

Article

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The Good, the Bad, and the Needy: Discourses of Helpfulness after the 2020 Earthquakes in Croatia

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Abstract: When heavy earthquakes hit southcentral Croatia at the end of December 2020, the general readiness to help those who lost their material everything, or even loved ones, was remarkable. People and institutions all over the country (self-)organized relief actions, ranging from fundraising to packing their toolboxes and heading towards the affected regions. Based on the rich media coverage ensuing these so-called Petrinja earthquakes, named after the town that was most affected, the author analyzes the discourse of helpfulness triggered by the disaster. As she shows, this discourse revealed not only a great affective momentum regarding the survivors of the catastrophe (“the needy”), but also clearly moralist stances of what was deemed right (“the good”) as opposed to wrong (“the bad”) with regard to how people sought to help.

Keywords: affective discourse, Croatia, helpfulness, natural disasters, Petrinja earthquakes

Introduction

When heavy earthquakes hit southcentral Croatia between the Catholic–Protestant and the Orthodox Christmas of 2020/21, the readiness to help those who lost their material everything, or even loved ones, was remarkable. People and institutions all over the country (self-)organized relief actions that ranged from fundraising money to packing their toolboxes and heading towards the affected regions. Over 41,000 houses and infrastructural buildings were damaged and/or uninhabitable, amounting to an estimated 5.5 billion euros worth of damage. At least 26 people

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suffered injuries, and seven people lost their lives. With the local hospital in Sisak directly affected, media immediately focused on the rescue missions' transport of Covid-19 patients to hospitals in Zagreb, 60 km away.

In the face of the catastrophe, getting busy seemed to help not just the people surviving the earthquakes but also the bystanders. The sheer amount of help offered, the readiness to accompany and comfort the victims, and the hands-on approach of packing the car with everything possibly needed that Croatia saw right after the earth shook so heavily was impressive and undoubtedly well-appreciated. All media channels unremittingly reported on initiatives and actions taken to help earthquake survivors. This rich coverage allows for detailed insights into the discourses that were entwined around the topic of human suffering, in direct relation with solidarity and kindness. In the following, I analyze this discourse of helpfulness, which contained great affective momentum regarding the survivors of the catastrophe ("the needy") but also of clearly moralist stances of what was deemed right ("the good") as opposed to wrong ("the bad") with regard to how people sought to help.

In a society as polarized along political but also ethnicized lines as the Croatian (Henjak 2017, 350; Reinkowski 2019, 212), even a discourse apparently focusing on help, philanthropy (Kapucu 2015), and empathy (Lehmann-Carli 2013) results in not refraining from a stark rhetoric of mistrust in state institutions (Henjak 2017). Almost immediately with the discourse of helpfulness, after the earthquakes, discursive practices that constructed in- and out-groups emerged (Wodak 2008, 62) with regard to who was thought to handle the crisis well, or not. The disaster discourse (Schneider and Hwang 2014) quickly became a moralistic discourse (Bennett and Shapiro 2002, 8) which aimed not just at separating good from bad modes of helping, but also at the earthquake victims themselves, whose modesty, thankfulness, and indigence were put under public scrutiny.

Media discourses can point perceptions of a natural disaster in surprising directions. Otherwise (more) silent voices and topics may oddly become a part of what is "sayable" (Jäger 2019, 63). The time frame of a given discourse in fact plays an important analytical role (Blommaert 2001, 28). The Petrinja earthquakes took place in the middle of the holiday season, which people were forced to spend mostly at home due to the anti-Covid-19 restrictions. Some of these restrictions, especially the ban to travel across intra-Croatian regional borders, were suspended after the earthquakes. Altogether, the different "discourse strands" (Jäger and Maier 2012, 46) concerning helpfulness, as shown in the following, prove revealing in terms of how seemingly unrelated discursive fragments add up to the more general treatment of a given disaster in a given society at a given time. Stijn Joye's account of the "social nature of a disaster" is helpful here. While the human tolls

are the primary concern, these social aspects manifest also “in the way affected communities handle a disaster and its aftermath” (Joye 2014, 994).

