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Domestic violence and hashtag activism: the Croatian case of #SpasiMe

Hana Krsul

Master in Sociology

Supervisor:
PhD., Gya Accornero, Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science and Public Policy
ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon

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SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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Abstract

Domestic violence is one of the long-standing social grievances. The victims of domestic violence needed to be heard and they found their voice in the feminist social movements. The emergence of social media facilitated reaching the public and motivating them to participate in social movements in order to bring about change. The aim of this thesis is to analyse the impact hashtag activism has on society. This thesis addresses the topic of domestic violence and focuses on an example of hashtag activism in Croatia. The research was carried out from three different perspectives on the #SpasiMe initiative, whose name means save me in Croatian. A semi-structured interview with one of the founders of the #SpasiMe initiative was conducted. A media coverage analysis was performed, analysing how #SpasiMe is framed in a Croatian newspaper. The framing of the initiative in the media was compared to the frames #SpasiMe uses on its Facebook page. A document analysis was carried out on the legislative changes concerning domestic violence. The main results of this study demonstrate the social impact of the #SpasiMe initiative in the form of raising awareness of domestic violence with a more extensive media coverage of the issue. They also suggest the initiative's participation in initiating changes in the Croatian laws on domestic violence. The case of #SpasiMe illustrates that hashtag activism can contribute to the protection of victims of domestic violence and foster changes in society.

Key words: domestic violence, social movements, hashtag activism, #SpasiMe, Croatia

Resumo

A violência doméstica é uma das injustiças sociais de longa data. As vítimas de violência doméstica precisaram de ser ouvidas e encontraram a sua voz nos movimentos sociais feministas. O surgimento das redes sociais facilitou o alcance do público e motivou-as a participar nos movimentos sociais para trazer mudanças. O objetivo desta tese é analisar o impacto que o ativismo de hashtag tem na sociedade. Esta tese aborda o tema de violência doméstica e foca-se em um exemplo de ativismo de hashtag na Croácia. A pesquisa foi realizada a partir de três eixos diferentes sobre a iniciativa #SpasiMe, cujo nome significa salve-me em croata. Antes de mais, foi realizada uma entrevista semiestruturada com uma das fundadoras da iniciativa #SpasiMe. A seguir, levou-se para frente uma análise da cobertura mediática, analisando como o #SpasiMe é enquadrado num jornal croata. O enquadramento da iniciativa nos media foi comparado ao enquadramento que o #SpasiMe utiliza na sua página própria no Facebook. Enfim foi realizada uma análise documental sobre as alterações legislativas relacionadas com a relativas à violência doméstica. Os principais resultados deste estudo mostram que a iniciativa #SpasiMe teve impacto na sensibilização para a violência doméstica com uma cobertura mediática mais ampla da questão. Sugerem também a contribuição da iniciativa na promulgação de alterações à legislação croata em matéria de violência doméstica. O caso de #SpasiMe ilustra que o ativismo de hashtag pode contribuir para a proteção das vítimas de violência doméstica e promover mudanças na sociedade.

Palavras-chave: violência doméstica, movimentos sociais, ativismo de hashtag, #SpasiMe, Croácia

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1. Introduction

“Our vision is a society in which #SpasiMe (#SaveMe) is not needed” (Ana Pecotić)

The above statement has been made by one of the founders of #SpasiMe, a Croatian organization engaged in raising awareness around the problem of domestic violence in Croatian society, providing support and assistance to the victims and contributing to improving the ways this type of violence is dealt with by both social welfare system¹ and national legislation.

Domestic violence refers to the violence occurring within a family or intimate partnership and is according to the Council of Europe “the most common type of gender-based violence”.² On its website the difference between domestic violence and other types of violence is highlighted by the fact that the former happens in a relationship and the latter among people who do not know each other. Since domestic violence was long considered a private matter, it has been particularly difficult to view this issue as a violation of human rights. The Istanbul Convention gives an explanation of what the concept of domestic violence includes: “*acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim*”.³

The victims of domestic violence are both adults and children. In spite of the fact that the adult victims can be in heterosexual or same sex relationships, male or female, in the majority of cases the victims are women.⁴ Therefore, domestic violence is frequently gender violence and it has become one of the major items on the agendas of feminist social movements.

In recent years, the #MeToo movement has been at the centre of attention for exposing cases of sexual harassment and assault with many perpetrators being public figures, which has increased the visibility of the movement and encouraged other victims to step forward (Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre, 2020). The movement has been successful in making sure that the voices of women victims of sexual harassment are heard. The movement began in the United States of America, but

¹ „Social welfare is a public interest organised activity aimed at providing assistance to socially vulnerable persons, as well as persons in unfavourable personal or family circumstances.” <https://gov.hr/en/social-welfare-system/248>

² <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/domestic-violence-or-violence-in-intimate-relationships>

³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/domestic-violence-or-violence-in-intimate-relationships>

⁴ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/domestic-violence-or-violence-in-intimate-relationships>

quickly spread all over the world thanks to social media and the hashtag, in this context similar movements were created around the world. In Europe many countries started their own hashtags inspired by #MeToo. "... #balancetonporc in France (“#DenounceYourPig”), #quellavoltache in Italy (“#ThatTimeWhen”), #yotambien in Spain (“#MeToo”), #sistabriefen in Sweden (“#TheFinalBrief)..” (Zacchia, Corsi and Botti, 2019: 26). Among them, in Croatia the #SpasiMe movement emerged in 2019. It began as a digital invitation to join a protest demanding institutional protection for victims of domestic violence and has grown into a movement whose Facebook group counts over 50,000 members. Moreover, it has initiated significant changes in the treatment of domestic violence in the Republic of Croatia, which is the focus of this thesis.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the role of hashtag activism in the context of domestic violence, focusing on the Croatian case. The methodology employed in the thesis includes a semi structured interview with one of the founders of the movement #SpasiMe, a frame analysis comparing the frames observed in the Croatian online newspaper portal Jutarnji.hr articles with the frames of the #SpasiMe movement on their Facebook page, and a document analysis of Croatian legislative on domestic violence. The laws on domestic violence before and after the emergence of #SpasiMe are compared, with the purpose of establishing to what extent the movement might have influenced the changes in the legal system.

This thesis consists of five chapters. The introductory chapter is followed by the State of the art section containing the theoretical framework and literature review on domestic violence, social movements and frame analysis. The third chapter gives background information on the initiative #SpasiMe, a detailed description of the research design and methodology including the frame analysis based on media coverage of the #SpasiMe movement and the movement's Facebook page, document analysis of the changes in legislation and a semi-structured interview with one of the founders of the initiative #SpasiMe, Ana Pecotić. The fourth chapter sets out the main findings. Finally, the concluding chapter addresses the significance and implications of the main ideas elaborated in this paper, and its contribution to literature. This research was conducted with the aim of identifying whether the emergence of the initiative #SpasiMe influenced the media coverage of the topic of domestic violence and domestic violence laws. The expected finding of this research is that the #SpasiMe initiative affected both the media coverage and laws concerning

domestic violence. The findings should make a contribution to the field of social movement studies, specifically social movements concerning domestic violence in Croatia.

Being the first in-depth analysis of the #SpasiMe movement, this thesis also contributes to social movement studies in three areas. First of all, it will increase our knowledge about social movements' outcomes, by connecting impact in the public sphere and legislative changes. In the second place, the thesis contributes to the understanding of feminist activism against gender and domestic violence, in the context of an eastern European country. And finally, focusing on framing processes, the study contributes to the understanding of the potentiality of digital activism and of the dynamic relationship between social movements' communication platform and mainstream media.

2. State of the Art

There is a large and growing body of literature and research on the issue of domestic violence and social movements engaged in this matter. This thesis draws on this literature connecting it with the one on social movements.

Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani give the following definition of social movements. “Social movements are a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks and share a distinct collective identity.” (della Porta and Diani, 2006: 20). On their side, Accornero and Fillieule (2016) describe the background of the emergence of social movement studies referring to the work of one of its founders, Charles Tilly, who situates the first social movements in the middle of the nineteenth century in Western Europe, precisely Great Britain, amid the rise of capitalism and urbanization.

