

PROMISE: Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement: Opportunities and challenges for conflicted young people across Europe.

WP6: From Conflict to Innovation: Ethnographic Case Studies

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Supporters' Varteks FC

Croatia

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Executive summary: This is the first Croatian sociological research on a specific social actor - Supporters' Varteks FC. It is football club founded and owned by its supporters. Old Varteks FC played an important role in Croatian football until its management and local political/football elites changed its name to Varaždin and brought the club to bankruptcy as a result of numerous deals, legal cases and convictions related to match fixing. In 2011, this led the White Stones, passionate supporters of old Varteks, to join with other supporters to found a new football club with the old name – Varteks. Today that club is known as 'Supporters' Varteks'.

This paper is based on 16 months of ethnographic research with members of Supporters' Varteks. This group of supporters is marginalised because of their age, stigmatised and frequently labelled in the media as hooligans and in conflict with the local political establishment and local/national football establishment. However, they did not remain isolated in hedonistic places (parks, pubs etc.) but emerged as a social actor, building their football club on a democratic basis (one member one vote) and fighting for their values despite the hostile social/political environment. Those values align with the Against Modern Football Movement (AMF), which, in the Croatian context, is not only against rigid commercialisation and police repression, but is also a movement against corruption in football and politics.

One of the key findings of this research is the demonstration of the inaccuracy of the stereotype that regularly appears in both the Croatian mainstream media and the academic community concerning supporters – a stereotype of violence and extreme right-wing political orientation. Our respondents represent a social actor that includes both representatives of the ultras subculture and other supporters who share the sensibilities of the 'Against modern football' movement and who oppose corruption and crime in the Croatian Football Federation. Whilst this stance brings them into conflict with a range of social and political institutions, it also makes them a potential site of social innovation.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Why Football?

This report is the first scientific paper on the first Croatian 'Against Modern Football'¹ (AMF) football club founded (2011) and owned by its supporters. The paper is based on 16 months of ethnographic research. We decided to conduct research with this group because it is a group which has been in conflict with the local political establishment and local/national football establishment from its inception; in fact, that conflict partially started even before the foundation of the 'Supporters' Varteks' in 2011. In the Croatian context, the 'AMF' movement is not only concerned with commercialisation and police repression, it is also a movement against corruption in football and politics. Marginalised because of their age, stigmatised and frequently labelled in the media as hooligans, the Varteks supporters did not remain isolated in hedonistic places (parks, pubs etc.) but emerged as a social actor, building their football club on a democratic basis (one member one vote) and fighting for their values despite the hostile social/political environment. This stigmatisation accompanied by the potential for social involvement, even innovation, constitutes the groups as an interesting case study for the PROMISE project.

Sport is indivisible from the structure of modern society. As an important social institution, sport greatly depends on the dominant culture, i.e. the norms and values of the society it is a part of. Sport in Croatia has had great social importance for decades, especially the most popular sport of football. The development of the sociology of sport in Croatia began in the late 1980s with research of football hooliganism (Žugić, 1996; Perasović and Bartoluci, 2007). This research into the football supporter subculture (Buzov *et al.*, 1989; Fanuko *et al.*, 1991; Lalić, 1993) significantly directed future empirical research of youth subcultures in general, foremost through the employment of the ethnographic method. Following the Croatian Homeland War (1991-1995) and the transition process, research was sporadically published on this subject (Perasović, 1995; Vrcan and Lalić, 1999; Vrcan 2003). Perasović and Mustapić (2013) argue that research on football supporters came to a complete halt during this period, and that an 'ethnographic turn' also took place in the broader international academic community. In this context, a handful of sociologists have returned to empirical research of football supporters in recent years (Perasović and Mustapić, 2013; Perasović, 2015; Hodges, 2016a, 2016b; Šantek and Vukušić, 2016; Perasović and Mustapić, 2017a, 2017b; Hodges and Brentin, 2018; Vukušić and Miošić, 2018).

1.2 Youth and the Socio-political Context in Croatia

Croatia's 'transition' differs from transition processes in other post-socialist countries in that transition in Croatia was tied to the Croatian Homeland War (1991-1995). In addition to material damage resulting from the conflict, it is also important to mention the enormous demographic losses the war left in its wake. The traumatic experiences of the Croatian transition mean that its young people are undergoing a process of personal maturation, and taking on social roles, under the expansion and domination of political capitalist values (Županov, 1995) and consumer culture alongside various forms of nepotism, corruption and crime in the political system. Županov (1995) emphasises that a 'new rich class' formed in Croatia during the 1990s that would never have come

¹ AMF is the common denominator for the broad and heterogeneous social movement 'against modern football' across Europe. The establishment of football clubs by their supporters represents one of the means of struggle against current processes of the rigid commodification of football. Supporters also protest against new laws, surveillance and control. Within the movement, there are strong nostalgic sensibilities to the periods when loyalty of players to their clubs was natural, as well as links between football clubs and local communities/identities.

about under normal circumstances; it was created as a result of the ‘theft and plunder of national resources’ (Županov, 1995:146). Franičević (2002) analysed the dynamics of economic change in Croatia during the 1990s, emphasising that ‘national capitalism was established, i.e. a specific complex of economic policies and privatization, which was the main cause of the weakness of the Croatian economy.’ Because of the system’s deviations, he named it ‘crony capitalism’. That type of capitalism is unstable as such, but the war and its consequences additionally made the life conditions more unstable – refugee crisis and displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, ‘us and them’ media discourses, the spread of fear and uncertainty etc. The transition from childhood to adulthood is always complex, but under the ‘war atmosphere’ and presence of conflicted society with unstable institutions, such transition was more complicated and full of potential conflict between young people and social institutions. The political and economic establishment perceived particular youth subcultures as a threat (if only a symbolic one) to these social and political processes. During the 1990s, football supporters (especially the Bad Blue Boys, supporters of Dinamo from Zagreb) were labelled as hooligans, ‘Yugo-nostalgics’, ‘anti-Croatian’, and ‘anti-state elements’ by the political establishment and most of the media (which was almost entirely state-owned at the time) (Vrcan, 2003).² Indeed, youth more generally was politically marginalised during the entire transition process in Croatia (Ilišin, 2003, 2006). Existing social and political processes had a crucial influence on the process of distancing young people from politics and creating mistrust in political institutions (Franc et al., 2018). Mistrust of institutions and disappointment with politicians in Croatia are especially high among football supporters (Perasović and Mustapić, 2017a).

1.3 Modern Football in Europe and Croatia

Modern football is a short hand for referring to the process by which the most successful clubs and competitions have become a more and more important and profitable part of global business in recent decades. The largest clubs and associations function as corporations that brand their products and services with the goal of increasing profit. To this end, they focus on the ‘supporter-consumer’. Professional football clubs are moving further and further from their former significance as symbols of local communities as the key element of their identity. The dynamic commodification of football, which began in the UK in the 1960s, saw a new phase in the 1990s, especially with the introduction of the so-called ‘Bosman ruling’ in 1995 and the liberalisation of football player transfers. Among other things, this ruling made modern professional football into what it is today (King 2003; Giulianotti and Robertson 2004; Millward 2011). The loyalty of footballers to clubs from their own local communities thus became a part of amateur football or a romantic ideal from the past. These transformations of modern football in the 1990s took place parallel with the establishment of an independent Croatia and of a football federation and competitions in Croatia. There is no doubt that Croatian football competitions are on the European periphery in terms of quality and marketing significance. The First Croatian Football League has changed its format multiple times since being founded in 1992, however a key fact is

² Srđan Vrcan (2003) wrote of the conflict between the Bad Blue Boys and Franjo Tuđman, president of Croatia at the time. BBB wanted the club, which had been renamed NK Croatia, to have its original name of NK Dinamo reinstated. Despite being an impassioned supporter of this club and a regular attendee at matches until his death in 1999, Tuđman refused to consider allowing the name to change. The old name was only reinstated in 2000. In the context of this period, it is possible to understand the label of ‘Yugo-nostalgic’, ‘anti-Croatian element’, or ‘Soros’ mercenaries’ as an attempt by the system to cast supporters as enemies. These labels have no connection to reality, as the supporters were predominantly strongly patriotic, and the system – which drew its own legitimacy from national (ethnic) sovereignty – actually wanted to waive the right to criticism within this same referential framework, portraying them as enemies of the Croatian state. A few years earlier, during socialism, these same supporters were labelled as ‘Croatian nationalists’ and ‘hooligans’.

that it was composed of four former Yugoslav first-league teams (Dinamo Zagreb, Hajduk Split, Rijeka, and Osijek) and a handful of lower-league teams from the Yugoslav period. Numerous clubs went bankrupt due to financial difficulties, however all of them were financed significantly by local government and sponsored by large state-owned companies for many years. Politics, both local and national, had a great influence on the management structures and financing of clubs, just as it had during socialism. From among numerous court cases, three provide an important insight into of the most important shall be chosen to portray the way in which crime has permeated Croatian football: the 'Offside Affair'; the 'Fair Refereeing Affair'; and court proceedings against Zdravko Mamić and his collaborators for money laundering. During the 'Offside Affair', 22 individuals were arrested for match fixing in the First Croatian Football League, and 15 footballers and football club employees were convicted. The 'Fair Refereeing Affair' began in 2011 with the arrest of Željko Širić (vice president of the Croatian Football Federation), Stjepan Djedović (president of the Referee Commission), and their collaborators. Stjepan Djedović pleaded guilty and was released on parole, while Željko Širić was sentenced to four years in prison in 2017. Zdravko Mamić, executive vice president of Dinamo Zagreb football club, was arrested in 2015 and is currently involved in court proceedings together with a few other football club employees, all of whom have been accused of a conspiracy to defraud Dinamo of more than €19 million between 2004 and 2015 by concluding fictional agreements between the club and numerous foreign companies and delivering invoices for non-existent services for player transfers. Regardless of this situation, Zdravko Mamić remains the absolute ruler of Croatian football, and regardless of the successes of its national team, Croatian football has been referred to by supporters and some Croatian media for years as the 'football swamp'.

