the existence of a wider network of transactional organisations is still an important precondition for mobilisation today.

## 10 The feminist movement: Let's unite!

In 2017, the Croatian Constitutional Court resolved that there was a need to preserve the right to abortion, which had been in force since 1978, as a constitutional right. It rejected appeals from representatives of the Croatian neoconservative movement but did order the government to prepare a new law within two years. At the time of writing this article, in early 2024, the law has yet to be prepared. In response to the Court's decision of 2017, the aforementioned Platform was established, which aims to unite all organisations that openly defend the right to abortion. Its emergence represents another recognisable compliant strategy that has been used and become dominant over the past ten years: networking across various organisations, including outside Croatia. The respondents connect the use of this strategy to both the greater urgency for action because of the Court's decision and the need to respond to the growing influence of the neoconservative movement.

The fact that the new law has been under preparation for so long has also affected the sort of strategies that are used. The respondents see a new law as contentious and polarising within society, which is why, according to the respondents, the deadline for drafting a new law has been exceeded – politicians are reluctant to bring up the topic. The feminist movement has responded to this inaction by claiming that statistically, as many as 80 per cent of Croatian citizens are for the preservation of the right to abortion, at least in certain cases. The respondents considered the pre-existing law to be adequate, which is why they often mentioned the goal of preserving it – the law guarantees the protection of reproductive rights for all women. All the respondents declared that they were not afraid of a full abortion ban, as is the case in Poland, but of tougher restrictions, which would be significant in the Croatian context. Waiting for the new draft offered an opportunity for improvement, and thus the coalition, in uniting a range of feminist organisations and lawyers, resolved to draft their own law and propose it to the government: 'Because the government did not draft a law, we, my organisation, together with some medical experts and also with some legal experts, drafted a new law' (CS). The fear of the forthcoming law was deepened by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, which paralysed the whole of society, including the feminist movement. The respondents stated that the pandemic was yet another factor that aggravated the sense of insecurity concerning women's rights and their precariousness.

The feminist movement unequivocally perceives conscientious objection as the main means of obstructing access to abortion. This is crucial due to the number of cases in which gynaecologists have refused to perform the procedure. This is why the feminist movement univocally calls for the regulation of the clause or its abrogation. The feminist movement continues to counteract conscientious objection via close cooperation with gynaecologists who are willing to speak openly about the abortion issue, emphasising the need for healthcare to be provided to all women in all hospitals. The case of Mirela Čavajda, a woman who spoke out about her traumatic experience in a Croatian hospital in 2022, mobilised the feminist movement, which formed a broad coalition that launched the initiative *Dosta!* ('Enough!'), the name under which demonstrations throughout Croatia were then staged. The mass mobilisation and the quick response of the feminist movement demonstrate their ability to react promptly as a united front in the specific case of the right to abortion. The respondents associated the exceptionality of the case with a trend in society where the topic of abortion is taboo. As a result, a destigmatisation strategy

readily employed by the feminist movement emerged, involving publishing the accounts of women who are willing to share their stories publicly, as in the case of Čavajda.

Ample discussions that took place around the time the Platform was being established aimed to define the position the feminist movement would take to counter the neo-conservative movement. According to Respondent V, the movement resolved to use a proactive approach: 'We always react to what they do, which is why we have chosen proactive strategies'. To a number of respondents, language is a key aspect, the complexity of which is problematised in relation to the general public. Respondent V mentioned a discussion within the feminist movement that revolved around an attempt to simplify the related language and goals: 'During this meeting, we tried to simplify the message so that people could identify with it, so that it would be useful, and not just focus on denying what the other side is saying but on changing our vocabulary'. After the influence of the neo-conservative movement increased in Croatian society and they changed their rhetoric, which was also the case in many European countries, the feminist movement directed their attention abroad and more vigorously sought to establish links with international feminists who share their experience: 'The first step is networking and collaboration. We are making contacts with organisations from Ireland and Poland, with those countries that have experience with this religious backlash' (L). Respondent V also mentioned Neil Datta, who worked on the analysis of Agenda Europe, as an important ally. His expertise has also made a valuable contribution to the way the whole issue is understood: 'We also have good cooperation with Neil Datta from the European Parliament, who has been here several times'. The organisation Cesi has also focused on the analysis of the neoconservative movement and Agenda Europe in their research projects. In general, as far as the rising visibility of the neoconservative movement is concerned, the feminist movement sought to unite more and network within the local feminist movement and even among international actors and allies.