When discussing the purpose of social movements, della Porta and Diani state that “Social movement actors are engaged in political and/or cultural conflicts meant to promote or oppose social change.” (della Porta and Diani, 2006: 21). Members of a social movement share a collective identity which includes them sharing a common purpose and commitment to a certain cause. The authors explain that it is to be expected that social movements may be treated in relation to a broad scope of intellectual issues, given their wide ranging, multidimensional nature. They have arranged these different ways of looking at social movements into four categories: “...the relationship between structural change and transformations in patterns of social conflict; ...the role of cultural representations in social conflict; ...the process through which values, interests, and ideas get turned into collective action; ...how a certain social, political, and/or cultural context affects social movements’ chances of success, and the forms they take.” (della Porta and Diani, 2006: 5-6).

Revillard and Bereni (2016) analyse the women’s movement observing that in the 1970s it was recognised as one of the leading “new social movements”, Neveu stresses that these “...so-called new social movements (NSM) that emerged in the wake of ’68 were founded on new modes of action, new claims, in challenging classic conceptions of political participation, and ultimately in blurring the centrality of class conflict.” (Neveu, 2016: 24). Radical feminism demanded complete politicization of the private realm matter while emphasising that the essence of women’s oppression is male violence and domination over female bodies. Radical feminists view patriarchy

as “the oldest form of dominance” (Lovenduski 1986: 69). The “gendered-ness” of political opportunities, i.e. that the gender affects those opportunities, has been highlighted by feminist researchers. In the Netherlands, research was conducted by Roggeband in 2002 on the women’s movement against sexual violence. Domestic violence, for example, was more difficult to politicize since it occurs in the private sphere, as opposed to sexual harassment, which happens in the workplace (Duyvendak, Roggeband and van Stekelenburg, 2016). As a consequence, until some years ago, authorities were hesitant to address in domestic abuse cases, preferring to view the family as a private area (Scott, 2014).

The European Union has signed a number of acts for the prevention of different types of violence and the protection of victims: The Victims’ Rights Directive, The Compensation Directive, EU rules on European protection orders, the Anti-trafficking Directive, the Directive against sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, The Counter-terrorism Directive.⁵ Concerning domestic violence, the Istanbul Convention has been signed by the EU and ratified by 35 state members of the Council of Europe: “This new landmark treaty of the Council of Europe opens the path for creating a legal framework at pan-European level to protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence.”⁶

Feminists started denouncing the phenomenon of domestic violence in the 1970s as physical or psychological male violence against women. They claimed that domestic violence is a manifestation of gender power imbalance and women's oppression and founded shelters for female victims (Scott, 2014). Feminist scholars have trouble agreeing on a single definition of feminism, but what most agree on is what feminism stands for: “Many would agree that at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order.” (Delmar, 2001: 8). Women have not been treated equally to men throughout history and have mostly had a subordinate status. However, the first women's movement appeared only in the late 19th century.

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0258>

⁶ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatynum=210>

In the US the wave metaphor is used to present the evolution of the feminist movement in four waves. The first generation of feminists emerged in the nineteenth century in response to exclusion of women from the political, social, public and economic spheres. The goal of this generation was to expand social contract so as to include the right to vote for women (Gills, Howie and Munford, 2007). Proponents of these goals were called suffragettes. The second phase or wave of the feminist movement is much more distinctive and more clearly defined than the first. It begins in the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century and represents an upgrade to the base of the movement which was set up by suffragettes. Members of the second wave do not believe that the woman's right to vote would solve all the problems that women face. Issues of motherhood, offspring, unpaid work, expressions of sexuality and sexual violence come into the focus of their agenda (Wilding, 1998). The third wave began in the 1990s, and was, among others, also inspired by the ideas of a French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida sees language “as a patriarchal sexist phenomenon that precedes excludes women from their grammatical structures” (Bertoša, 2001, as cited in Mihaljević 2016:165). The goals of gender equality and sexual liberation have come together in the third wave of feminism, it recognizes women's ability to make their own decisions on how to balance the sometimes at odds demands for both gender equality and sexual pleasure. This wave is considered inclusive, pluralistic, and nonjudgmental (Snyder-Hall, 2010). When it comes to more recent events of the fourth wave, in 2009 feminist Jessica Valenti stated: “Maybe the fourth wave is online,” and it has become one of fourth-wave feminism's central principles. Actually, even if face-to-face action continues to be highly relevant for mobilization (Mattonir and Treré, 2015), large part of feminist conversation and debate take place in the digital sphere. Fourth-wave activism can take place on the Internet (#SpasiMe Facebook group) or in the streets (#SpasiMe protest), but it is developed and spread online.⁷

An example of a fourth wave feminist movement is #MeToo, a movement which aims to end sexual harassment and abuse. Tarana Burke, an American sexual harassment survivor and social activist, founded it in 2006. It is mostly coordinated on social media with the hashtag #MeToo. #MeToo gained traction online and in conventional media in 2017 when numerous well-known female celebrities revealed their own experiences with sexual harassment in the entertainment business. Since 2017, the #MeToo campaign has helped women to survive different types of

⁷ <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/20/16955588/feminism-waves-explained-first-second-third-fourth>

harassment by male perpetrators and has provided compassion and empathy for those victims (Collier Hillstrom, 2018). On October 15th 2017 actress Alyssa Milano tweeted: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” By doing this she addressed the rising conversation around sexual violence in Hollywood, which was started by actresses speaking out about producer Harvey Weinstein's repeated predatory conduct (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles, 2020). Rosemary Clark-Parsons (2019) mentions that following its rapid growth, #MeToo was confronted with two fundamentally opposing criticisms. Critics of a conservative point of view claimed that #MeToo had gone to extremes by ruining the lives of the suspected and putting a pressure on male and female interpersonal and professional connections. On the other hand, others questioned if the campaign had achieved enough or if the hashtag was only a media sensation unable to overthrow an oppressive regime. “Both critiques echo a question at the center of debates concerning networked activism: can hashtags cause “real” social change?” (Clark-Parsons, 2019: 2).

In recent years social movements have increased the use of digital tools. Mary Joyce (2010) explains that while the techniques are substantially the same as they were before the Internet, they are now supplemented by digital resources such as email, social networks, sophisticated supporter databases, and online event tools. These features allow activists to get their message across in an easier, quicker and more efficient manner. As activists and organizers have progressively emphasized the necessity of online action having offline influence, the 1990s perspective that Internet activism happens in an online domain and is apart from the real world has fallen out of favour. Digital technologies and methods are continually evolving in terms of their use and relevancy (Joyce, 2010).

Joyce continues to define digital activism as “...use of digital technologies—mobile phones and Internet-enabled devices, for example—in campaigns for social and political change.” (Joyce, 2010: Preface). Digital technologies can be offline too, while using terms like “cyber-activism,” “online organizing,” and “online activism” involves the use of the Internet. The author states that “The inventors of Facebook, a group of American college students, probably did not see it as a tool for activists around the world, but it is nevertheless used for that purpose.” (Joyce, 2010: 3). Mary Joyce observes that the initial goal of Facebook most likely was not activism although it is nowadays widely implemented to this end. To disseminate their objectives, most digital activists

use commercial apps like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, since apps are the most prominent aspect of digital activism.