1.4 NK Varteks and White Stones

Varaždin is a town in the north of Croatia with 47,000 residents according to the last census data; it is also the seat of a county of the same name. Slavija Football Club was founded in Varaždin in 1931; its name was changed to NK Tekstilac in 1945, and again to NK Varteks in 1958, when its main sponsor became Varteks, the largest textile and clothing factory in Croatia at the time. Although Varteks supporters were already organising to attend home and away games by the 1980s, the supporter group White Stones was founded in 1990, and has operated without interruption since. Before 1991 and the collapse of Yugoslavia, the club was most often ranked second or third in competition; its greatest success was reaching the finals of the Yugoslav Cup in 1961. In 1992, the club became a member of the 1st Croatian Football League, where its greatest successes have been three third-place victories and six cup final performances. The club's greatest international success was entering the quarterfinals of the Cup Winners' Cup in the 1998/99 season. This was also the last Croatian club to 'greet the spring' (to qualify for the second phase of competitions, usually played in spring) in European competition. The club's main sponsor, Varteks textile factory, experienced a decline in business and layoffs in the 2000s, and NK Varteks also found itself in financial difficulties. The club leadership was in constant flux, and in 2010, the club was renamed NK Varaždin. Due to this, as well as to particular Varteks players' involvement in the 'Offside Affair', White Stones organised match boycotts, protests, and various organised efforts to keep the club operating under the name Varteks and in accordance with the law. Due to years of dissatisfaction with the state of the club and the name change, supporters (members of White Stones and other fans of the club) founded a new club with the old name NK Varteks on 29 April 2011. Due to its debts, NK Varaždin filed for bankruptcy in 2012. Since then, NK Varteks, which began from the lowest rank, managed to reach the Third league in 2017/18, while NK Varaždin entered the Second league in this same season.

NK Varaždin is headed by former players and officials who were once part of the 'old' Varteks prior to its bankruptcy in 2012. The club continues to play and train at Anđelko Herjavec Stadium in Varaždin (capacity: 10,800 seats); it depends greatly on public grants, and is supported by the local government and the largest local companies. The club also enjoys 'logistic' support from the Croatian Football Federation. On the other hand, NK Varteks has a reputation as an AMF and 'Supporters' Club' that functions under the 'socio' model of 'one member one vote'. It is primarily financed through membership fees, donations and sponsorships from small companies and craft businesses from Varaždin and the greater area, which support both the old and new Varteks. The club played and trained at an improvised pitch, in fact the field with no terraces, just standing area around it, in the village of Jalkovec, in the suburbs of Varaždin from its creation until 2017.

Crawford (2004) emphasises that football supporters in the older sociological literature are observed primarily as deviants or obsessed fanatics who comprise a group. However, in various aspects, the world of football, including supporters as an important part of this world, affect the society in which they live. Supporter activities strongly affect one's position and relations in various institutions such as family, school, university, work, etc. It is then understandable that White Stones ultras, like other NK Varteks supporters, have been subjected to labelling, barriers, and various problems in both club activities and in their private lives in recent years. One of the authors of this report has been researching football supporters since the late 1980s, while both authors have been researching football supporters in Croatia together continuously since 2011. The world of football and supporters is, in addition to a research interest, also a subject of personal affinity to the authors, primarily as supporters of HNK Hajduk Split. Therefore, the selection of this theme represents a combination of inductive rationale and deductive reasoning. On the one hand, we have followed and observed the phenomenon of the creation of the first true supporter (AMF) club in Croatia (NK Varteks) even prior to the outset of this research.³ On the other hand, we are verifying the hypothesis from the literature on supporters as social actors included in the work of a broader, international social movement against modern football. The goal of this research is to affirm how stigmatised and conflicted young people succeed in creating social innovation by joining members of subculture groups (White Stones) and other Varteks supporters into an active social actor in a local environment, despite the barriers placed before them by the football and political establishments in this same local environment.

2. Methods

This research uses the participant observer method with detailed field diary entries; towards the end of field research, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Our initial contact with individuals involved in NK Varteks began prior to the outset of this research in 2016. At one point, both researchers were university professors to an individual who was especially active in the workings of the club. The second moment in which contact with a few active members of the club and of White Stones took place on 17 May 2015, when a friendly match was held between NK Varteks and HNK Hajduk Split in Jalkovec. The respondent who was a former student of both researchers became our 'key informant'. He enabled us to meet a few groups of young people involved in White Stones and NK Varteks. Field research began with trips to Varaždin and socialising with supporters in September of 2016 (see Plate 1). Between then and January 2018,

³ NK Zagreb, founded in 1946, reached its greatest success in 2002 as the Croatian champion. Because of dissatisfaction with the work of the management, the change of the club's colours and logo, and a string of other reasons, supporters led by the ultras group White Angels also founded the AMF club NK Zagreb 041 in 2014. For more on NK Zagreb 041, see: Hodges (2016c); Hodges and Brentin (2018); Vukušić and Miošić (2018).

we wrote 53 field diary entries, of which 21 are related to NK Varteks home and away matches, to which we travelled and supported alongside White Stones (see Plate 8). The other entries relate to various forms of socialisation with supporters and club members in cafés and other public and private places in Varaždin. We spent a total of 94 days in the field, which amounts to roughly 1,500 hours of observation. The journal entries amount to a total of 62,000 words. We recorded and transcribed 25 interviews. The shortest interview lasted 40 minutes, and the longest lasted 230 minutes. The majority of interviews lasted between 80 and 120 minutes and all transcribed interviews amount to a total of 301,612 words. Nearly all interviews were carried out in the quiet atmosphere of private homes or flats which the respondents themselves made available to us, with the exception of a few interviews conducted in a hotel room; one interview was conducted in a car. During observation, we took around 100 photographs and ten short video recordings, each lasting roughly two minutes.

2.1 Access, positionality and field relations/dynamics

At the outset, we attended matches with our key informant and slowly began to meet people and get to know members of various generations of White Stones, as well as a few informal groups oriented around NK Varteks. In contrast to an earlier ethnographic research project we carried out in the 'Torcida' supporter group, during which our positionality and guarantee of entry and trust lay in the fact that both researchers are supporters of Hajduk and members of Torcida, this research found us in a different location and a different supporter group. The majority of members of White Stones viewed us primarily as Hajduk supporters, and then as sociologists, regardless of the fact that we had familiarised them with the research and our role in it. This perception was certainly strengthened by the frequent appearance of one of the researchers in the media, including his speech before 30,000 people in Split during protests against the Croatian Football Federation in November of 2014. Due to this, the respondents frequently referred to us as 'donkeys' (Cro. *tovari*), a derogatory term for Dalmatians and Hajduk supporters in the Croatian context. We accepted this as a friendly joke, and thus strengthened the impression of our belonging to the supporter scene. With every subsequent trip to Varaždin, we expanded our circle of acquaintances and began to earn trust. Our identity as football supporters (or at least a significant part thereof) doubtlessly had a positive influence on our ability to gain the trust of the respondents. We left the interviews to the very end of our research period, so that the most sensitive part came after the establishment of trust; the great majority of young supporters would certainly not have agreed to a recorded conversation at the outset, which is entirely understandable to us as ultras subculture researchers. Regardless of the fact that we encountered no serious problems, a great deal of time was necessary to expand our circle of acquaintances and move out of the initial circle of respondents. During our time in the field, it was difficult to avoid the fact that some respondents were more extroverted and communicative, and that our first independent socialising with them was determined by a few individuals who imposed themselves in various ways. Only after investing a sufficient amount of time, traveling to Varaždin numerous times and attending multiple NK Varteks matches, were we able to access those who seemed more introverted and who were in some kind of opposition towards the individuals who first approached us. In time, we realised the subtle differences in places where particular respondents gather, we learned of their likes and dislikes for each other, we began to understand the complex picture of variations in those belonging to different generations, neighbourhoods, and other differences and relationships that exist in this relatively small group. Our awareness of the rules that exist in the ultras subculture and our behaviour, which made apparent the fact that we shared values and sensibilities that arise from a critical relationship towards corruption and crime in Croatian football, certainly contributed to the establishment of interpersonal trust. Among



other things, this resulted in the respondents consenting to interviews. Given the aversion towards police in the ultras subculture and the explicit mistrust of the institutions, symbols, markings, and procedures of the establishment, we decided against the use of written consent for participation in the research, relying instead on verbal forms of consent from respondents. The respondents chose their own pseudonyms and they were introduced to our anonymization procedures, although true anonymization in this kind of group and a city of this size is not always entirely possible in some situations. For this reason, particular descriptions and statements by respondents that would compromise their anonymity have been left out of the report. Considering our age (40 and 54) during the research, it was not easy to enter informal groups in which the average age was 18 or 20; in such situations, we were aided greatly by one respondent (Eminence Grise) who became a kind of integrative point for a part of the younger generation. We developed a significant friendly relationship with him, and with his help, we were offered the chance to socialise and, later, to interview the youngest part of the group.

When choosing individuals to interview, we followed criteria that would represent all significant subgroups of White Stones, endeavouring to include representatives of various generations and neighbourhoods, etc. Within a sample of 25 interviews, 23 respondents were male and two were female. This reflects the actual composition of the Varteks group. The youngest respondent was 16 years old, while the oldest was 46. Eighteen respondents fell between 16 and 29 years of age, while seven were older than 29. While this means around a quarter of those interviewed were older than the formal target age group of the PROMISE project, it falls within the parameters agreed by the Consortium for cases where the socio-demographic of the group was older or where it was important to include key 'gatekeepers' in the respondent set. All but two respondents, who had moved to other cities due to work and were thus only partially active, were fully active members of the group. The majority of respondents had full-time jobs (17 of them), three were secondary school pupils, and the rest were unemployed, seasonal workers, or university students. As concerns education, one respondent had completed elementary school, three were secondary school pupils, the majority of the rest had completed vocational or secondary education, and four respondents had university degrees. As concerns marriage status, four of the respondents in the sample were married, one was divorced, and the rest were either single or in relationships.

