

Emina Bužinkić

## **What If Political Landscapes of Solidarity Were All We Cared For?**

As an activist and a scholar interested in the departure from rooted ways of grasping social and political, I explore articulation of different images of socio-political landscapes with a solidarity as an immanent language to the desired change. Exploration of possibilities often means digging into a historical socio-political context as well as leaps into the other geographies of present political organizing. What often builds on that, are the dives into social experimentations locally, challenging current set up whether political establishment, cultural mentality or economic power and the like. What plays out are long journeys of thinking and re-thinking, growing and de-growing, articulation and re-articulation. Even though it has been a *long dureé* for certain ideas and concepts to mold their way through, collaboration of a few progressive civic and cultural political collectives, yielded strong platforms of valuable experiences while expanding the landscape of social imagination.

In this article, two examples of social experimentations are presented: one that intertwines concepts of culture(s) and public infrastructure, and the other one that meets concepts of food and socio-economic emancipation. Both concepts, developed within the Centre for Peace Studies,<sup>1</sup> question and disrupt ideas of culture and cultural integration of the newcomers in its' conventional understanding within the framework of the nation-state, particularly Western Balkan state as the latest member of the European Union. These two developing concepts with its' long trajectories are located in Croatia. For this article, I find important to note that Croatia is a country that has undergone its' own war and exile experience merely twenty years ago, and that has been recently walking down the path of both, emigration and immigration experiences. While the emigration experience is becoming vast<sup>2</sup> and the immigration fairly mere<sup>[1]</sup>, mainstream politics and public discussion on immigration and specifically on asylum policies and integration are encapsulated in the sense of the jeopardy, hence the caution and rejection as the main navigation tools<sup>[2]</sup>. While major focus of this article may be on global geopolitical strategies and global migration, particularly forced migration rhythmic and the effects it causes to the European countries namely Balkan countries such as Croatia, in spite of that, this article will focus on a response to the culture of polarization between *us* and *them* and empowerment of the community through solidarity practice in life. Let us just acknowledge the context within we are placing these two stories composes of a conflation of a global, national and local environment in its' pronounced

production of inequalities within the framework of longstanding projects of neoliberalism and capitalism, hand in hand with the economic exploitation and privatisation, exclusion, xenophobia, and racism. The location where these two stories emerge is overrun by the global currents while it also plays out as a *tough guy* against people on the move and in the need of a protection.<sup>3</sup>

In a landscape of a narrow-minded *polity* led by butchery type of politics where power plays out in sharing bits and pieces to minority groups, and where multiculturalism is sold as the best goods on the market, those with an experience of exile or other experiences of forced flee from what used to be a home, have been experiencing an everyday pressure to assimilate, yet severe rejection to integrate.<sup>4</sup> In this everyday reality with an ongoing encounters emphasizing the lack of systemic inclusion policies for newcomers and deprivation of social support and at the same time facing the lack of capacities in human time and infrastructure devoted to creating a meaningful change, one is drawn into a thinking-creating process with limited material and time resources but with a creative imagination talked through and consulted with various circles. First of all, there are questions to be asked such as: How does it feel to be a newcomer, a stranger, an immigrant, a refugee, an alien, the Other? How can this society nurture hospitality and emerge its' capacity for solidarity? How can we as activists and locals create that space for support to those who we want to see as politically equal, as economically empowered, as culturally emancipated? Those questions are interrelated with understanding that a stranger and an immigrant such as a refugee are social constructs whose bodies and cultures are labeled and framed<sup>5</sup> often as a threat or at least their bodies and their presence in a shared space provoke fear and prejudice. Our ultimate inquiry has been exploring the ways of how those who have had an exile experience become more than refugees and are fully perceived as humans in their interactions in a new society while their refugee experience morally obligates the state and the society to provide support in growing independence in a new socio-cultural setting deprived of economic prosperity and right to political participation.