While digital activism has a lot of benefits to it, it also has some limitations. Benjamin Themba (2018) mentions some of them: "...lack of privacy, unreliable information is often shared, likes or hashtags do not result in change, systemic issues also arise from hashtags..." (Themba, 2018: 34). He also points out that rumours are often believed online, that people create their own echo chambers and only communicate with like-minded individuals and ignore others. Merlyna Lim (2013) points out the limitations and benefits of social media activism through the concept of participation. She mentions the ideas of both sides, those that view online activism as a negative way of participation and those who believe that it is mostly positive. The members of the negative spectrum distinguish online activism as "...banal, superficial and failing to transform or renew democratic institutions." (Lim, 2013: 637). Simultaneously with this thought a few terms appeared to doubt the value of digital activism, frequently considering it inferior to what they call "real" physical activism. Those terms are: slacktivism, clicktivism, armchair activism and keyboard activism. The other side "...focuses on the rise of new forms of participation in public life, enabled by emerging new technologies, particularly the internet and social media, which promote a more enlightened exchange of ideas, transform political debates, increase levels of citizen engagement, enable societal change and reform political systems." (Lim, 2013: 637). Lim concludes that this dichotomy is a very simplified way of understanding digital activism and states that: "The social impacts of the internet and social media, or "change" in society, should be understood as a result of the organic interaction between technology and social, political, and cultural structures and relationships." (Lim, 2013: 637).

In the past few years, some social movements have been emerging online and most of them with a hashtag in front of their name. This allows easier and faster sharing of thoughts regarding a certain topic. The term "Hashtag activism" refers to the formulation and spread of online activism marked by a hashtag (Jackson, Bailey, Foucault Welles, 2020). One of the most famous movements of that kind are #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, which both made a strong impact on the society concerning issues of gender-based violence and racism. This thesis focuses on a Croatian movement called #SpasiMe that has exposed the extent of domestic violence cases in

Croatia and the inadequacies in providing assistance to the victims as well as in sanctions aimed at deterring this type of violence.

The causes for the appearance of social movements and their effects on society have been studied by many researchers. Addressing the outcomes of social movements, Bosi, Giugni and Uba (2016) identify three main types: personal and biographical, cultural and social, and political change. Political change includes changes in formal institutions such as legislation, an outcome that is addressed by this thesis.

Internet also impacted the relation between social movements and the public sphere. The perception of social issues by the public largely depends also on how they are framed in the media. The term frame analysis was coined by the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman in 1975 in his book *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. He identifies frames as the way individuals experience social reality and defines the term frame analysis as: "... a slogan to refer to the examination in these terms of the organization of experience." (Goffman, 1986: 11) Frame analysis is a useful tool when analysing social movements concerning both the way they set their agendas and portray themselves to the public and how they are covered in the media. Snow, Vliegenthart and Ketelaars describe the social movements' framing perspective: "... mobilizing grievances are seen neither as naturally occurring sentiments nor as arising automatically from specifiable material conditions, but as the result of interactively-based interpretation or signifying work. Framing conceptualizes this signifying work, which is one of the activities that social movement leaders and participants, as well as their adversaries and the media, do on a regular basis." (Snow, Vliegenthart and Ketelaars, 2019: 393).

The above-mentioned authors explain that frames perform three functions: focusing attention by arranging what is in and what is out of frame as it is in a picture frame; articulation mechanisms so that a specific set of meanings is delivered; a transformative function works on reshaping how some items of attention are perceived or interpreted with relation to one another or to the actor. These functions demonstrate that the way we observe and understand different subject matters as well as our behaviour in a certain context is conditional on their framing.

Guya Accornero defines identity frames as: "... messages related to self-image, issues and claims..." (Accornero, 2017: 192). The author conducts a frame analysis of Portuguese anti-austerity protests concentrating on identity frames implemented both by the social movements on

their social media and online editions of Portuguese newspapers. The findings show that thanks to digital networks social movements were able to influence mainstream media, inverting the traditional dependency of contentions actors on them. This type of frame analysis conducted on the press coverage and the social movement's social media inspired the research of this thesis focusing on the framing of the initiative #SpasiMe on their Facebook page and in the online edition of a Croatian newspaper Jutarnji list.

There has been extensive research on the #MeToo movement while other movements originating in other countries have not been researched as much. There is very little research on the #SpasiMe initiative in Croatia and none from the sociological point of view. There are three master theses from The Faculty of Political Science Zagreb at University of Zagreb: Maša Petranović (2020) *The Media Representation of Jelena Veljača and the Save me Initiative on Online Media 24sata.hr, index.hr and jutarnji.hr in 2019*; Hana Volenik (2021) *The Rhetoric of Gender Equality in the Columns by Jelena Veljača*; Gea Ujčić (2020) *Feminist Movements in the Republic of Croatia: A Case Study of "#SpasiMe" and "#PrekinimoŠutnju"* which look at #SpasiMe from a journalistic point of view. By using descriptive statistical analysis, discourse analysis and quantitative content analysis they showed how Croatian media reports on #SpasiMe and in what way. Petranović (2020) conducted research to investigate how the three most popular Croatian portals report on the Croatian actress and activist Jelena Veljača and her initiative against domestic violence #SpasiMe. She concludes that Croatian portals adhere to ethical standards even more than she had expected and that Jelena Veljača is one of the first examples of celebrity diplomacy and activism in Croatia. Petranović cites April Biccum (2011) who defines celebrity diplomacy as using the influence of a public figure as a platform to convince others about certain ideologies or political issues. Volenik (2021) researched Jelena Veljača's columns on jutarnji.hr from 2019 to 2020 with a focus on her columns about gender equality and domestic violence. Ujčić (2020) in her work compared two hashtag activism movements in Croatia and how they were covered in Croatian media.

There are two other articles on #SpasiMe, one from a feminist and populist approach by Brigita Miloš (2021) *Strange tropes of salvation: populist rhetoric and violence against women in Croatia* in European Journal of English Studies and the other from a legal perspective by Josipa Šarić (2022) *The #MeToo movement's manifestation in Croatia: engaging with the meaningfulness of transnational feminist solidarity* in the journal Transnational Legal Theory. Miloš (2021)

investigates celebrity feminism in Croatia and includes a gender violence survivor testimony. Šarić (2022) in her article examines how the #MeToo movement manifested in Croatia alongside the ratification of the Istanbul convention. All of the above-mentioned literature has made a contribution to the topic of #SpasiMe in a certain way. However, there is an existing gap that this thesis will fill and that is the sociological perspective of a hashtag activism movement fighting against domestic violence. Pursuing the aim of this thesis, which is to understand the impact of this movement, I will fill this gap.

3. Research design

3.1. Methodology

This thesis' research was conducted in order to gain insights into the relationship between the #SpasiMe initiative's activities and their impact on both media coverage and legislation regarding domestic violence. Media analysis of the coverage of the #SpasiMe initiative on Jutarnji.hr was done in order to see if there is a difference in how the initiative is framed on Jutarnji.hr versus how they frame themselves on their Facebook page. The analysis aims to understand the impact of the movement's frames on the media framing. Croatian domestic violence laws were analysed to see whether the initiative had an impact on their changes.

Two research hypotheses have been proposed to be tested in this thesis. The first one is that the Croatian newspaper Jutarnji list wrote more about the topic of domestic violence after the emergence of the #SpasiMe initiative. The second one is that the #SpasiMe initiative made a difference in Croatian society concerning domestic violence laws. Both hypotheses are related to the impact of the movement: the first one on the media coverage of domestic violence in Croatia; the second one on Croatian domestic violence legislation. Certainly, the two hypotheses, as well as the two processes they address, are strictly connected. The former will be dealt with in the media analysis section of the paper and the latter in the document analysis.

The methodology employed in this paper includes: a semi structured interview with one of the founders of the movement, a frame analysis comparing frames observed on #SpasiMe initiative's Facebook page and in the Croatian online newspaper portal Jutarnji.hr articles and a document analysis of Croatian legislation on domestic violence. The interview with Ana Pecotić, one of the founders of the #SpasiMe initiative, was done in order to gain an insight into how the initiative started and the way it is working today. It also helped to understand the meaning the activist associates to the mobilization and her trajectory, which was important for the understanding of the deep connection between biography and activism.