3. Key Findings

3.1 The old NK Varteks

In order to explain the source of the energy to resist the changes that would come to their club, it is first important to know how supporters forged their passion for Varteks football club. NK Varteks never won a championship or cup trophy; however it was a significant player in the First league before it was relegated.⁴ During this time, the club's main sponsor was quite successful and financially powerful. The individual key to the club's rise in the 1990s was its president Anđelko Herjavec. The following view is typical for nearly all respondents, and is well illustrated by the point emphasised by Đoko: 'It all went to hell for me when Anđelko died. Anđelko died, some new people came and everything went downhill.' Varteks had a well-visited stadium, played entertaining football, and was known for its quality youth academy. As this part of Croatia gravitated towards Zagreb, during Yugoslavia, the great majority of football fans here were Dinamo supporters. However, with Varteks' entry into the first league, young footballers soon became the idols of children and young supporters. Žilac, like many others, appreciated most the

⁴ Croatian champions: GNK Dinamo 18, HNK Hajduk 6, NK Zagreb and HNK Rijeka 1 each. Cup winners: GNK Dinamo 14, HNK Hajduk 6, HNK Rijeka 4, NK Osijek and NK Inter 1 each.

'local boy' Miljenko Mumlek, and he describes how he perceived him at the time: '...I remember Mumlek, when I was training as a kid and going to matches, and when he would walk past me it was as if Ibrahimović or someone like that had walked past.' The majority of respondents, except for the youngest who came of age with the Varteks supporter club, built their relationship with Varteks during its successful first league period prior to the name change in 2010. During this time, the majority was truly interested in football as their favourite sport. Our respondents generally began to attend matches with an older member of their family, sitting in the 'west' Stand, like JK 47 who attended with his grandfather, or Seven and 1990 who went with their fathers. Thus, our respondents were the very first generation of citizens of Varaždin for whom Varteks was their first love in football. Such a strong emotional connection also engendered a very strong negative relationship towards the deviations and crime that brought this club to bankruptcy, its name change, and its move down to a lower league in the late 2000s. Supporters are especially disappointed with the fact that most of the players they considered 'legends of the club', such as Mumlek, were involved in these processes and did not support the Varteks supporter club. Rex summarises how he now perceives his childhood idols: 'Well, I would say they're local sheriffs, burnt-out stars who aren't stars anywhere except in their heads, and maybe in Varaždin.'

3.2 Turning points: corruption, name change, bankruptcy, and the founding of the Varteks supporter club

One important turning point for all our respondents who are old enough to remember the events of the time is the period of match fixing and the revelations concerning this event, which would later become known to the public as the 'Offside Affair'. For our respondents, this turning point began with a match against Šibenik in 2010. Varteks and Šibenik played two matches, a championship match and a cup match, with just a few days in between. Varteks secured a useful win in Šibenik (they were in dire need of the points); then, these same opponents played a cup match in Varaždin, which Šibenik won. Supporters protested during the match in Varaždin, demanding an explanation for the defeat from the players and club management. They attempted to break the barricade and move onto the pitch, but the players succeeded in calming them. Then, for the first time in the history of the club, supporters broke into a practice session a few days after the match. In the words of Kapelnik:

That was the first time we came to a practice session and – at that moment we weren't exactly sure what was going on, when there's some sort of foul play going on then everyone is suspicious, every result is suspicious, every tackle, every foul, every intervention, and we wanted to let them know that we had been on the terraces for twenty years, that we had more years on the terraces than some players did on the field, and that we demanded they fight! (Kapelnik)

The same respondent explicitly describes the consequences of these events: 'It was such an ugly situation afterwards that it would be difficult for someone who's a true supporter, an ultras, who really has an opinion of his own, to make himself continue to support the club'. Random calls this a kind of disappointment 'the shattering of dreams'. Walker also emphasises one of the best-known players, Mumlek, and mentions how this turning point completely put him off following the club:

Oh, it's terrible. Terrible, when you watch players, like Mumlek too for example, who were something at the time, and when you see him at 37 playing and being team captain, you think, he really loves this club, he wants to help, and then you realise they

were fixing matches, it just makes you sick of it all. You see that everything you believed, everything you lived for, everything you followed, everything you were preoccupied by in life at that time – we lived for the club 24 hours a day – everything falls apart, and that’s when I left. And I didn’t come back for a long time. (Walker)

Some of the respondents might have considered forgiveness if the players had honestly apologised or repented:

That’s one thing I simply can’t overlook; maybe – no, I couldn’t overlook it, but I might be able to understand it if he had ever shown any kind of regret, if he had stood before the supporters and said: boys, I’m sorry, I fucked up, apologised, showed regret, showed, you know, anything that showed he was even the least bit sorry, but he never did, and that’s just one more reason not to forgive him. Essentially, yes, a betrayal. A betrayal and a disappointment. (Whatever)

The majority of respondents who were active at the time perceived this turning point as a warning sign, a signal for either some kind of action or complete withdrawal and disappointment. Discovering that matches had been fixed, alongside the name change and other financial fraud that had resulted in the club’s bankruptcy, led to the founding of a new club with the old name – NK Varteks – which the First-league club’s management had given up on. Our respondents mention that they had been disappointed because everyone else, including the public in Varaždin, journalists, and other members of the football and city political establishment did not want to talk about it, justifying match fixing by players because their salaries were late. Matches continued under the name NK Varaždin as if nothing significant had happened. In fact, the disappointment of the White Stones and other fans of Varteks and fair football turned into the strength and decisiveness to take action and found a new club:

It was one of those reasons that simply forces you to take some other path, because nothing was happening. The club president didn’t react, nor did the public in Varaždin, journalists, they all swept it under the carpet. Then the name change happened and everything just took its course, and then in 2011 we suggested to the NK Varaždin management that they consider reinstating the old name Varteks. And then the club president, Mr Horvat, answered that discussing this with us was the last thing on his mind. And that’s where that story ended, a few days after that we announced to the public that we were founding a football club called NK Varteks. (Kapelnik)

The founding assembly was held on 29 May 2011. Some supporters decided to set off on an uncertain path with the old name, embittered by people who had driven their Varteks into bankruptcy and by the participation of key players in the ‘bookie mafia’ affair. The founding assembly was attended not only by the White Stones but by other Varteks supporters as well. Serviam provides a good overview of the number and structure of the active supporters at the time:

In May 2011, the first assembly was held towards the end of the month, and there was, let’s say, around sixty not only White Stones but some people from the East Stand and some people from the West, and that meant if there were around two hundred Stones, there were from 50-100 people up on the West Stand, depending on the match. And of those three hundred or so active supporters who went to matches, sixty or so of them came to Riki’s pub and founded the club. (Serviam)

The founding of the club was not a mere one-time symbolic act – it was the beginning of a long, difficult task, and a shock for those supporters who had been used to First-league pitches:

The first practice was the Varteks selection on that pitch in Jalkovec, which looked at the time like you'd come to a farmer's field, like there had been horses – the best part is that horses did use to graze there. You come from some First League and end up on a real farmer's field you come to a playing field that has no façade, that doesn't even have a fence. You could measure the grass in percent, I don't know, eighty percent dirt, twenty percent grass. Those were the initial problems we had to face as soon as we founded the club, no one gave us a stadium nor did anyone give us anything, we had to do absolutely everything from scratch. From scratch! (Eminence Grise)

Fixing the poor pitch was just one example of a large number of things the founders of Varteks had to undertake for the first time in their lives:

We had no idea the problems we were going to come up against, it was all so complex. We were looking for a pitch, and we got one, but now none of us actually knew how bad a shape it was in, we didn't have a clue how to maintain a pitch. But then you have no choice, you need this, you need that, it was a property owned by the city but we got the toilet running, we set up a safety fence, we bought goal nets, we chased off moles, we planted grass, I learned to do things I never thought I would do in my life. In the first season when they chased off the moles there were people who came at five in the morning with spades and waited for the moles. People with wives and children. So what does that tell you? (Kapelnik)

In addition to the founders, who invested a great deal of effort and time, volunteered, learned skills 'on the hoof', and gave their all, there were also other supporters (active today) who were unaware of what was happening, and were sceptical towards the founding of a new club in various ways. Some, like Wild Boys, even considered it a betrayal of the real club, which would perhaps somehow consolidate and come back:

And at the start, I thought, what are you thinking, it's a betrayal of the club, and so on and so on, but the club had already been founded. It took me a long time to swallow it. It simply wasn't Varteks to me. But in time I saw how much they (people around NK Varaždin) were attacking us and who was attacking us, and that was more like it. Now it's almost like the old Varteks. (Wild Boys)

Regardless of the fact that some supporters knew of FC United of Manchester⁵ and similar examples from other countries, they could not believe that a similar story would take place where they lived:

I knew about FCUM, but I didn't believe it would happen here, not in a million years, it was totally obscure to me. During the first year, the second year even after the founding of the new Varteks, I didn't realize how great a thing it was, until I got myself together and started following it, until I realised that there were young people, there were two or three hundred kids who would come, there was one member-one vote, everything was transparent, no one was making money, no one was lining their own

⁵ FCUM is one of the most known football clubs founded and owned by its supporters.

pockets, everything was out in the open, just the way a club should be, the boys were playing for, you know, a thousand, a thousand and five hundred or two thousand kuna, regardless, it's not a lot of money, you know. Exactly the way it should be. (Rex)

Seven years after the founding of the club, awareness of the great significance of this act was strongly present among all respondents interviewed, both those who worked hard from the start and believed strongly in the idea, as well as those who were sceptical at first, but later joined wholeheartedly.