In the case of the Petrinja earthquakes, space, that is the region where they occurred, is another important aspect of how the discourse of helpfulness evolved. Within Croatia, the region can be characterized as both symbolically loaden and structurally marginalized. This is visible in its name: *Banovina/Banija* are the traditional toponyms for the region, covering the larger part of the Sisak-Moslavina county (*Sisačko-Moslavačka Županija*) in central Croatia, south of the capital Zagreb and bordering with the northern parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina. While Sisak is unassociated with the toponym *Banija/Banovina*, the towns of Petrinja, Glina, Kostajnica, and Dvor are the region’s main (semi-)urban settlements. Shortly after the earthquakes, a lively discussion on the region’s name emerged, after the supposedly old and Serbian toponym *Banija* was used in some newspapers and TV coverage, while other commentators used the more official naming *Banovina*. While this discussion is both ethnographically and linguistically relevant because it clearly happened in the service of nationalist Croatian language politics and linguistic purism (Kersten-Pejanić 2018), it supersedes the aim of this study, and will need to be tackled elsewhere.

The economic neglect of the disaster region is a consequence of decades of rural depopulation, with the war of the 1990s accelerating these processes (Lončar and Pavić 2020, 202). A divide between ethnicized groups such as “Serbs” and “Croats” persists, especially in the demographic and topographical structure of the region, but also when it comes to sociopolitical attitudes (Clark 2013, 132; Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković 2012). This mirrors the above-mentioned polarization of Croatian society as a whole, which runs along political-ideological struggles between nationalist/revisionist and liberal/reconciliatory forces. Related are questions of how to remember the 1990s wars and how to come to terms with the violent past (Henjak 2017; Šarić and Radanović Felberg 2017). Especially in semi-urbanized and rural areas, such as the region where the earth shook, ethnicized cleavages remain an important part also on the microlevel, of people’s everyday life (Jansen 2006; Leutloff-Grandits 2008, 2016; Stieger 2021).

In the following, a short methodological section precedes the empirical discourse analysis of media texts and readers’ comments that accompany them. The focus is on the first two weeks after the Petrinja earthquakes. The methodological section explains the interdisciplinary approach of critical discourse analysis and my take on it. The empirical section first looks at reactions by leading politicians, in order to illustrate how the official, top-down discursive tone was set. The analysis of media texts and their accompanying commentaries on helpfulness reveals the main “codes” used to evoke a more general discourse of helpfulness that went beyond the immediate action that was taken.

The Discourse of Helpfulness: Methodology and Outline of the Data

Actions of solidarity and collective response of mutual aid are tested human behavior in the immediate aftermath of disasters and have the potential to be “rendered across class, ethnic, and other boundaries” (Oliver-Smith 2020, 234; cf. Hoffman 2020a, 2020b). In fact, in the (social) media response to the Petrinja earthquakes, expressions of solidarity, and the construction of a “collective we” of physical as well as mental support were quickly palpable, giving proof of the “emotional appeals to an imagined community” (Schneider and Hwang 2014, 646) observable via the media elsewhere also, such as after the Sichuan/Wenchuan earthquake in China in 2008.

While solidarity and the wish to help in a crisis are just human and logical reactions to “mediated suffering and disasters” (Joye 2014, 997), such altruistic emotions, as much as any related “mediation of moral education” (Chouliraki 2008, 832), have otherwise been widely absent in the Croatian public. For example, the prolonged refugee crisis at the Croatian state borders has been widely ignored, and the suffering of those seeking refuge often, especially in social media comments, even excused when caused by police violence. On the other hand, scorching criticism has been directed at the Croatian state institutions and government when it comes to their performance in the Covid-19 pandemic—their bad shape being seen as one of the main reasons for the slow progress in the vaccination campaign. Whether a natural, health or political crisis, the discursive elements are very similar, as “it is within those crises, understood here as “disruptive moments of history”, that sensitive perceptions of different common objects of reference [...] become particularly salient and vibrant, and open for a context dependent (re-)negotiation and (re-)appropriation” (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2009, 6).