### **Spaces of solidarity**

Spaces of solidarity, cooperation and cultural production have been thought of and widened for many years in Croatian progressive cultural and political circles. Those thoughts and further actions were initiated by independent cultural groups and formal associations in Zagreb and other Croatian towns (Rijeka, Pula, Zadar, Split, etc.) mainly around creating awareness and advocating for city infrastructure to be turned into an infrastructure for public good. For more than a decade, Zagreb located independent cultural, artistic, green, feminist, peace and other civic groups, have been strategically and fiercely asking for political push towards acknowledging public interest in the contrast to privatization and commercialization. In retrospective, at least two larger civic political outreaches were made by a local umbrella alliance

*Operation:City*<sup>6</sup> and the initiative (later an NGO) *Right to the City*.<sup>7</sup> The first one's campaign and advocacy work resulted in establishing first civic-public partnership based youth and cultural centre *Pogon*.<sup>8</sup>

Some years later, it came to realization that further advocacy for sustainable infrastructure is of an immense importance for different civic actors since the needs of the community, as it changes and develops, have not been systematically responded to, along with the growth of consumerist society being fully supported by local politics. Along with that idea emerging mainly from the cultural sphere, another idea emerged around infrastructure that would be supportive of the ideas of hospitality and support to newcomers, mostly those with a refugee experience. In order to respond to those needs and articulate political standpoint around need for the public infrastructure for the whole community of the capital, intentionally was emerged the concept of the multi-location, polyvalent, cultural centre as well as the actors behind - the Upgrade platform.

*The intention of the project "UPGRADE - toward sustainable spatial infrastructure" was to create a platform of organizations which would search for systemic solutions for the issues of inadequate spatial infrastructure faced by independent culture and civil society organizations in Zagreb. The Platform's aim is to upgrade its past activities in this field by conceptualizing an innovative model, defining current needs and providing conditions for instituting a socio-cultural center as an integral model that would meet the needs of wider civil society and local community. This is a long term process which implies on the one hand strengthening local actors and the platform itself for advocating the change and on the other hand influencing the creation of a positive social and political context for its implementation. For that purpose the Platform included in its operation new members and designed activities which will influence the external context. The activities primarily refer to advocacy implemented through organization of public events and campaigns, mapping and studying the potential of unused city spatial resources as well as further work on the model of governance and use of the future socio-cultural center. Joint work of the organizations in the Platform has led to the concept of socio-cultural center in Zagreb which would have a prominent intercultural element. It thus created the Intercultural social center on whose model and way of governance it currently works. In order to inform and include the public and citizens in this process, the Platform initiated the campaign "Zagreb: open city?" which, through numerous media activities and cultural, artistic and social events, examines openness of the city and imagines it in the future.*<sup>9</sup>

Intercultural social centre is a decentralized space that serves as a central spot for encounters of people of different backgrounds being a part of their local community as they are. It is also a space, in it's polyvalent and multi-location structure, for socio-cultural and socio-economic emancipation of newcomers, especially refugees. It is primarily seen as a space of mutual support and cooperation as well as a space that generates cultural production

embracing culture of multiple identities, traditions and urban practices, and intertwines with the cultural expression through art and other cultural forms keeping political sharpness and a language of solidarity and empowerment. This concepts supports integrative practices while it disrupts the conventional concept of the integration that places a burden of sole integration to a newcomer in an unknown society by adopting language, cultural norms and social expectations. The integrative here means and loosely defines as embracing diversity of backgrounds with recognition of multiple identities sharing the same space while feeding that space with the blend of newly created culture of participants of that space. This concepts strongly opposes multicultural melting pot or blending in the majority, thus it strongly encourages hospitality, political participation and social re-imagination. This space we envision is an active and vibrant space, it is facilitated and kept safe, it is constantly being improved in it's co-creating and co-working atmosphere. This space holds multiple needs important and responds to them through various clusters such as:

- cultural production and inter-cultural connections (workshops, discussion, artistic work...),
- socio-economic emancipation (language hubs, employment counsels, social entrepreneurship),
- legal and civic integration (legal status related support, psycho-social support).

This concept has been developed in cooperation of variety of subjects such as organizations in culture and art, peace-building and human rights organizations, sustainable development and good economy oriented groups, recreational sport groups, youth and community led actors. This synergy creates a model of the centre that derives it's own content bottom up paying full attention at its' grass root movement and cooperation sentiment within. The envisioned space nurtures and supports micro models of cultural expression and production, supporting services and emancipatory models. As one of the examples of the emancipatory social models of organizing and shared economic models is the social cooperative for the intercultural cooperation *Taste of Home* that is an envisioned integral part of this centre with its' restaurant, coffee-shop and the library, workshop and creative culinary space as well as the language hub. Already existing cooperative *Taste of Home* is a sort of a model that can also serve as an inspiration for new collaborative social entrepreneurial projects.