3.3. The relationship towards modern football (national team) and the creation of new sensibilities

Football is a passion for the majority of our respondents. Many of them played in football teams for a significant part of their childhood. Some of them were promising young players, and some even played football professionally like Totti: 'I've played football ever since I was born. I was a footballer and I played in the First League and abroad.' Some still play football recreationally, however their following of professional football and matches manifests itself differently. Seven follows football closely: 'We also follow all Big Five⁶ matches, we follow the German and Croatian leagues, I really follow them.' A small portion of our respondents also follow and are fans of some foreign clubs. However, their following of these clubs also includes the supporter groups of these clubs and the supporter atmosphere they create at matches. Totti mentions: 'I always watch matches that have some kind of atmosphere. The stadiums are more or less full everywhere, but it's not the same to watch Chelsea vs Shakhtar or the crazy Greeks against Barcelona. It's the best experience for me to watch that atmosphere'. Particular individuals follow exclusively Varteks matches. All respondents share an expressly negative opinion towards the amounts of money involved in player transfers and the commercialisation of football.

It has nothing to do with football anymore. When you watch Arsenal and their new stadium where 30-40% of the people are tourists. It doesn't make any sense when you watch it, the first row are all cameras, video cameras, they're filming, taking pictures, what the fuck did you come for? I don't know, big football doesn't make sense anymore. It's all about money. (Walker)

They view Croatian professional football in a similar light. They are expressly negative and critical towards the deviations that have taken place as a result of the operations of the Croatian Football Federation and GNK Dinamo under the leadership of Zdravko Mamić, as well as the dictate of profit in the local context.

It's all gone too far, it seems to me, football has lost its magic altogether. When you see everything that is going on with the Croatian national team and Mamić, it's totally turned my stomach. I actually don't follow anything anymore – because it's all against my principles. I don't see how it makes sense to waste my time on that kind of thing. (Rex)

As a group, White Stones has not gone to national team matches for the past few years, and some individuals have not gone even longer than this.

⁶ Big Five means English, German, Italian, Spanish and French (league).

First of all, I think it doesn't make sense for them (CFF) to make any kind of profit as a civil association. Their function is to regulate competitions, to make sure that each one has the infrastructure and conditions necessary for play. I don't see what reason there could be for them to be a money factory. (Serviam)

As much as I loved the national team once, then there was a period where I was neutral, but I would be glad when they scored a goal. But now I'm no longer neutral, instead I want them to lose, because I simply hope, I don't believe but I hope that it could maybe change some things, reduce the flow of money to the mafia, so those people will just turn on each other, let's say, because they're that sort of people. (Whatever)

3.4 Agents and sites of conflict

During the period of the old Varteks, the White Stones lived a life similar to any other ultras group, where in addition to existing conflicts with the Federation or players in the football and political establishment, the main conflict was against opposing ultras groups that also belonged to the same subculture. During this period, conflicts with supporters of Osijek, Cibalia, Dinamo, Hajduk, and other clubs were followed by conflicts with the police. After the founding of the 'Supporters' Varteks', this situation changed. In the lower leagues, there are no ultras subcultural groups nor is there organised supporting. Conflict with the Croatian Football Federation, the police, and the local football and political establishment, all of which existed prior to the founding of 'Supporters' Varteks', has now become even more explicit and visible. As opposed to conflicts with other supporter groups, the conflict with the local and national elites that manage football are clearer because NK Varteks must act and play under the rules of the same federation they are fighting against. Since 2011, NK Varteks itself – not only the White Stones – has been an actor in the fight for different football. In addition to extant agents of conflict such as the Croatian Football Federation, the police, and the national team (in a sense), people involved with NK Varaždin, led by the 'legends' of the old Varteks, now find themselves with a significant place among the agents of conflict. During our field research, a former Varteks player (a 'legend') and a current key figure in NK Varaždin, became the trainer of the Croatian national team, which intensified the tensions between the opinions of our respondents and the general position of NK Varteks in relation to NK Varaždin, the mainstream media, and the football establishment in Varaždin and Croatia.

3.4.1 The police

The police is a universal agent of conflict for the overwhelming majority of ultras subculture actors across the world. Supporters in Croatia often perceive the police as an excessively repressive force with no sense of understanding, characterised by a lack of principles in interpretations of the law, selective behaviour, overstepping authority, and endangering the human rights of supporters. One of our first field diary entries in this research is related to an NK Varteks match in the village of Slakovci, where the very number and presence of police amazed us (see Plate 2).

A peaceful village atmosphere without any locally organised supporter groups and without any animosity or unfriendliness towards the visitors. In the peaceful atmosphere of a village, a few trucks of riot police stopped a column of vehicles with Varteks supporters, performed a detailed search, behaving as if they were in Zagreb as security for a Hajduk – Dinamo match. Later, they tested Varteks supporters for alcohol, but not the visibly drunk village residents in the stands. Some White Stones were arrested due to excessive blood alcohol levels. This is only one small example of

selective police behaviour towards supporters. (Fieldwork diary, Slakovec, 22 October 2016)

Walker recounts a few cases also mentioned by other supporters, which are unfortunately more a rule than an exception:

In Koprivnica, it was really like you were a dog, an animal, you have no rights, you can't piss, you can't drink water, in Koprivnica a guy sprayed us with a hose two hours before the match, then they packed us into the stands in 35 degree heat and you're stuck there. We said we were thirsty, and he sprayed us with a hose and laughed. Drink up, he said.

3.4.2 The national team

To the majority of older respondents, the national team represents a symbol of love for one's homeland for which they were prepared to make sacrifices. They followed the national team everywhere and supported it wholeheartedly. However, just like other ultras groups, since the establishment of Mamić's domination of Croatian football in the late 2000's and the ever more apparent use of the national team for personal gain from player transfers to foreign teams, a wave of disappointment began that completely distanced many supporters from the national team, or even engendered a desire for them to lose matches. The national team thus became an agent of conflict, while matches represent sites of conflict. This is one example reflecting a complete lack of understanding between mainstream society and supporters (ultras), as the majority does not follow football and the events surrounding it closely. However, they are interested in patriotic feelings and the national team as a symbol of the Croatian state. This situation only serves to further deepen the gap between our respondents and their social environment, which, with the support of media propaganda, perceives them as 'traitors' of a sort.

Yes, but the biggest problem in Croatia is that people in general – a lot of people aren't interested in football, not just club football but the national team also – they aren't interested in what's happening in general. They just want to be able to say, right, the match is on, I'm going to turn on the TV, I'm a big fan of the Croatian team, now let's take some pictures for Facebook so people can see that I'm wearing a Croatian team shirt, our boys are playing, I know Modrić, I know Mandžukić, now let's go: Croatia, Croatia, the match is over and that's that. And when supporters, Croatian ultras, stated that they wouldn't support the national team, and then all those others, tourist fans and politicians immediately call them anti-Croats, fascists, and god knows what other epithets they bandy around. And they refer back to the war, which is so stupid; people don't realise how narrow-minded they are. (John)

Those who followed the national team from the start experienced a change in the structure of national team supporters. While most of the national team's supporters were initially ultras, now they are dominantly tourist- and consumer-oriented supporters and diaspora who live outside of Croatia, to whom the national team represents an important symbol of the homeland. Eminence Grise believes that 2008 was the point when many people reached their limit: 'If you ask me, it started around 2010 in supporter circles, maybe even in 2008 after the match with Turkey and all that, there was a kind of emotional emptiness around the national team'. The same respondent describes who continued to follow the national team:

All that was left were square clowns, Indians as I would call them, as supporters would call them, who don't care if it's Mamić or if it's, I don't know, a war criminal like Mladić⁷ at the head of the Croatian Football Federation – it doesn't matter to them.
(Eminence Grise)

Ghetto Boys, who emphasises that he is a passionate patriot, believes that people at the top of the football federation wanted ultras to begin giving up on the national team: *'I think people gave up on the national team more than anything else. They gave up on fighting, and that's exactly what they want, to get rid of us, for thousands of people to come with selfie sticks and for nothing to happen'*. This respondent, like many others, considers this kind of situation unsustainable, and calls for revolution:

I want us to go stand in front of Parliament or the Croatian Football Federation - a peaceful protest. If five thousand people come it would be enough. But when you see that the government protects them all, that they're stronger than the state, that Mamić can tell the ministers anything, no one can do anything to him. He pays for the president's birthday parties and all that. How long has it been going on, ten years? What can I say? It's terrible! We can't change any of it. I'd rather we all went to the Croatian Football Federation building and started a revolution. You know, burn all their papers like they used to do, like when they overthrew Ceausescu. Alright, now I'm exaggerating, but... (Ghetto Boys)

3.4.3 The Croatian Football Federation

The national team is of key business interest to the Croatian Football Federation. The Federation is actually the most important and strongest 'agent of conflict' for those fighting against corruption and the 'football mafia', for different football. To the majority of respondents, the football establishment on the global level is no different than on the local level in Croatia:

All the people in all the federations in the world should be replaced with normal people for any changes to be even possible. Because that's exactly how it's set up in the Croatian Football Federation: you can replace Mamić, you can replace Marković, anyone, but all the same people who were installed in that phase stay, who are actually under their control, and everything continues along the same course, nothing changes. It's just like that in all the others: UEFA, FIFA. (1990)

Eminence Grise used a few adjectives, synthesising many other respondents who spoke about the Croatian Football Federation:

The Croatian Football Federation. I won't be saying anything new, I won't be reinventing the wheel if I say that what is happening in the Federation is a joke, a comedy of errors, a shame and god knows how many other adjectives and negative words I could apply to it... I'm completely opposed to the current state of affairs for the past 10 years in the Federation. Everything is in the hands of one man, who we can say is the ruler of Croatian football, it's a dictatorship... No one reacts, we supporters are the last remaining bastion of society that wants something fair, and then they discredit us and deride us because we have a culture that isn't socially acceptable, and

⁷ Mladić is Serbian general, convicted war criminal; this shows how sarcastic is this statement about 'square clowns' (square signifying Croatian coat of arms).

yet it's socially acceptable for there to be someone like Mamić who dominates Croatian football... (Eminence Grise)

3.4.4 NK Varaždin

The bitterness of young people involved in NK Varteks is understandable if we know that the people who run NK Varaždin today are the same people responsible for the failure of the old NK Varteks. Someone who is young or who nurtures the principles of fairness, principled behaviour, and transparency in football cannot understand how this kind of club can have the support of the local and national sports establishment, the media, and a significant portion of the public.