The outlet chosen to analyse the coverage of the #SpasiMe initiative is Jutarnji list (eng. The Morning Paper), a Croatian daily newspaper. Its original name was "Dnevnik" and it was published in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, from February 28th 1912 to April 13th 1941. On April 6th 1998 it changed its name into Jutarnji list and it has been published in Zagreb since then. Jutarnji

list quickly became one of top selling newspapers in Croatia with 160 000 copies sold daily.⁸ Today it can be found in two formats: paper and online which is called Jutarnji.hr. The analysis is conducted using the online version Jutarnji.hr which makes it easier to get access to older issues and to search for keywords on their page. Jutarnj.hr has 771 093 average daily real users which makes it the second most read news portal in Croatia.⁹

The time frame selected is two months: February and March of 2019. (1. 2. 2019 – 1. 4. 2019). February 28th is the date of a tragic incident, a father throwing his children from a balcony, an episode which motivated the starting of the initiative. On March 1st #SpasiMe was mentioned for the first time in general and on Jutarnji.hr. The time sample of the analysis is one month before the #SpasiMe initiative was established and one month after its emergence. Having analysed Jutarnji.hr coverage by searching the term *nasilje u obitelji* (eng. domestic violence) 27 articles were found on this topic in February and 75 articles in March. Articles in February are about different domestic violence cases happening in Croatia and the world and at the end of the month most of them are about an incident that started the #SpasiMe initiative, which will be elaborated in “The emergence of #SpasiMe” section. In March almost all of the articles on the topic of domestic violence refer to #SpasiMe.

The time frame selected for the frame analysis on how the movement organizers portrayed the initiative on its official page, which is their Facebook page called Spasime, compared to the framing of Jutarnji.hr, is March 2019. In that month 38 articles were published on the topic of #SpasiMe. Among them, we selected eight stories to be analysed in greater detail. These specific stories were chosen because they portray the way Jutarnji.hr covered the news concerning #SpasiMe.

The frames I have identified on Facebook are: victim protection, institutional violence, permanent fight against domestic violence, voluntarism and public identity of violence. These frames describe the way the how #SpasiMe frames the problem of domestic violence, while some of them can be identified as identity frames. Throughout their posts these frames are highly prominent. The best example where victim protection, institutional violence, permanent fight against domestic violence and voluntarism are visible is in this sentence: “What should have just been an event that will

⁸ <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=29627>

⁹ <https://rating.gemius.com/hr/tree/8>

encourage the government to solve problems in the system, has turned into a permanent, voluntary and unpaid engagement of the members of the Initiative #SPASIME for the protection of victims of domestic violence and the elimination of institutional violence against victims.” The founders posted this on their page on March 16th 2022, the third anniversary of the #SpasiMe initiative’s protest. The public identity of violence frame is chosen because the motto of the protest on March 16th 2019 was: “Violence is not a family matter”.¹⁰

3.2. Croatian background

In the area of the former Yugoslavia, a shift occurred following the Balkan Wars in the 1990s. The society became more patriarchal than it was and it appears that women now have far less liberties than they did then.¹¹ This concerns many issues such as: reproductive rights, gender pay gap, the glass ceiling, domestic violence etc. Slavenka Drakulić, a Croatian writer and journalist (well-known for her articles and books on the topics such as capitalism, post capitalism and feminism) states: “The political and economic system has changed, whereas the mentality of the people has not, especially concerning women.” (Drakulić, 2020: 34). She explains this by saying that despite legislation governing women's equality had been passed during the socialist era, the patriarchal attitude toward women today seemed to have become more pronounced. Nationalism and the influence of the Church are the main causes of this, the author concludes. Prejudices were promoted by Catholic-affiliated civil society organizations during the 2018 campaign in Croatia in support of the Istanbul Convention on women's rights. Some Croatians believed that it promoted an idea that will make children want to change their sex. They feared that would then cause a confusion about who is male and who is female. Drakulić explains that this happened because of the lack of education on the difference between sex and gender and the above-mentioned civil society organizations spreading frightening and untrue messages to the people. Despite Croatia being a formally secular country, the Catholic Church has a significant impact on public institutions. This is what Drakulić observes about the impact of the Catholic Church on the Croatian society: “However, so far no Government has strongly opposed its influence, they have preferred to turn a blind eye to circumventions of the law.” (Drakulić, 2020: 36). In the article the author mentions the #SpasiMe initiative as an example of the rise of activism in Croatia,

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/Spasime-394629151370980>

¹¹ <https://www.boell.de/en/node/68241>

particularly those concerning domestic violence, even though conservative values are still dominating.

3.3. The emergence of #SpasiMe

On May 23rd 2017 a mother suffocated her 3-year-old son and then threw his body in the sea in the city of Pula in Croatia. On February 28th 2019 a father threw his four children off the balcony of a first floor apartment on the island of Pag in Croatia. The children were three, four, seven and eight years old and suffered severe injuries and ultimately survived due to emergency medical intervention. In both of these monstrous cases the involved families were in the social welfare system which had failed in doing their job and did not manage to prevent these events from occurring. Even though the social welfare system's job is to provide care to families, from the interview conducted with Ana Pecotić and the testimonies of domestic violence victims it is visible that the system sometimes does not function the way it is supposed to. Some of them even suffered institutional violence from the system. Institutional violence is characterised as: "... all practices of humiliation, degradation, neglect and abuse inflicted upon institutional residents, regardless of intention or circumstance." (Sirotkin, 2019: 853).

Just a day after the scandalous event on the island of Pag Jelena Veljača, a famous Croatian actress, screenwriter and columnist, who later on became one of the founders of the initiative #SpasiMe, wrote a status on Facebook addressing it:

"My dear friends and acquaintances. I did not sleep because of the children from Pag. I didn't sleep because of little Denis, who was killed by his mother a couple of years ago. I never forgot him. I didn't sleep because of the little girl who was beaten by her father. I don't sleep often since becoming a mother. And as I have written many times that being a "public figure" has its obligations, now is the time to do something about it, apart from salon writing. Well, clumsily and for the first time, without politicians, but with people who support me, I will try to organize a #spasime protest on behalf of all the children and all the women we failed to save. We are responsible. The group on Facebook is called #spasime. Whoever wants to, may ask for membership."¹²

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/jelka12/posts/10156986203940768>

In the interview conducted with Ana Pecotić on March 21st 2022 she shared a story about how the #SpasiMe initiative came about and her perspective on it as one of the founders. Ana describes herself as a marketing expert, mother of two and an activist in her free time. She has always been interested in socio-political issues but has never engaged in them before the #SpasiMe initiative. In her words: “Political parties are repulsive to me, each in its own way and there isn't a party in Croatia that I would join“. She was one of the first people to react to Jelena's status and said that she would attend the protest. Along with Jelena Veljača and Ana Pecotić, Mirsada Begovic, Jelena Kovačić, Anica Tomić and Una Zečević Šeparović formed a #SpasiMe Facebook group whose only primary goal was to invite people to the protest in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. After a few days these six women met for the first time and organised the protest. In the interview Ana recalls that there was a huge turnout in the group of more than one thousand five hundred people, which called for the protest to be transferred to King Tomislav Square, being much bigger than the original venue they thought of, Saint Mark's Square. At the beginning the only goal was to protest and point out the problems to the government, but in a matter of days the Facebook group became what it is today, a place of support for victims of violence. It began with one victim of domestic violence writing her story in the group first and then all the other women started sharing their stories too.

At the time, Ana was one of only three administrators of that group, and later there were five of them. She describes herself and the other founders as an army: “I calculated at one point when I was looking at the statistics that we had five thousand daily activities or comments per administrator.“ Ana explains that she was on her cell phone in the group non-stop and since the nature of the topic of domestic violence can be tricky, she blocked and crossed out inappropriate comments. From the beginning the initiative had a vision of what to do which they presented at the protest, later the more they got into the matter the more issues arose. Ana emphasises the responsiveness of the initiative by saying that each time the founders spotted something new that needed to be fixed they tried to address it. The founders are six women with completely different careers and according to Ana working for the #SpasiMe initiative requires at least part time, if not full time working hours, so they had a plan for their work to be taken over by women's organizations/associations. However that idea failed to materialize, but that did not stop them and three years later they are still working on achieving their goals. Ana Pecotić concludes: “Basically, this is how the initiative #SpasiMe came about, completely spontaneously, as a spontaneous

reaction, and somehow we have continued to do so to this day.“ Through the Facebook group #SpasiMe has provided a secure space of understanding, support and focus on concrete help for over 50,000 members.