*Taste of Home*<sup>10</sup> started as a culinary-cultural-research project of the Centre for Peace Studies introducing culture, customs and countries of origin of refugees and migrants in Croatia by recording their memories of home, smells and tastes of their cuisine. This was an experiment in sharing life stories and culinary skills of refugees and people from Croatia. Tastes of home have been investigated and recorded over several years in asylum seekers' reception centers and new homes. The tastes and memories were finally published as a book of personal stories and recipes.<sup>11</sup> By preparing the food they grew up

with, these human beings with a painful refugee experience evoke memories and create new friendships and experiences in their new home. Those connections were built mainly through culinary workshops and food festivals organized in local neighborhoods and Croatian towns. In the same time, those who we call refugees, were aiming to achieve more than to be called a refugee by improving their skills that would eventually help them find or create employment and be a cohesive element on this new leg of their journey. With years, Taste of Home has come to the establishment of social cooperative, with 16 co-founders of a diverse background and magnificent culinary skills.

Taste of Home as a social enterprise was officially kicked off through a crowdfunding campaign which helped to raise funds for establishing a social cooperative.<sup>12</sup> After almost \$20.000 of raised funds, Taste of Home started off a catering business specialized in African, Arabic, Asian and Middle Eastern cuisine and culinary exchange projects (cookbooks, cooking courses and workshops, public dinners and *showkitchens*). Catering currently employs two chefs from Senegal and Nepal, a technical coordinator, and a manager. Taste of Home is the first social enterprise of it's kind in Croatia. It is a social business primarily based on support, solidarity and knowledge exchange. It gathers people of different origins who run catering and organize cooking workshops, public show-kitchen activities, language courses. Public recognition and quality of offer resulted in initiating social cooperative to be specialized in catering with further ideas of opening a restaurant, food production, publishing cookbooks as well as language courses and interpreting services. No less important, this whole project aims at sensitizing Croatian public to refugees needs and combating prejudice followed with stepping forward in the realm of social hospitality through culinary and cultural exchange.

Vision of Taste of Home is a colourful world embraced in hospitality. It's mission underlines economic emancipation of refugees and persons with migrant background through culinary and cultural exchange. The collective is led by values of appreciating human beings and their needs - Human beings in search of happiness and safety ready to offer the best of them - tastes of their childhood and youthhood as well as tastes of their adulthood in new society. The resources are tastes of Middle-Eastern, Arabic, African and Asian cuisine (rather unrepresented in Zagreb). Collective 'Taste of Home' now gathers 30 refugees and volunteers/activists. While it gathers broad range of asylum seekers and refugees, and collects personal memories and refuge experience, it is mainly focused on development of a cooperative that emancipates refugees and migrants both as a reality for some and a sustainable model for others. This group functions on non-hierarchy and collective decision-making, shows equal sex/gender representation and its' members have diverse roles in management, communication and representation, event management, sales and relationship with clients, logistics, cooking and catering, language teaching, etc.

The goal of *Taste of Home* is to push economic emancipation of the refugees and other migrants by using their knowledge, skills and earlier experience while sensitizing environment/society on potentials of their integration. Taste of Home is about understanding organic development of organizing and people's gathering around common idea. The concept of *Taste of Home* is somewhat innovative, thus in reality it translates into an in-depth, organic and multilayered work on a long run. *Taste of Home* bears in mind that plates of food or languages taught, are part of it's members, their memories and experiences, that make this 'project' much bigger than a plain project - it's core is in connecting bits and pieces into a story that does not hide emotional side and does not strive to become a model of capitalistic business type but rather a space of non-hierarchical life values that enables emancipation at least for those who are part of it. Strategy of *Taste of Home* encompasses personal growth and emancipation in line with social business growth that contributes to local community we are all part of.

### **Re-Imagining the Possible**

While both concepts, intercultural social center and the socio-economic emancipatory model of the social cooperative exploring connections of food and culture, are in its' early phases only to be emerged in a full array of capacity in not such a near future, they represent a visionary journey and a reality of and for a community of visionaries and practitioners. These social experimentations respond to numerous questions while opening new ones and filling in the chapters with try outs and re-thinking so much needed for social re-imagination. Often that work seems to be a patchwork that brings in solidarity as a vital part of survival and existence of modern communities. Solidarity, I firmly believe among many others, is a solid political response to a fragility and scattering nature of our societies ill-painted in mistrust and their resistance to change. Transformative nature of solidarity in physical and intercultural spaces has already been performed in numerous examples such as *Taste of Home*. That small community teaches us on how to re-imagine even after everything is lost. Struggle for different reality where solidarity plays out as a common leverage and building relationships with others in similar struggles becomes immensely important, such as it is and it will be in further endeavors of the Upgrade Initiative and the social intercultural centre.