Honestly, if you asked me about NK Varaždin, I don't know what I would say. I only know that, from the name change to the involvement of politics, I simply don't want to hear about them because I'm not interested in crime and the scum that's involved in all of that. It's simply something I don't need in my life and I'm not going to bother with it. (Drava)

Until now, Varteks and Varaždin have met only a few times in cup matches, and these are usually matches for which the White Stones and other Varteks supporters mobilise a great deal of people in the city (see Plates 4,5 and 6). They make large, symbolically important events out of these matches, because NK Varaždin has more money, support from the Croatian Football Federation, the media and politics, and it plays in a higher league. Despite this, no one organises to publicly support them at matches or on the street. Walker also points this out:

But NK Varaždin, they're the 'saviours' of Croatian football, and they're all people who destroyed our Varteks, who bet on matches, who have been convicted, served time – today, there are trainers there who train kids as if they're upstanding people... But what can you do, they forced their way into the Second League, the rabble in town ate it up, they give away free tickets, a thousand, a thousand and a half people come to matches, of whom maybe ten of them can name the players. What can you do, they have the media, politics, the Croatian Football Federation behind them, they have it all, but they don't have supporters... (Walker)

The youngest respondent, Mali Narkoman, reduced the story to a single concept – money: 'My opinion of NK Varaždin is that it's all money. That they don't play football out of love like in Varteks, but that it's all for money.' In addition to the police, the Croatian Football Federation, the national team, and NK Varaždin are all interconnected 'agents of conflict', who actually form the basic referential framework of football in Varaždin and Croatia. They are symbols of the specific and broader surroundings in which NK Varteks finds itself, and in which it must fight for its rights against an incomparably stronger enemy – first and foremost, for the right to survive.

3.4.5 Sites of conflict

During the old Varteks, the sites of conflict were home and away matches. Today, home and away matches are sites of conflict only where the police are concerned, because there is generally no conflict with other supporters. National team matches can be a site of conflict, and considering the tensions towards NK Varaždin, cup matches with Varaždin can also be sites of conflict. The resistance of our respondents to the Croatian Football Federation, the national team, modern football, NK Varaždin, the new head coach (or any other actor in the football-political establishment on the local and national level) is sometimes expressed at the stadium, but most



often there is no specific, physical site of conflict – the site of conflict can be any place where a discussion or argument begins, and that means at home, at work, at school, in a café, on the internet, or anywhere else included in the everyday lives of our respondents. In addition to verbal conflicts and a lack of understanding in their surroundings, our respondents are not in physical conflict in a physical place as a part of their fight for different football, with the exception of occasional close encounters with the police.

3.5 Politics and politicians

Football (and other sports, but football is the most popular) in Croatia has played significant political role, especially in the war years and during Croatia’s fight for recognition in 1990’s. Croatia asked for membership in FIFA and UEFA before membership in United Nations, football players were considered ‘ambassadors of Croatia’ and the important role of the national football team in building Croatian national identity was already analysed by sociologists (Bartoluci, 2013; Biti, 2002; Brentin, 2013). From the beginning of Croatian independence, leading (and ruling in most periods of time) party, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) had control over football and other sports; party members were, and still are, the majority in all supervisory boards and other controlling bodies of all big sport organisations. Croatian Football Federation is good example of that practice. Moreover, Croatian football national team became unquestionable symbol of patriotism, as journalists would put it, ‘something sacred’. While politicians are trying to impose their meaning of the national team, as unifying, sacred force, members of ultras subculture (most of them strong patriots) are in opposition, sometimes boycotting, because of Mamić’s dictatorship and corrupted character of the CFF. During our field research and interviews, respondents expressed a very critical opinion of politicians and political institutions. The majority of them are not aligned with any political party. However, some individuals are inclined to particular political actors or ideas to a certain extent.

Interviewer: How do you view politics?

Random: Politics?

Interviewer: Are you interested in it, do you follow it?

Random: No. I’m a very apolitical person. Hmm, I mean, I follow it, but I would never come close to politics at all, or anything that has anything to do with any party, I avoid it like the plague.

A complete lack of trust in the political establishment is apparent. The local government in Varaždin provides 15 times more money for NK Varaždin than it does for NK Varteks. The city government has not allowed NK Varteks to play at the city stadium. Also, local politicians were key members of club management during the seasons that preceded the bankruptcy of the old NK Varteks. Nearly all respondents referred to these facts during the interviews. They expressed feeling that the relationship of the local government towards Varteks was unjust. Some mentioned that they felt like ‘second-class citizens’ as Varteks supporters. In his interview, Stijena points out that it is tragic that a large number of children in the Varteks youth academy train under significantly worse conditions than those in the Varaždin youth school: ‘It’s sad that they play favourites like that. Then the city stadium – it isn’t for the city! That’s how it appears’. In late May 2017, the first round of local elections was held, and Varteks played a match on the same day (see Plates 5 and 6). In a conversation prior to the match, a few respondents told us that they had not voted, that it makes no sense because ‘*all politicians are the same, crooks*’. Eminence Grise was the only one among those present who had voted, but he had spoiled his ballot by writing in ‘Al



Capone' on the ballot paper for County Council Therefore, his ballot was considered invalid. Opinions about politicians are the most radical among the youngest. Drava, for example, reacted as follows to the subject of politics during his interview:

Interviewer: Do you see any difference, for example, between the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) as the two largest parties?

Drava: Honestly, I couldn't give a shit about HDZ and SDP. There, if that answers your question.

Interviewer: Is there anyone who seems different to you?

Drava: In politics?

Interviewer: Yes.

Drava: No, I'm totally indifferent absolutely nothing related to that interests me. Whatever politicians do, they do in their own interest, it's the same today, everyone is still deeply connected and they still oppress us, there's always someone repressing the ordinary man.

Aside from a lack of interest, the youngest respondents have either a modest or almost no knowledge of historical figures and events. This is in accordance with the current findings of research on youth interest in history in Croatia (Mustapić 2015). It is very important in Croatian context because relation to the past (especially to WW2) is the key determinant of someone's 'left' or 'right' political position.

Interviewer: Even though you're young and World War II might be distant history to you, do you know something about the Ustaša and the Partisans, for example?

Malac 1: Well, I know something.

Interviewer: Here, let me simplify the issue: do you know anything about Pavelić and Tito, what do you think of them?

Malac 1: I don't have an opinion because I didn't really follow it, it didn't interest me in school.

Interviewer: And the last war, the War for Independence, Croats and Serbs?

Malac 1: That I know about.

Interviewer: Alright. Have you ever noticed that people in the group talk about politics or doesn't it interest you? Do you talk about it?

Malac 1: What, in our group, you mean?

Interviewer: Yes.

Malac 1: We don't give a shit. I don't remember anyone ever commenting on politics when we're out.

Notwithstanding this apparent complete distaste for politics, most respondents were active in protests and in various social campaigns related to the club. Some respondents relate to the activist character and populist ideological concept of the Living Wall party.⁸ Many respondents

⁸ Human Wall is an activist-political organization that prevents evictions in order to highlight the problem of repaying housing and mortgage loans. Ever since its foundation in 2012, its conflicts with the police in PROMISE (GA693221) Deliverable D12 (D6.1) – Supporters' Varteks FC (Croatia)

also mentioned the work of the Catholic Church in Croatia. Most of the respondents interviewed were not prone to positive evaluations of the church, while some were expressly critical, like JK 47.

Look, I don't go to church, personally. Because I consider that the church as the church, not as a faith, as a big company across the world, they make lots of money, and the cover-ups of cases of paedophilia, as far as that's concerned, my personal opinion is that I'm disappointed. But now who goes to church, that's different, because you have to let people choose whether they want to go to church or not. I personally don't go, nor do I think that the church is some kind of religious institution, it's a big company that makes money. (JK 47)

The Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995) is an exceptionally important subject in the Croatian political context. The relationship of political actors towards the war is one of the key determinants of their image as 'left-wing' or 'right-wing'. During our field research, we were present when a banner commemorating 1991 was raised (Fieldwork diary, 23 September 2017, Varaždin):

A few supporters came from Čepin, a small town near the Croatian-Serbian border, who occasionally cheered at the edge of the stands. They were loudest when White Stones raised a message in honour of the anniversary of the 'liberation of the city' in 1991 on today's date, when the YNA garrison surrendered to the Croatian National Guard 'my homeland': 'VARAŽDIN'S WAR DAYS – FOR THE FREEDOM OF THE CROATS! 13-9-1991 – 22-9-1991'. Aside from the support of the people from Čepin, it is interesting to note that very few Varteks fans joined the White Stones in singing ('My Homeland'), which suggests that patriotic pathos means much more to ultras than to other Varteks fans. (see Plate 7)

Generally, politics is not a frequent topic among supporters. Despite this, it is apparent that there is a variety and pluralism of orientations on the personal level. The apparent cynicism of Seven should be viewed in this light when he discusses politics in Croatia, mentioning that Ivo Sanader (prime minister from 2003-2009), who has been involved in court proceedings for years for political corruption during his time in power, is his 'political hero': 'One politician I admire is Ivo Sanader... (laughter) The man is educated, he speaks five or six languages, the man fucked over Croatia completely, the man fucked over half the Balkans, the man did everything someone can do. He did steal, that's true, but I admire him.' Speaking generally of the position of the respondents as a specific group of youths in Varaždin and Croatia, it can be said that feelings of political marginalisation and a lack of faith in the outcomes of youth political participation are present among them.