3.3.1. Ana's reason for joining #SpasiMe

In the interview Ana Pecotić shares her personal reasons for joining #SpasiMe. She reveals that she got involved because she went through domestic violence herself and managed to get out of it, but after that she experienced severe institutional violence from the social welfare system, which lasted for six years. When Jelena Veljača posted the status, it was clear to her exactly what could have happened in that family, why and what mistakes the social welfare system is making. She states her personal goal: “What my personal motive is that since I myself went through both domestic and institutional violence, my mission is that no woman in Croatia has to go through that anymore, what I and my children went through.“ She points out that her own experience with domestic and institutional violence helped her understand the victims and enabled her to talk to them in an appropriate way. The communication took place in the closed Facebook group of the initiative and attracted a great number of victims of domestic violence. The success of this group earned the coverage of initiative’s efforts in the traditional media.

4. Media analysis

4.1. Jutarnji.hr's framing of #SpasiMe

On March 1st 2019 Jutarnji.hr published its first article mentioning #SpasiMe. In the article, written by Damjan Raknić, Jelena Veljača's Facebook status about her idea of organising a protest is shared. It also mentions which Croatian public figures support her by liking and/or commenting on her post and gives insight on how many likes and comments she has received in the first few hours after her posting it. This article and some others that have been analysed have a new frame visible in them: the celebrity scene frame while on #SpasiMe's Facebook page this frame is not visible. This article was framed by the frames as well.¹³ In the process of doing the frame analysis the celebrity scene was created. It is visible when an article puts an emphasis on a celebrity or a number of celebrities instead the actual issue concerning the article. This is resulted in articles that have the celebrity's photo as the cover, leaving out names of non-celebrities connected to the issue, going more in depth about who is involved rather than the impact it has etc.

After the establishment of the #SpasiMe group on Facebook many women shared their stories about their personal experience with domestic violence. "... The #spasime Facebook group... became the voice of those who had been persuaded for years that it was better for them to remain silent." These are the words of Iva Badanjak, Iva Grubiša and Lana Mindoljević who wrote an article for Jutarnji.hr on March 10th 2019. The article includes six anonymous testimonies from women that wrote in the group as victims of domestic violence. It mirrors the initiative's mission and goals: "The wall of the group became a place for confessions of women who were themselves victims of violence, who went through a system that had no understanding for them, who were told that "that is how things are in a marriage"..." This article shows the frames the initiative uses on their Facebook page, since it conveys #SpasiMe's mission and demands for victim protection. Institutional violence is recognised in the anonymous testimonies.¹⁴

An article about #SpasiMe was featured on the front page of Jutarnji list titled: "We are here to say to you that you will never be left alone again" Jelena Veljača writes for Jutarnji amid the

¹³ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/jelena-veljaca-nisam-spavala-zbog-djece-iz-paga-bitu-javna-osoba-obavezuje-sad-je-trenutak-da-nesto-i-napravim-po-tom-pitanju-8437880>

¹⁴ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/naslovnica/sest-potresnih-svjedocanstava-zlostavljanih-zena-nakon-strasnih-primjera-obiteljskog-nasilja-zene-se-sve-cesce-odlucuju-za-javni-istup-8469104>

#spasime protest. It was published on the day of the protest on March 16th 2019, minutes before it started. In the article Veljača explains how the protest came about by describing the days that led up to it, from March 1st 2019 when she wrote the first status on Facebook to March 16th 2019 when the protest was held. She gives her personal reasons for starting the initiative and lists the people that helped her organize it. She recalls a statement made by Nada Murganić: “That is how things are in a marriage” and says it is scandalous and demands an apology. These words were uttered by Nada Murganić, the then Minister of Demographics, Family, Youth and Social Policy of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, when asked to comment on the wife of the mayor of the Požega-Slavonia County withdrawing all charges against him for domestic violence. Murganić has a Master's degree in Social Work and is a member of the leading conservative party in Croatia HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union), as well as the mentioned mayor. Throughout the article the frames are present especially the public identity of violence: “Violence is not a family matter”, which is also the initiative’s motto and was written on the Facebook invitation to the protest.¹⁵

On the day of the protest, March 16th 2019, Jutarnji.hr published an article describing in detail of what had happened at the protest. The article was titled: “PROTEST IN ZAGREB: CITIZENS TAKE TO THE STREETS AGAINST VIOLENCE Initiative #spasime against the growing wave of domestic violence, but also every other violence in the Republic of Croatia”. The author reported on everything that was said and done during the protest and gave a complete report of the initiative's demands for introducing a zero-tolerance rate for violence. The article is accompanied with a gallery of photos and videos from the protest featuring the members of the initiative giving speeches and crowds of people holding up signs and banners saying: #stopviolence, #bravepeople, #violenceisforcowards, “Love is forgiving but it does not forgive a slap”, “The power of love is not measured in blows” etc. All of the frames are visible in this article by reporting on exactly what was said during the protest, what the initiative stands for as well as including a number of pictures that show #SpasiMe’s main motives and goals. In addition, an emphasis is placed on the public figures and celebrities that attended the protest by writing their names in bold while listing them and including their photos in the gallery which describes the celebrity scene frame. This

¹⁵ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ovdje-smo-da-vam-kazemo-da-nikad-vise-necete-biti-ostavljene-same-jelena-veljaca-pise-za-jutarnji-povodom-prosvjeda-spasime-8493782>

frame is also present in other articles where Jelena Veljača's name is in the title or cover photo of the article. Moreover, the names of the other founders are not disclosed in those articles.¹⁶

While the #SpasiMe protest was taking place in Zagreb on March 16th 2019 it was also held at the same time in three other Croatian cities: Šibenik, Split and Dubrovnik. An article reported on how many people gathered in each of those cities, included some of the participant's comments as well as a photo and video gallery of them protesting and holding signs with different messages such as: "There is no justification for violence", "Love does not hurt", "Crime not a misdemeanour", "Family without violence" etc. The frames are visible mostly in the messages of the signs and banners.¹⁷

Just two days after the protest, on March 18th 2019, the Prime Minister Andrej Plenković had a meeting with the members of the #SpasiMe initiative. He agreed to a number of demands made by the initiative: changing the legislation by making punishments for domestic violence stricter, establishing a helpline for victims and safe houses in six Croatian counties that do not have them. The frames are recognised in the article covering this story especially the victim protection frame, since the meeting based on doing what is possible to protect the victim.¹⁸

The day after the meeting with the Prime Minister, the #SpasiMe initiative was invited by the president of Croatia at the time Kolinda Grabar Kitarović. On the day of the protest Jelena Veljača commented how she was disappointed that the President, as a woman, didn't come to the protest. Veljača stated after the meeting that it was of symbolic importance while the meeting the day before with the Prime Minister was more important for the initiative. This story was also covered in a lifestyle magazine called Gloria which is owned by the same media company, Hanza media, as Jutarnji list. On their online portal the article can be found in the section headed "Stardust". The author of the article does not mention the names of the other women that are founders of the

¹⁶ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/prosvjed-u-zagrebu-gradani-izasl-na-ulice-protiv-nasilja-inicijativa-spasime-protiv-rastuceg-vala-obiteljskog-ali-i-svakog-drugog-nasilja-u-rh-8495039>

¹⁷ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/foto-video-prosvjedi-protiv-nasilja-odrzani-i-diljem-hrvatske-obale-prepoznajmo-zrtvu-i-prijavimo-nasilje-trpe-djeca-zene-i-muskarci-8496512>

¹⁸ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/plenkovic-primio-inicijativu-spasi-me-postozit-ce-se-kazne-za-nasilnike-8504357>

initiative and were there at the President's office, just Jelena Veljača. This is another example of the way that this topic has been framed with a celebrity scene frame.¹⁹