**If you come only to help me, you can go back home.**

**But if you consider my struggle as part of your struggle for survival,**

**then maybe we can work together.**

*Aboriginal wise woman*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cms.hr](http://www.cms.hr)

<sup>2</sup> Cf. According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (cf. [http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv\\_Eng/publication/2015/07-01-02\\_01\\_2015.htm](http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2015/07-01-02_01_2015.htm)), 20,858 people moved from Croatia to abroad in 2014, compared to 2005 when 6,012 people left.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bužinkić, E. & Hameršak, M. (2016) *Kamp, koridor, granica*. Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, Centar za mirovne studije, Centar za istraživanje etničnosti, državljanstva i migracija i Inicijativa *Dobrodošli*

An excerpt from the non-yet published English version:

It has been entirely clear since the late 1990s and early 2000s that Croatia is a transit country for most refugees who entered it (cf., for example, Mavris 2002). Since forced migration in the early 1990s from neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Macedonia and Kosovo, due to civil wars and other war conflicts, when Croatia received and, in most cases, permanently provided for more than half a million refugees (cf. Lalić Novak 2010: 58; Župarić-Ilić 2013), Croatian borders have been gradually becoming less propulsive and more protected. The key factor in that was Croatia's accession to the European Union whose one of the primary objectives (cf., for example, Kranjec 2013) is to protect EU territory along its external borders from the so-called unlawful migration and to prevent a large number of refugees from arriving to safer and more democratic territories, where rigid asylum policies were simultaneously being shaped. In the making of that rigid and exclusive "protection" system that provides access to only a few, and asylum to even fewer of them, Croatian politics and bureaucracy constructed Croatia's identity as a transit state and painted refugees as people who do not wish to stay in Croatia. The construction of such an identity indicated a persistent unwillingness of the political establishment to prepare and open its own society to inevitable global changes. On the one hand, that unwillingness is practised with regard to refugee issues, and on the other, there is intense pressure on Croatian citizens to emigrate in search of better education, economic and other opportunities. In this overall plan, the Republic of Croatia agrees to its given role in global exclusion and enclosure processes with its daily-political moves, moving away from the ideal of a society of justice and equality. The global dynamic economic and political power play in which the European Union is an active participant, as is Croatia as its Member State, requires an industry of war and suffering that results in the fleeing of civilian war victims, long-standing displacement and exile. The current state of the world, abundant with war, civil, ethnic and other conflicts, threats of nuclear war, patriarchal and patrimonial violence, economic exploitation and systemic impoverishment practices, climate change and a number of other phenomena, inevitably leads to further refugee movement towards Europe and the Balkan states. (Bužinkić, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Barry, B. (2002) *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism*, Harvard University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Suzuki, M. (2016). *Performing the human: refugees, the body, and the politics of universalism*. Refugees Study Center; Kusow, A. & Eno, M. (2015) *Formula Narratives and the Making of Social Stratification and Inequality*. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*.

<sup>6</sup> <https://operacijagrad.net/savez-udruga-operacija-grad>

<sup>7</sup> <http://pravonagrad.org/category/uncategorized>

<sup>8</sup> [www.upogoni.org](http://www.upogoni.org)

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<sup>9</sup> <https://operacijagrad.net/upgrade>

<sup>10</sup> This part of the article on Taste of Home is a revised text initially published in Bužinkić, E. (ed) (2017) MIGRENT - Migrant (Social) Entrepreneurship as a Tool of Socio-Economic Emancipation of Migrants. Centre for Peace Studies.

<sup>11</sup> The recipes and stories are available at [www.okus-doma.hr](http://www.okus-doma.hr) in English and Croatian.

<sup>12</sup> Initial step to that was a 18 months long project 'Quality Steps to Integration of Refugees' implemented in partnership of the Fade In (project leader) and the Centre for Peace Studies, Iskra, Izazov, NESsT, and CEDRA. Fade In's Martina Globočnik authored documentary movie Taste of Home in 2015.