3.6 Life in Varaždin

Within the context of Croatia, Varaždin is a very important industrial city. The parents of the majority of our respondents work in this sector, primarily in non-graduate jobs. The fathers of some work abroad, and the majority of respondents live with their parents. Many of them are aware that they can realise a future for themselves exclusively by relying on their own strength and on their families. Some respondents, such as 1990 and Wild Boys, have years of experience

defence of citizens have received wide media coverage. In elections 2015 they won their first won mandate, and next year Human Wall won eight mandate in Croatian Parliament.



working abroad. Older respondents mostly have families and children. Some of them are financially secure, while some, such as Tomahawk, bear witness to the difficulties of life on a worker's salary and express resignation and feelings of luck at having found full-time employment at all: 'And when you pay for food and bills, what do you have left?' (Fieldwork diary, 14 May 2017, Nedeljanec). Stijena has a similar experience: 'I can't say that every month is great for us, no, I think we all have some months that are really hard.' All respondents believe they had a happy childhood in Varaždin, and NK Varteks and White Stones played an important role in their socialisation. Their fathers most often played a key role in their connection to football and NK Varteks. Seven says: 'I remember that my dad would always take me to matches. Going to a match, it was like a holiday!' They frequently mention that young people are not offered many opportunities for an 'economically secure future', and they all mention that they have very many friends or relatives who have emigrated from Croatia. Tuljan describes why his friend emigrated from Croatia:

Unless something changes dramatically, I don't see why young people would stay here. Take my friend, for example, he was working on a professional apprenticeship for 220 euros the state gives you. And when it expired and he was supposed to get a normal salary for his work – they told him, if you want to stay for 220 euros, you can. And he had learned to do everything and did everything. (Tuljan)

Despite criticism of low salaries and job opportunities, some older respondents claim that some young people are not interested in finding jobs and working. Serviam and Đoko, for example, believe that the difficult circumstances of some young people serves as a 'good excuse'. The respondents believe young people have an inappropriate position and role in the local community, but also that the citizenry in general does not look kindly on activism and protests, or even on benign expressions of dissatisfaction. Members of White Stones frequently emphasise this as the main reason why the local establishment can hold their current policy, within the framework of which NK Varteks is stigmatised as a 'hooligan' club. Random is one of those who is very disappointed by this:

I think everyone in Varaždin takes the path of least resistance. No one wants to fight for anything. Just like in the rest of Croatia, actually, everyone just wants to sit back and watch someone else solve their problems. I think supporters are the last so-called subculture that hasn't been destroyed. I mean, not that it hasn't been destroyed, but all others are on thin ice. We're the only ones fighting against something. (Random)

Respondents rarely mention poor experiences with teachers in school in connection with their belonging to the supporter subculture. Their bad experiences are primarily tied to matches and the police, as well as to a lack of understanding for the goals and methods of NK Varteks both from their fellow citizens and their employers.

3.7 Being young in Varaždin

Youth have always been in a position to receive and transmit the heritage of their own culture, gain experience, and build their relationship towards institutions and society. It can be said that youth, led by various motivations, has frequently been the bearing force of social changes. The socialisation of youth in Varaždin, amidst the unstable circumstances of economic transition, has been and remains burdened by economic and political difficulties. The important aspect of socialisation represented by how teenagers spend their leisure time should be interpreted in this context. The majority of respondents, aside from by their school friends, were significantly defined

by trends from their neighbourhoods or street. Musical preferences and football were most often key in this phase of life. 1990 provides an example from this part of his life:

All of my neighbourhood friends were 80% punks and the rest were metal heads. So we were an alternative crowd, we even had a neighbourhood band that was playing yesterday when I was walking through town, my old punks, we grew up together, and so my neighbourhood friends with whom I hung out a lot was also based on music.
(1990)

Music has enormous significance for teenagers in the creation of a group identity. A large number of respondents were more or less part of the local punk scene during this phase of their lives (1990, Đoko, Walker, Whatever, Random, Klokan 1312, Žilac). However, the supporter and ultras identity eventually prevailed.

As a kid, high school came with All-Stars⁹, long hair, I hung out in the park, I listened to punk, hung out with punks, rockers, metal heads, but I went to matches that entire time. Then I cut my hair and stopped going to matches, I was a supporter, but I would still say hi to those people in town, talk with them, I didn't go out with them, but it's not like I would hate them for that. (Whatever)

However, music is completely unimportant to particular individuals (Drava and Malac 1). Alcohol is strongly rooted in the dominant culture. Wild Boys says: 'This is the kind of town where alcohol is omnipresent. It's in every pore of society, it's become the culture. Even though it's uncultured, it's the culture.' There are numerous examples from our field diaries that bear witness to large quantities of alcohol at matches or when socialising. We also, as researchers, sometimes reluctantly and sometimes gladly, joined in the rituals that are one of the key characteristics of the White Stones. Rare members, such as Tuljan, are teetotallers who drink only water, or like Whatever, who emphasises that he always drinks in moderation. The respondents are quite critical concerning the places that are currently available to young people for evening outings in town. Individuals clearly emphasise the status significance of particular places, cafés, or discos available to youth in Varaždin. Such statements also point to the identity and solidarity shared by the White Stones.

Interviewer: So, what is it like to be a young man in Varaždin? You're among the youngest in WS.

Mali Narkoman: It's alright. It's the same with young people in Varaždin, it's all about money, the cliques are split between the elite, those who supposedly have lots of money, who go to the expensive cafés, and us who don't have a lot of money and struggle to make ends meet – it's all divided.

Interviewer: And where do those with lots of money go?

Mali Narkoman: Well, there are clubs like Mea Culpa, for example, where they spend loads of money – when I come there they look at me and tell me I can't go in, they judge everyone there.

Interviewer: So Mea Culpa is a symbol of the posh crowd and the elite, as they say?

⁹ Chuck Taylor All stars is a model of casual shoes first developed in the early 20th century by Converse Company. In socialist period, it was certain mark of subcultural belonging.



Mali Narkoman: Well, most of the people who go there... For example, underage kids aren't forbidden as far as I can tell, the two of us when we go there we see kids younger than us with collared shirts, fat wallets – they let them in immediately, [but] they grab us and push us out immediately.

Drugs are not a frequent occurrence, but it is apparent that marijuana use bothers no one, regardless of their own preferences or use.

Interviewer: Does it bother you if someone lights up, takes a drag?

Tuljan: No, it doesn't bother me in the least.

Interviewer: You don't worry about it?

Tuljan: It's their business.

3.8 White Stones and being young in White Stones

The White Stones were founded in 1990, when Varteks played in the Yugoslav Third League. At the time, Dinamo Zagreb supporters dominated in number, and the BBB¹⁰ Varaždin group was also active. Key figures from this group in the 1980s later founded the White Stones. A 'BBB VARAŽDIN' banner was even later used to make a banner that read 'VARAŽDINCI' (en. 'citizens of Varaždin'), which the White Stones later took to national team matches.

[...] The group placed banners at the stadium. Serviam shows us a banner reading 'VARAŽDINCI' and explains that the last two letters 'CI' are actually in a different font, I wouldn't have noticed this but if you look hard you can see it. A part of the first group from the time who made this banner, which used to read 'BBB Varaždin', gave up on Dinamo, and they cut out the 'BBB' and added 'CI' on the end, so it read only 'VARAŽDINCI'... (Fieldwork diary, 5 March 2017, Jalkovec)

The oldest of our respondents were founders of the White Stones (Kapelnik, 1990, Tomahawk). They still play a key role both in the stands and in the club.

Of course, I was a kid, I was only allowed to go to home games as a kid, I wasn't allowed to go to away games yet, but that older crowd, they were more or less all Dinamo supporters. On Saturdays they would go to Third League games, to see Varteks, but on Sundays the group would go to Zagreb to watch Dinamo, to bigger matches, Dinamo, Zvezda, Partizan. and Hajduk. I went to a few matches with them too, but after that I only followed Varteks. (1990)

Younger generations travelled their path as supporters with NK Varteks as members of White Stones. As a First League team, NK Varteks enabled both home and away matches and encounters with other supporter groups. One idiosyncrasy of their actions in the First League were good relations between members of the older generations of White Stones and the members of Armada from Rijeka at the time. White Stones thus became the central point of a subcultural youth lifestyle in Varaždin. Serviam remembers his fascination with the atmosphere at the stadium, as

¹⁰ The Bad Blue Boys is an ultras subculture group, founded in 1986. they are supporters of Dinamo Zagreb. Together with Torcida (supporters of Hajduk Split) they are the biggest groups, far bigger than any other similar group. Apart from Zagreb, BBB are present in all northern Croatian areas, except the city of Varaždin.

well as with the relationships within the group, which also brought conflicts in the 1990s because of which he distanced himself from the stands at one stage of his youth, when he fully identified with the supporter style (spitfire jackets, shawls, hairstyles, caps, typical clothing brands of the time, and all other accoutrements). Simultaneous to their role on the terraces White Stones also ran an association and organised various activities. There were phases during which the group experienced crises and upturns; boycotts and protests were also organised in the late 2000s due to the poor management of the club. It is thus logical that the nucleus of the group of founders of the 'Supporters' NK Varteks' was led by key figures in White Stones. Members of older generations consider there to have been no classical leader of the group; instead, there were a few important figures who made up the group's informal leadership. Our field diaries bear witness to the significant level of spontaneity in leading the cheers of this generation of the group – decisions on which songs and slogans will be performed on the terraces as well as agreements on various actions ranging from those closely tied to the terraces to those tied to contributions to the club. They are not coordinated by one 'leader' (see Plate 3).