On March 29th 2019 Snježana Pavić wrote an article for Jutarnji.hr titled: "Who did Jelena Veljača save". In this article the author gives her opinion on the #SpasiMe initiative and their work throughout the month of March since they appeared. "Is Veljača's initiative perfect and flawless? It is not. But it is also very useful and important. Because now everyone is talking about domestic violence, and it is even possible that the topic of the SOS helpline for women victims of violence gets two pages in the newspaper. Also, because the 55,000 member Facebook group functions as a place of cathartic confessions and group support, in a society that does not condemn a husband who assaulted a woman, but a woman who destroyed a family and took children away from bullies." The author includes several comments and stories from women that wrote in the #SpasiMe Facebook group and concludes: "That is why #spasime is not a message to victims to sit passively and wait for help, as the name of the initiative has been criticized by some feminists. But an appeal to all of us that we are responsible for the weakest, for those who have no one to protect them, and who are not yet able to stand up for themselves. Don't turn your head, it concerns you too." The article encompasses the mission of #SpasiMe and is framed through their frames.²⁰

The only additional aspect which the newspaper sheds light on, and the initiative does not, is that one of the founders is Jelena Veljača – a Croatian actress, screenwriter, columnist of Jutarnji list. The celebrity scene aspect is visible in the articles on Jutarnji.hr about the initiative but is not on their official Facebook page. On the other hand, the voluntarism frame is prominent on Spasime Facebook page but not in Jutarnji.hr coverage.

Media analysis of the coverage of the #SpasiMe initiative on Jutarnji.hr has revealed that there are a few differences in the way the initiative is framed on Jutarnji.hr versus how they frame themselves. On the #SpasiMe Facebook page the frames visible are: victim protection, institutional violence, permanent fight against domestic violence, voluntarism and public identity of violence. Essentially, Jutarnji.hr gives a fairly faithful and positive portrayal of the #SpasiMe initiative and what they stand for by implementing the majority of initiative's identity frames. However,

¹⁹ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/jelena-veljaca-kod-kolinde-grabar-kitarovic-ovo-je-bio-sastanak-od-simbolicke-vaznosti-za-ovu-inicijativu-predsjednica-ju-je-podrzala-8507855>

²⁰ <https://www.jutarnji.hr/naslovnica/koga-je-to-spasila-jelena-veljaca-8666420>

Jutarnji.hr uses a celebrity scene frame in the coverage of #SpasiMe that is absent from the initiative's frames, whereas the #SpasiMe initiative uses the voluntarism frame on their Facebook page that is missing from Jutarnji.hr articles.

The celebrity scene frame entails reporting on a story while placing an emphasis on the fact that one or more celebrities or public figures were involved in it. In addition to Jutarnji.hr framing the #SpasiMe initiative using almost all of their frames it also frames the initiative through the celebrity scene frame by stressing that Jelena Veljača is a part of the initiative. Jelena Veljača is a famous Croatian actress, screenwriter and columnist. In the interview Ana Pecotić, explained the significance of one of the founders of the initiative being a public figure: "As a person, Jelena is quite controversial, people either love her or don't like her very much...since she is a public figure there was a lot of media attention and interest." Jelena as a celebrity gets media attention on whatever she does which includes establishing the #SpasiMe initiative. Through her the initiative got more visibility in the media, which lead to the increase in the media coverage of the topic of domestic violence. That is evidently a positive outcome of a celebrity's involvement in a serious cause. On the other hand, there is also a negative one which Ana elaborated on in the interview: "The presence of #SpasiMe in the media is great, I can't complain about that. What is both a blessing and a curse is that Jelena has such great visibility and then on the one hand it gave us visibility and on the other hand it may have trivialized our work. The initiative is perceived as Jelena and a couple of her friends. We accepted this as the default variable. Our visibility may be a bit extravagant (under the influence of the celebrity scene), that's the price we have to pay because if there was no celebrity scene, I'm afraid we wouldn't have that visibility." Because of Jelena's initial Facebook status many other celebrities and public figures from Croatia joined her and offered public support, which Ana mentions in the interview: "Famous people recorded videos of support and invited people to come to the protest." From this specific case, it can be concluded that celebrity activism played a role in the success of the #SpasiMe by giving it visibility.

While the initiative was framed using the celebrity scene frame and the initiative's own frames by Jutarnji.hr, one frame was not adopted. The voluntarism frame was totally neglected in the way that none of the analysed articles state the fact that what the founders of the #SpasiMe initiative do is completely voluntary and that their efforts are not bringing them money. The initiative frames themselves through voluntarism frame on their Facebook page and Ana also brings it up in the

interview: “Primarily, the obstacle is the lack of resources or lack of time since volunteering is done in free time without compensation.” Ana illustrates this by pointing out that all the members of the Initiative are employed as professionals in various industries. Ana Pecotić is a marketing expert, Jelena Veljača is an actress, screenwriter and columnist, Mirsada Begović is a deputy news editor at Al Jazeera Balkans, Jelena Kovačić is a playwright, Anica Tomić is an actress and Una Zečević Šeparović is a lawyer.

5. Legislative impact of the movement

On March 16th 2022, exactly three years after the #SpasiMe protest, the founders of the initiative shared on their Facebook page all the changes that they have initiated, made and been a part of.²¹ This analysis suggests a possible connection between the #SpasiMe initiative on the changes that they claim they have initiated by analysing the perception of the impact through the lens of the activists.

Those referring to legislative changes were discussed and initiated in regular meetings the initiative had with Josip Aladrović, the Minister of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy at the time and Ivan Malenica, the Minister of Justice and Public Administration. These meetings were held with a purpose of improving the system aiming at preventing violence against women and domestic violence. In one of these meetings minister Josip Aladrović emphasized the importance of interdepartmental cooperation, the non-governmental sector and society as a whole through raising awareness of the problem of violence against women and domestic violence. He also referred to the previous cooperation with representatives of the #SpasiMe initiative, evaluating it as a positive example of cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the non-governmental sector.²²

On a meeting held on January 25th 2021 with the representatives of the Ministry of Justice and Administration the imposition of protective measures was discussed. Minister Malenica referred to the legal changes that increased penalties, better defined provisions on criminal offenses by introducing a single offense of rape and provisions on the state of long-term suffering. He reported on the first data which indicate that the number of criminal cases is increasing, while the number of misdemeanour cases is decreasing, which indicates a stronger sanctioning of violence. In addition, Minister Malenica announced changes to the Criminal Code, which will prosecute sexual harassment ex officio.²³

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Spasime-394629151370980>

²² <https://mrosp.gov.hr/vijesti/ministar-josip-aladrovic-i-ministar-pravosudja-i-uprave-ivan-malenica-odrzali-sastanak-s-predstavnicama-inicijative-spasime/12231>

²³ <https://mrosp.gov.hr/vijesti/ministar-josip-aladrovic-i-ministar-pravosudja-i-uprave-ivan-malenica-odrzali-sastanak-s-predstavnicama-inicijative-spasime/12231>

Since then, the newest Criminal Code effective from July 31st 2021²⁴ was updated. Article 153 concerning rape has been updated and the imprisonment has been increased from a minimum of one year to a minimum of three years for severe life-threatening rape cases. Article 179a concerning domestic violence has introduced the state of long-term suffering as a feature of the criminal offense of domestic violence. This term encompasses the long-term psychological violence that is present in every violent relationship. Its introduction incriminates perpetrators causing psychological pain to the victims, thus emphasizing the nature of abuse that is not solely physical. In the Criminal Code from 2019 Article 156 concerning sexual harassment had a motion of a three-month time limit for reporting, which is no longer the case in the newest Criminal Code and is now prosecuted ex officio.²⁵

Other legislative changes that the #SpasiMe initiative claim they have initiated are amendments to the Criminal Code and the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence. Among them are that physical violence resulting in bodily injury has become a criminal offense. The legal minimum for the crime of domestic violence has been raised to one year. The criminal offense of sexual intercourse without consent was abolished, and the legal minimum sentence for the criminal offense of rape was raised from one year to three years. The statute of limitations for serious sexual offenses against children has been abolished. Convicted paedophiles will no longer be able to perform activities related to children.²⁶

5.1. Non-legislation related achievements

The #SpasiMe initiative claims to be responsible for many non-legislation related achievements concerning dealing with domestic violence in Croatia. Among them are, bringing the topic of domestic violence into the public space and raising awareness of the scale of the problem by organising the protest and founding the #SpasiMe Facebook group which helped destigmatise the topic of domestic violence and give victims a sense that they are not alone. The initiative has exposed the extent of institutional violence against victims and unlawful treatment of victims.