Respondents associated the more frequent emergence of networking strategies with the expectation of a new law after the Constitutional Court decision and the growing influence of conservatism in Croatian society. The emergence of the Platform has created space for discussion and a reassessment of the strategies that are used. The strategic practice of networking can be classified as a compliant practice. However, the emergence of the Platform exemplifies how building a coalition across formal and informal organisations can increase mobilisation capacity and thus support not only compliant but also contentious practices.

## 11 Conclusion

The paper investigates whether strategic practices have changed over the last decade and, if so, how and why, according to the actors themselves. Siročić (2019, p. 7) sees the strength of the post-Yugoslav feminist movement in the dynamic changing of strategies, organisational forms and ideas, as well as its ability to blend various traditions and directions. My research corroborates her thesis and builds on Kajinić's. She claims that the rapid change in the Croatian Domestic Violence Act in 2013 was accompanied by enormous pressure from the state on the feminist movement, which may have required the adoption of new mechanisms of operation (Kajinić, 2015, p. 85).

The research shows that the strategic practice of the feminist movement in the last decade has been influenced not only by external factors based on the socio-cultural context in which the movement operates but also by internal factors based on the needs of the movement itself. One external factor has been the growing conservatism in society and the strength of the neoconservative movement. Since 2013, the neoconservative movement has become a visible actor in the debate around abortion rights and has begun to use contentious practices and mobilise the wider public in greater intensity. They have taken on the strategic practices previously employed by the feminist movement and entered the discourse of civil society. The urgency of reacting to the more robust neoconservative movement and its greater presence in the discussion has prompted a revision of strategies, which have increasingly included confrontational ones, such as blockades, classified as contentious practices. The neoconservative movement's use of a human rights discourse has increased the difficulty of dialogue between both sides. The respondents' reflections indicate that an alternative narrative that differs from today's worn-out civil society discourse has yet to be developed. The second external factor for the change in strategic practices was the Constitutional Court decision. The long wait for a new law opened up space for action but also fears that the pre-existing right to abortion was under threat, and thus, there has been more urgency to defend it. The large coalition Platform for Reproductive Rights was established as a response, uniting different feminist actors from civil society and creating space for discussion about strategic practices. The Platform demonstrates the networking strategy that has increasingly appeared over the last decade.

The most important internal factor in the revision of the movement's strategic practices was the partial generational shift in the feminist movement, sparked by the wider context and the economic crisis that sustained the trend, which caused tension within the feminist movement. The new generation has introduced a more pro-social and anticapitalist narrative as well as a wider focus on reframing cultural issues as social ones. With the emergence of the younger generation, there has been a need to use contentious practices more often, with the marches organised by the new organisation Faktiv showing great capacity for mass mobilisation.

Baca's analytical framework for researching the Croatian feminist movement is an appropriate framework for two reasons. By focusing in detail on the strategic practices of civil society actors, regardless of their form, one can better describe its changing shape in the post-socialist context and thus move beyond the thesis of robust transactional activism at the expense of contentious politics in post-socialist countries (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007). Using compliant practices has increased the mobilisation capacity of the movement and its ability to use contentious practices. The existing structures of transactional organisations, which have been emerging in large numbers since the 1990s, are also an important element and a prerequisite for mass mobilisation today. Regardless of the form of the Croatian feminist movement organisations, which are predominantly NGOs, contentious strategic practices are appearing more frequently. The second reason is the latter's expanded understanding of the concept of civil society, which goes beyond the boundaries of the normative. The subsumption of the practices of the neoconservative movement under the practices of post-socialist civil society indicates a discursive change whereby, suddenly, the conflict between the feminist and neoconservative movements is not taking place outside but inside civil society, leading to appeals for change in the strategic praxis of the feminist movement under study.

## Acknowledgements

The study was supported by Charles University, project GA UK No. 98823

This work was supported by the Cooperatio Program, research area Sociology and Applied Social Sciences

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