At the start of halftime, the intensity of songs faltered somewhat, the group is small, and when most of the group doesn't give their all it sounds bad. Walker, with a WS tattoo on his calf, yells: 'Are you going to cheer or are you going to go root for Varaždin?' By which he means – are you ultras/Stones, or are you posh spectators? The group breaks out loudly into a chant... Fly, who goes to get beer every so often, climbs up dead drunk on the fence, two others can barely hold him up as he sings in his sunglasses, yelling, and Kapelnik tells me: 'That's how it should be! Pure heart! Without any airs or pretending ... Walker argues with Tomahawk about a song, and Tomahawk tells him not to stop the song halfway through. He says, if you want, climb up on the pole and lead the cheer Therefore, there is no classical leader, it's fairly spontaneous) (Fieldwork diary, 9 April 2017, Novi Marof)

White Stones made their full comeback to the terraces of the 'Supporters' Varteks' in 2013. Because of the bankruptcy of the old NK Varteks, the group had become quite passive. Volunteering and contributions to the club by older White Stones members were key during this phase. Simultaneously with this, new, young ultras gathered alongside older generations.

In early 2013, for the 23rd anniversary of White Stones, the White Stones reactivated and began following all the matches. For the first two years of the 'Supporters' Varteks', they didn't follow every match, but then we decided to devote ourselves a bit more seriously to the supporter group, I got involved again, and here we are, I'm still here today. Although this might sound a bit arrogant or what not, I think that I have the most matches of the new Varteks under my belt of all those people. That means from early 2013 to 2017, until today, I've missed maybe two or three matches. (Eminence Grise)

NK Varteks has an official Facebook profile (10,600 followers). White Stones has one as well (3,600 followers). As a result of the current media relationship towards the club and supporters, these communications channels are of key importance in informing the public and mobilising supporters.

3.9 Identity: AMF, The City of Varaždin, 'Supporters' Varteks', Patriotism

Today's identity of our respondents is composed of a few important elements, of which some old ones inherited from the 1990s have been revived and adopted by the younger generation, while

some are newer and relate to the past few years and the existence of the supporters' club. One of the old elements that has won over the newer generations is the group identity of 'White Stones', which is shared by the majority of our respondents, but not necessarily by everyone who is involved in 'Supporters' Varteks'; also related to this is a feeling of belonging to the city of Varaždin and Croatia. More recent identity elements belong to a broader supporter movement known as Against Modern Football, embodied in the local environment and in activities tied to the supporter club.

3.9.1 Against Modern Football (AMF)

AMF as a part of the identity can be explicitly expressed for the most part (as some respondents did), but it is most often present as an implicit group of sensibilities. It is a kind of 'feeling structure' that points to resistance against the domination of money and corporate football on not only the global level, but the local level as well – although there are no large corporations or wealthy clubs, there are followers and symbolic representatives of this world. The people responsible for the ruin of the old Varteks who run NK Varaždin today are supported by the football and political establishment – by the Croatian Football Federation and other actors connected to it – which, in light of the recent selection of the new Croatian national team's head coach from Varaždin (Dalić), is additionally seen as a conspiracy of representatives of modern football (the Croatian national team players play in the best, wealthiest clubs) on the European level with local representatives of the football establishment and its nomenclature.

A week ago, I was having a debate with some people twice my age, they could be my father, and they're all so smart, former policemen, and I was explaining to them that if Varaždin played against Barcelona there was no chance I would go watch that match, even if they gave me a ticket for free. And you can't explain to them why you wouldn't go watch Barcelona. It's not that I wouldn't go to watch Barcelona, but I wouldn't go out of principle because of the people running this NK Varaždin, and it could be Barcelona playing, it could be Manchester, anyone, I wouldn't go. Not a chance. Give me Varteks and Zelengaj or Rudar 47 and I'd rather go see that, hang out with the group, cheer, have a beer, and that's that. But Varaždin – Barcelona, no way. (Đoko)

Walker simply stated: 'Against modern football – that's us.'

3.9.2 The City of Varaždin

The city of Varaždin has always been an important element in the identity of White Stones and other Varteks supporters, and so the city's main motifs (the old city walls, the old city council building, the coat of arms) frequently appear on the tattoos of our respondents and in symbols of the group. As Tomahawk notes, it is difficult to identify with a regional identity such as Zagorje or Podravina, both in a geographical sense and as a supporter:

So we can't say we're from Zagorje, why would we say we're from Zagorje when we really aren't Zagorje, we're the region around Varaždin, in Zelina they have a fifty-metre Bad Blue Boys Zelina graffiti mural, so why would I say I'm from Zagorje. (Tomahawk)

Regardless of positive identification with the city, our respondents are ambivalent towards the mentality of people in the city, as they believe that the city mainstream is too passive towards manipulation by the political and football establishment.

3.9.3 'Supporters' Varteks

In addition to having written numerous times in our field diary entries how much the 'Supporters' Varteks has become an important part of the identity of our respondents, we also put this question to them during our interviews, and many of their answers were clear and explicit. To the question of what was most important for the identity of White Stones, Malac1 answered, 'The fact that we founded a club'; when asked what made White Stones special or recognisable, Tomahawk answered, 'At the moment, we're definitely most recognisable by the club we support, that's a fact.' To Drava, the supporter club is also a symbol of the fight against HNS:

Just our action against the Croatian Football Federation, the entire group, as a supporters' club, as a club fighting against politics, as a club that has made it clear that it doesn't recognise them; I think we've made it clear what we're about. That we're fully a part of the 'against modern football' thing. (Drava)

3.9.4 Croatia

All of our respondents respect the Croatian War of Independence and participate in celebrations marking important events from the war. Some respondents state that they are strongly patriotically oriented, but they will also express a critical distance towards the politicisation of patriotism and the abuse of patriotism for political ends. The feeling of belonging to the Croatian nation is a part of their identity, but it is not an end in and of itself, nor does it pass into politicisation or some form of extremism in the majority of respondents. As their song simply states, 'I love Croatia, I love Varaždin, I love Varteks and I'm proud of that'.

4. Conclusions: Conflicts, stigmatisation and social innovation

The creation of the Supporters' NK Varteks in 2011 was characterised by prior conflict between supporters (including both White Stones and other Varteks supporters) and the players, management, and other actors in the football and political establishment who violated the true ethos of old NK Varteks, fixed matches, changed the club name to NK Varaždin, and finally led it to bankruptcy. For the first time in Croatian history, supporters created something new out of this kind of conflict – a new football club with the old name, which had over time become a modern symbol of the local community – and begun competing from the lowest league. Thus, this conflict resulted in a social innovation: the creation of the Supporters' Varteks. Even had the club lasted just one season, it would have been remembered as interesting, worthwhile, and inspirational, and it would have had far-reaching consequences. However, this innovation turned into a club that has existed for seven years and advanced to the Croatian Football Federation's Third League. A part of the innovation that resulted from the creation of this football club is in fact the creation of a new social actor, today known as NK Varteks; this social actor came about by joining the White Stones group with non-ultra supporters who are usually known by their place in the stadium – 'West Left' (implying that they sit on the left-hand side of the western stand). Out of these two groups, a social actor came about that brings together a number of generations and informal groups, and it can be referred to by the name of the club – Varteks. Regardless of the differences between the ultras subculture and other types of supporters, the majority of the people involved in the club share the same values and common sensibilities that can be referred to as a part of the broader common denominator that is the 'Against Modern Football' social movement.

Supporters (especially ultras) have been and remain stigmatised among the Croatian public as hooligans, extremists, drug addicts, good-for-nothings, fascists, and terrorists – in short, as deviant actors. This stigma has remained present in good part, and the basic conflict the White Stones had with the football establishment became deeper and more visible in a situation in which conflicts with other supporter groups ceased almost completely. However, the founding of the supporter club, the enormous efforts invested into this project (including volunteering and donating money in accordance with one's means), along with the symbolic potential that lies in the new life of the old name *Varteks*, have enabled the club to attract new young people. Despite the stigmatisation and the unfriendly surroundings of the football establishment and the local economic and political elite, the social innovation attained through the founding of the supporter club, on the basis of the democratic 'one member – one vote' principle, has provided an additional source of identification for the club's members and given meaning to their continued work.

The social actor 'Varteks' consists of a few informal groups and many different generations. We mention here the basic groups on the basis of their type of action: there are people who are active in the club management who are not active on the terraces as supporters; there are people who are active in management who are equally active on the terraces and there are people (the youngest members and a few of the older ones) who are active on the terraces but who are not involved in management. The very fact that Varteks is a 'Supporters' club' enables an understanding of the relationship dynamics of these basic groups, as well as of the fact that the president or secretary of the club are active supporters (or even lead cheers) on the terraces, and that some people contribute exclusively to supporter activities without any broader inclusion in the club's administrative and economic framework.

One of the key findings of this research is certainly an awareness of the inaccuracy of the stereotype that regularly appears in both the mainstream media and the academic community concerning supporters – a stereotype of violence and extreme right-wing political orientation. Our respondents represent a social actor that includes both representatives of the ultras subculture and other supporters who share the sensibilities of the ‘against modern football’ movement and who oppose corruption and crime in the Croatian Football Federation. A significant majority of our respondents also differ completely from the widespread media stereotype of violence and extreme right-wing politics. Rare conflicts or expressions of patriotism certainly cannot be sufficient to affirm these stereotypes.

A great deal of sociological research on youth participation in society across Europe has displayed either a very low level or a complete lack of participation (Pilkington et al, 2018). Youths (and those who are no longer youths but who are a part of the same social actor) in our research show many similarities to their other peers as concerns disappointment in the system, especially in the political sphere; they share the everyday life of Croatian society marked by the search for employment and economic and social security. However, there is one important difference – an active relationship and enthusiastic involvement in activities concerning NK Varteks.