With the Solidarna Foundation they established the #SpasiMe Fund for emergency financial assistance to victims of domestic and sexual violence, which raised over HRK 580,000 and thanks

²⁴ <https://www.zakon.hr/z/98/Kazneni-zakon>

²⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/Spasime-394629151370980>

²⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/Spasime-394629151370980>

to these funds enabled 126 women and 274 children to leave the abusers and start a new life. Six new shelters have been opened in counties in Croatia that did not have them before. The national SOS line 116-006 for assistance to victims of violence has been established, which works 24/7. Education of social welfare system staff by professionals working with victims of domestic violence has been organised to improve the understanding of gender-based violence.

There appears to be a connection between the described meetings dealing with changing the legislation concerning domestic violence and the actual changes coming in place. Although it is difficult to establish a cause-effect dynamic between the mobilisation and these changes, as it is always in the analysis of social movements' impact, since there are many factors at play, it is still relevant that these changes followed the mobilisation and that it surely contributed to impact public opinion too. All of these achievements were made in order to help victims of domestic violence in many ways, legally, financially, socially and psychologically.

6. Discussion

6.1. Does mobilisation matter?

“We brought the topic of domestic violence into the public space” (Ana Pecotić)

The first hypothesis of this thesis is about the media coverage of domestic violence by a national newspaper with high circulation both of print and online editions. The research was conducted on the online edition of the newspaper Jutarnji.hr to test the following hypothesis: The Croatian newspaper Jutarnji list wrote more about the topic of domestic violence after the emergence of the #SpasiMe initiative. In the time frame selected for the media analysis, which is February and March of 2019, there were 27 articles on the topic of domestic violence in February, while in March 75 articles were published on the topic of domestic violence. Compared to the month of February the media coverage of domestic violence almost tripled in the month of March. Therefore, the fact that the initiative #SpasiMe emerged on March 1st resulted in a substantial rise in the number of published articles about domestic violence following the emergence of the #SpasiMe initiative. This significant consequence was predicted by the first hypothesis of this thesis, which has thus been confirmed.

The second hypothesis proposed in this thesis is about Croatian legislation on domestic violence: The #SpasiMe initiative made a difference in Croatian society concerning domestic violence laws. The initiative’s founders had many meetings with different politicians in which they put forward their proposal of measures for the introduction of a zero-tolerance rate for domestic violence on three levels: legislative changes and changes in implementation practice, education and prevention and strengthening of system’s institutions. The #SpasiMe initiative appears to have influenced the adding and/or changing of several articles of the Criminal Code effective from July 31st 2021 concerning domestic violence. The analysis results suggest that the initiative has contributed to making some punishments more severe and eliminating the statute of limitations in some cases. These changes have been demonstrated in the previous results section and support the proposed hypothesis on legislative changes. This thesis suggests that the #SpasiMe initiative succeeded in initialising change and making a difference in Croatian legislation on domestic violence. Consequently, the second hypothesis of this thesis has also been confirmed.

The interview with Ana Pecotić gave an overview of how the initiative started, how and why she got involved, reactions of the public on Jelena's post, #SpasiMe's goal, setbacks that they have been facing, hashtag activism, presence in the media and goals for the future. When describing #SpasiMe's goal, which is providing institutional protection to victims of violence, she added: "Violence will never be eradicated. Our vision is a society in which #SpasiMe will not be needed. Victims of violence when they turn to any institution will be able to receive all possible support and help to: leave the abuser, start a new life, have the means to do so, protect their children, etc. At the beginning of our work, we had a diametrically opposite situation where a woman comes out of violence she comes to the institution and then she is abused there and suffers secondary victimization. You can escape from domestic violence, but you cannot escape from institutional violence. Our mission is actually to eliminate institutional violence and introduce an institutional framework for adequate protection of victims of domestic violence." Ana explains the importance of hashtag activism in completing their mission: "The initiative originated on social media (Facebook) and I can't even imagine how it would live without it. Neither the protest could be organized, nor anything else. In the Facebook group, women shared their stories. In essence, the main strength of the initiative, apart from being completely independent, politically and financially, so we do not have to agree to any compromises about anything, is to have media visibility. First, there is Jelena and the initiative itself through the Facebook group and other things. It would not work without the presence of social media."

Activists have to deal with many ups and downs on their trajectory, whether on the national level or an activist's individual trajectory (Kernalegenn, Rihoux, 2018). While hashtag activism has made a positive impact on the spread of the #SpasiMe initiative, the movement has been facing some setbacks while trying to achieve their goals.: "Primarily, the obstacle is the lack of resources or lack of time since volunteering is done in free time without compensation. This is terribly difficult because almost all of us are business women with families. Secondly, emotional pressure and emotional burnout. Now we have found fresh blood to do the administration. It becomes too emotional to listen to these stories. The system did not want to accept that something was wrong, that even today it does not work and was not ready to make the necessary changes. The police have been accommodating, but we have the least problems with the police. For example, if my husband beats me and I curse at him, the police can arrest both him and me for violence. Me because of verbal violence and him because of physical violence. The judiciary is complex because judges

are independent. At least we had communication with the police and the judiciary through ministers. But social services are a disaster, the women who served as the Minister of Demographics, Family, Youth and Social Policy, first Nada Murganić, who said: “that's how it is in marriage”, after her Vesna Bedeković, you don't know which was really worse. The biggest obstacle is still that the people in the field are the ones who make the decisions, and until that comes down to the operation, none of that will work”. An obstacle that Ana also mentions is that a part of the Croatian public was sceptical of the initiative when it first emerged, even the professionals working in other women’s organisations and the social welfare system. The person who gave them legitimacy was Sanja Sarnavka. “Sanja Sarnavka is the President of the Foundation Board, one of the founders of SOLIDARNA Foundation, human rights and women’s rights activist, an expert in combating gender-based violence and gender equality. She is a former president of the B.a.B.e Associations and Human Rights House in Zagreb.”²⁷ In Ana’s opinion the media couldn't wait to say that non-experts started dealing with domestic violence, but then Sanja Sarnavka explained that anyone who makes the topic visible and contributes to solving the problem is welcome.

Finally, after quite a successful journey so far, Ana Pecotić disclosed what the #SpasiMe initiative is working on at the moment and the plans of the initiative for the future: “Minister Aladrović did not see the analysis of errors in the system as an attack on himself. The biggest changes happened with him. We started in November 2020. We have monthly interviews with him - work plan and what needs to change; we are now working on education of social workers on gender-based violence because none of them has undergone such education... We do not have concrete plans, but we are still doing everything possible until our goal is achieved, as long as we have the strength to do so.”

Ana stresses the importance of the role of each of the founders and describes their work dynamic: “We are passionate, proactive, we see the problem and we want to solve it and not rush through meetings and write announcements, organize panels. Give me the person that makes the decisions and let me sit down and talk to him. That's how we work, at our workplace but also in the initiative. Each of us has her own qualities that contribute to everything being as it should be.”

²⁷ <https://solidarna.hr/sanja-sarnavka/?lang=en>

Influencing the change in legislation concerning domestic violence is one of #SpasiMe's most important goals. Introducing the state of long-term suffering as a feature of the criminal offense of domestic violence, has turned long-term psychological violence from a misdemeanour into a felony, which lead to a more severe penalty for domestic violence and included psychological violence along the physical one. Ana Pecotić appeared as a guest on a radio show called "K'o žena" (eng. "Like a woman", but KO is also a common abbreviation for the island of Korčula in Croatia) broadcast on the Radio Korčula on April 9th 2021. This show talks about gender equality and invites different guests to comment on issues related to it. On the show Ana compared penalty for domestic violence to the one of crossing the road at a red light since both had been tried as misdemeanours before domestic violence became a felony, even though domestic violence is a far more serious act. During the broadcast she shared data that showed that there had been a 40% increase in reported criminal cases of domestic violence in Croatia since it was characterised as a felony and has a stricter penalty. The rise in reporting is also happening because of the abolishment of the three month limit for reporting sexual harassment. Due to different circumstances it is sometimes difficult or even impossible for a victim of domestic violence to come forward immediately or within the time period that used to be stipulated by law. On the show she also commented on how biological parenthood is being forced in Croatia even in cases when a child's parents are bringing him/her up in a harmful situation. Ana explained how those parents get too many chances to change their behaviour but are not offered the tools to do so. Commenting on this topic specifically for the situation in Croatia she added that along with the changes in legislation the changing of the mentality has to occur, which she regards as the hardest job and she expressed her opinion that unfortunately Croatia has a long way to go in order to bring about that change.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Making an impact on society through media and legislation

This thesis has two main aims. The first one is to examine the hashtag activism of the initiative #SpasiMe concerning domestic violence and to determine its impact on the public awareness of this important issue. The media analysis that was performed regarding the coverage of the topic domestic violence has found a significant increase in the number of published articles after the emergence of the initiative #SpasiMe. Other findings demonstrate that the media framing of the initiative is mainly in accordance with frames used on the initiative's Facebook page. The two frames that are not mutual are those of the celebrity scene and voluntarism. The former is emphasized by the Jutarnji.hr coverage, whereas the latter is one of the initiative's frames.

The second aim of this thesis is to establish whether any significant changes have been introduced in the laws on domestic violence influenced by the #SpasiMe activism among other contributing factors. The document analysis that was carried out comparing the domestic violence laws before the establishment of the initiative #SpasiMe with the present laws demonstrated differences regarding the classification of those violent acts as felonies as opposed to misdemeanours. As a result of this change in classification the penalties are more severe including longer minimum sentences. Another significant finding to emerge from this document analysis is the abolishment of the statute of limitation which used to be only three months. Both of the observed changes help the victims to come forward and report on those serious crimes. The fact that the victims not only know their abusers, but with most of them they are in a close relationship, has contributed to their reluctance to report the perpetrators to the authorities.

Not only may domestic violence still be considered to be a private matter that is best dealt with within the family or between the people involved in a relationship, the victims are usually ashamed to step forward because they have been repeatedly told that it was their fault and that they caused the violence to happen.

Domestic violence is a grievance with growing weight in social movements. Social media have proved to be an essential tool for disseminating information to the public, both in terms of the number of people to communicate with and the real time in which this communication takes place. Even though literature points out some of existing limitations of hashtag activism, it has gained

momentum and some of the most prominent social movements today belong to that type of activism, e.g. #MeToo. Not every social movement is as well-known as #MeToo. However, this does not necessarily mean that their role is not as important as that of the more prominent movements. This thesis examines the topic of hashtag activism and domestic violence on the Croatian example of the #SpasiMe initiative. The topic was researched from different perspectives including a media analysis, a semi-structured interview with one of the founders of the initiative and a document analysis of Croatian laws on domestic violence. The results of this multi-perspective approach indicate that the #SpasiMe initiative has made an impact by raising awareness of this issue through media coverage and suggest that the movement was able to influence Croatian legislation on domestic violence. Both of these effects supported the victims in their struggle against domestic violence along with the funds that the initiative was able to raise providing assistance to those victims. They have found their safe haven in the closed group of the initiative's Facebook page where they could share their experiences and receive empathy for the difficult situation they are in.

Further research might explore the victims' perspective to gain an insight into how they experience the work of the #SpasiMe initiative and what is their viewpoint on the initiative's achievements. The research could focus on both the positive impact of the initiative's activism as well as aspects that need to be improved. It could also include current media coverage and analyse the way the initiative is framed in the media three years after its emergence. This analysis could be a comparative one, comparing and contrasting the coverage of the topic of domestic violence by two media outlets with different political slant or bias. Other founders of the #SpasiMe initiative could be interviewed to find out their standpoints on the initiative's achievements and whether they differ on some points. Jelena Veljača could elaborate the celebrity scene media frame from her own perspective.

This research suggests that activism can initiate and introduce significant changes that make lives of the victims of domestic violence easier in various ways and provide them with support needed for a new start for them and their close ones who are also victimized. Six women devoted their time and energy for helping the most vulnerable members of our society. It all started with posting #SpasiMe on Facebook which activated a series of events that eventually lead to specific results. There are still many challenges on the way, a considerable one being the mindset of some people

who still consider domestic violence as an integral part of being married and not to be interfered in from the outside. Domestic violence is not a private matter and the society should ensure that it is dealt with as any other type of violence.

This thesis is the first in-depth analysis of the #SpasiMe movement. Its contribution to social movement studies can be classified into three areas. Firstly, this thesis broadens our knowledge about social movements' outcomes by combining the impact in the public sphere and changes in legislation. Secondly, it contributes to the comprehension of feminist activism against gender and domestic violence, in the context of an eastern European country. Finally, by focusing on framing processes, the study contributes to the understanding of the potentiality of digital activism and the dynamic relationship between social movements' communication platforms and mainstream media.

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Appendix

The Criminal Code effective since July 31st 2021²⁸

Article 179a: Domestic violence

„Whoever seriously violates the regulations on protection against domestic violence and thereby causes a family member or close person to fear for their safety or the safety of persons close to them, or puts them in a humiliating position or a state of long-term suffering, without committing a more serious crime, shall be punished by imprisonment from one to three years.“

This article has introduced the state of long-term suffering as a feature of the criminal offense of domestic violence. This term encompasses the long-term psychological violence that is present in every violent relationship. Its introduction incriminates perpetrators causing psychological pain to the victims, thus emphasizing the nature of abuse that is not solely physical.

Article 152: Sexual intercourse without consent

“Whoever has sexual intercourse with another person or a sexual act equated with it without their consent, or induces another person to have sexual intercourse with a third person without their consent, or a sexual act equated with it, or to perform a sexual act equated with sexual intercourse on themselves without their consent, shall be punished by imprisonment from six months to five years.“

This article has been removed from the newest Criminal Code but in the Criminal Code from 2019 it stated as mentioned above.

Article 153: Rape

“Whoever has sexual intercourse with another person or a sexual act equated with it without their consent, or induces another person to have sexual intercourse with a third person without their consent or a sexual act equated with it, or to perform a sexual act equated with sexual intercourse on themselves without their consent, shall be punished with imprisonment from one to five years.“

²⁸ <https://www.zakon.hr/z/98/Kazneni-zakon>

“Whoever commits the offense referred to in paragraph 1 of this article by using force or threatening to directly attack the life or body of the victim or other person, shall be sentenced to three to ten years in prison.“

This article has been updated and the imprisonment has been increased from a minimum of one year to a minimum of three years for severe life threatening rape cases.

Article 156: Sexual harassment

“Whoever sexually harasses another person to whom they are superior or who is in a dependent relationship with them or who is particularly vulnerable due to age, illness, disability, addiction, pregnancy, severe physical or mental disability, shall be punished by imprisonment for up to two years.“

In the Criminal Code from 2019 this Article had a motion of a three-month time limit for reporting, which is no longer the case in the newest Criminal Code and is now prosecuted ex officio.

Article 173: Failure to implement a decision to protect the welfare of the child and other vulnerable groups or acting contrary to the rules of the profession

“An official at work in an institution or state body or a responsible person in the exercise of public authority who does not fulfill legal obligations in a timely manner or clearly does not act according to the rules of the profession in the protection of children and other vulnerable persons due to their age, severe physical or mental disability or pregnancy and as a result endangers the health or development of a child, i.e. the health and well-being of a vulnerable person, will be punished by a prison sentence of up to three years.“

This section of the article was added in the newest Criminal Code and is meant to sanction officials <profession. In the case of domestic violence it specifically concerns the social welfare system.

This change is visible in the Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code published on July 23rd 2021 by the Croatian Parliament.