Therefore, the findings of this research point to the respondents’ exceptional criticism of the passivity of the citizens of Varaždin and their explicit tolerance of the numerous affairs (legal cases; convictions, accusations etc.) tied to the local and national political establishment. Our respondents are turned towards the future, new challenges, and new achievements. They don’t want to continue from the compromised past, they don’t want to participate in the NK Varaždin activities because it is not new, it is repetition and reproduction of the same people and same corrupted model of activity. This is where the roots of the lack of intergenerational understanding in Varaždin should be sought. Although some of our respondents belong to the older generation, there is strong similarity, in fact unity with the majority of young respondents in rejection of the compromised past, symbolized by NK Varaždin and there is common orientation towards ‘new club and new beginning’. It is thus unsurprising that the majority of our respondents showed an openness to new solutions to the problem, despite the resistance of older generations and social institutions, and their dedication to their work involving NK Varteks should be observed in this context.

Our respondents did not give in to apathy, they did not give up, but they also did not reach for certain models of radicalisation or extreme, violent action as a desperate answer to the current state of affairs. Unfortunately, the unfriendly action of the football federation and the local establishment, for whom the club is a ‘thorn in the side’, could lead to the destruction or failure of their social innovation (the club). The results of this for a fair portion of the respondents would be disappointment and a descent into apathy, and likely the desperate radicalisation of a small number of activists. Ultras subculture in Croatia, frustrated by the dictatorship in CFF, already tried several desperate attempts to draw attention to the problem, by trying to stop important matches of the national team; flares on the pitch in Milano (2014) during Euro qualifying match with Italy, designing swastika on the pitch in Split (2015) before the match with Italy, (when the match was played without spectators), flares on the pitch in St. Etienne (2016) during the Euro championship match with Check Republic etc.

5. Future analysis

For cross-case analysis within the WP6 cluster 'Economy/Leisure', it is significant to observe the similarities and differences in forms of activism considering the forms of the actors' economic development (or mere survival) and their social innovation. In our case, regardless of how close or involved the actors are, less of them are involved in forms of economic survival (usually the older respondents), while the younger respondents follow their own models of activism, which are frequently external to the economic aspects of the sustainability of the project they are involved in. One of the questions that arises from this problem is whether explicit or implicit models of negotiation around the roles of each generation of activist exist within the project.

As concerns triangulation with quantitative data, we suggest attention be focused on similarities in the expression of dissatisfaction with (or a lack of interest in) the system – specifically, on the perception of the social-political environment shared by youths from a representative sample and youths from our ethnographic research, in order to shed more light on the difference in approaches to action between 'inactive' groups (which we assume to be the majority) and our 'active' group. The hypothesis is that shared perceptions do not necessarily share an approach to action, or rather that a shared opinion about society and politics does not produce the same type of (in)action. What is it that drove our respondents to action, despite the perception (which they share with the majority) of a corrupt society and politicians who are all similar to one another? This is one of the questions that should be put, and the answer should be sought in a comparison of our case with the answers of youths to questions about society and personal involvement.

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Appendix 1: Table of respondents' socio-demographic data

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity (self declared)	Educational status	Employment status	Family status	Residential status	Relationship to organization
1990	M	41	Croat	Completed vocational education	Sesonal employment	Single	Lives alone	Full active
Bumbarica	F	16	Croat	Pupil	Pupil	Single	Lives with parents	Full active
Drava	M	20	Croat	Student	Student	Single	Lives with room mate	Full active
Đoko	M	32	Croat	Completed vocational education	Employed	Single	Lives with girlfriend	Full active
éminence grise	M	21	Croat	Completed elementary school	Unemployed	Single	Lives with parents	Full active
Ghetto boys	M	37	Croat	Completed vocational education	Sesonal employment	Single	Lives with grandmother	Full active
Jarni	M	27	Croat	Completed secondary education	Employed	Single	Lives with parents	Full active
JK 47	M	27	Croat	Completed secondary education	Employed	Single	Lives with girlfriend	Full active
John	M	27	Croat	Completed vocational education	Employed	Married	Lives with his Family	Full active
Kapelnik	M	46	Croat	Completed vocational education	Employed	Married	Lives with his Family	Full active
Klokan 1312	M	16	Croat	Pupil	Pupil	Single	Lives with parents	Full active
Malac 1	M	16	Croat	Pupil	Pupil	Single	Lives with parents	Full active
Mali narkoman	M	17	Croat	Completed vocational education	Employed	Single	Lives with parents	Full active
Random	M	22	Croat	Completed vocational education	Employed	Single	Lives with girlfriend	Full active
REX	M	26	Croat	MA degree university	Employed	Single	Lives alone	Partially active
Serviam	M	33	Croat	MA degree university	Employed	Married	Lives with his Family	Full active
Seven	M	26	Croat	Completed vocational education	Student	Single	Lives with partents	Full active
Stijena	F	32	Croat	Completed vocational education	Employed	Divorced	Lives with her kids	Full active
Tomahawk	M	41	Croat	Completed vocational education	Employed	Married	Lives with his Family	Full active
Totti	M	25	Croat	MA degree university	Employed	Single	Lives with parents	Full active
Tuljan	M	21	Croat	Completed secondary education	Employed	Single	Lives with parents	Full active
Walker	M	29	Croat	Completed vocational education	Employed	Single	Lives with parents	Full active
What ever	M	27	Croat	MA degree university	Employed	Single	Lives with girlfriend	Full active
Wild boys	M	29	Croat	Completed secondary education	Employed	Single	Lives with parents	Partially active
Žilac	M	24	Croat	Completed secondary education	Unemployed	Single	Lives with mother	Full active

Appendix 2: Plates

Plate 1. Graffiti in the Neighborhood



Plate 2. Away Match in Slakovec and conflict with police (22 October 2016)



Plate 3. Away match in Novi Marof (9 April 2017)





Plate 4. Mobilization a day before the city derby with NK Varaždin (16 May, 2017)

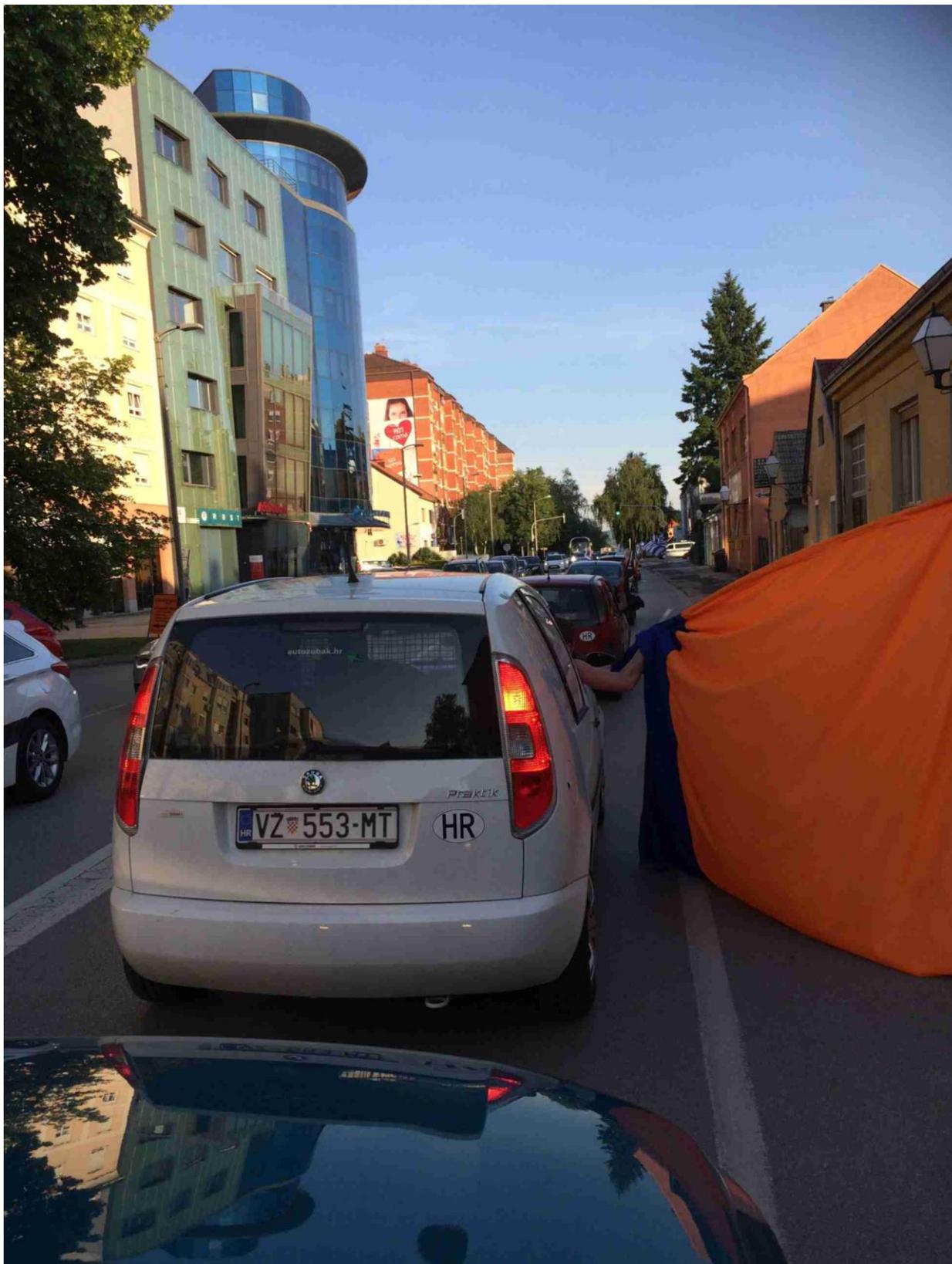




Plate 5. Home match with NK Varaždin (17 May 2017)



Plate 6. Coreto on the Streets of Varaždin (30 May 2017)



Plate 7. Home match with Čepin (23 September 2017)



Plate 8. Friendly match with Hajduk in Split (14 January 2018)