Such dissonances and ruptures were characteristic also for the “discourse of helpfulness” after the Petrinja earthquakes. I focus my empirical analysis on Croatian articles and recordings from media outlets with different political and journalistic backgrounds, as well as readers’ comments and Facebook discussions on these articles and recordings. In this way, I achieve a discursive democratization of sorts, as opposed to concentrating on “‘elite’ texts” only (Bouvier and Machin 2018, 197). The analyzed material comprises a total of 74 media documents. Five of these documents are transcripts of televised interviews and press conferences by Croatian prime minister Andrej Plenković and Croatian president Zoran Milanović while visiting Petrinja and the region directly after the first earthquake. The remaining 69 documents are newspaper articles, accessible online, with many of them also published in print.

The first earthquake struck on 28 December 2020 and measured 5.0 on the Richter scale. The day after, on 29 December, an even heavier and much more destructive earthquake hit, measuring 6.2. The earth continued to shake in the weeks and months after these two initial heavy quakes. It is important to keep in mind that on 22 March 2020, in the middle of the first and until now strictest Covid-19 lockdown in the country, the Croatian capital Zagreb had suffered a likewise destructive earthquake, measuring 5.5 in magnitude (Potresi u Zagrebu, Geofizički odsjek, Sveučilište u Zagrebu, 18 April 2020).

I analyzed media materials for the period of 29 December 2020 to 11 January 2021, allowing for a timespan of two weeks right after the (first) earthquake in south-central Croatia. The newspapers are *24 sata* (24 h), a national daily tabloid, *Novi List* (New Paper), a Rijeka-based regional newspaper, and *Novosti* (News), a Zagreb-based weekly magazine published by the Serb National Council (*Srpsko narodno vijeće*, SNV), the major media representative of the Serb national minority in Croatia. I chose these three newspapers because they mirror a diversity of public opinions and newspaper segments relevant for the topic of this research, that is country-wide tabloid press, local narratives (*Novi List*), as well as quality assessment coming from an alternative perspective (*Novosti*). The 74 documents comprise 158,530 words, of which two thirds stemmed from *24 sata*, mainly due to very active readers' commenting. The distribution is the following: 25 articles from *24 sata*, altogether 106,372 words; 27 articles from *Novi List*, equalling 31,359 words; and 17 articles from *Novosti*, which comprised 17,748 words. The five transcripts of the politicians' speeches consisted of 3051 words.

The documents were coded in paragraphs using the software MAXQDA, with multiple codes assigned to one paragraph in cases where more than one relevant topic was mentioned, leading to a total of 3543 code segments. The open system of allocating codes according to content led to a total of 67 codes, ranging from 1 (for the code "Firework on New Year's Eve") to 278 (for the code "Official Croatia's (un)helpfulness") code segments attached to individual codes. This quantitative aspect of the analysis alone brought forth some interesting results, as several of the anticipated subtopics of the discourse on helpfulness did not receive the expected amount of attention. Christianity is an example. Other subtopics, on the other hand, were referred to more often than expected, such as the need to support the helpers or the mediatization of field help.

In putting the topic of helping at the center of the material collection I followed an initial deductive approach to the data. Yet, the analysis is decisively inductive in that the thematic codes established in the course of the analysis of the selected material emanated from the texts themselves and were not pre-defined. For operational reasons, the article limitation was roughly set at around 20 articles per newspaper, with some flexibility to integrate coverage of events

and discussions which were deemed especially relevant. In addition to this software-aided analysis, I contribute some of my own impressions and perceptions of both the events and their discussions, based on direct observations in the region shortly after the earthquakes in early January 2021 and later, as well as a broad consumption of Croatian media outlets and social media during and after the earthquakes.

What caught my attention was how the immense helpfulness and publicly expressed solidarity was almost immediately undercut by discourse fragments such as the ideologically induced toponymical discussion about the naming of the region as either *Banija* or *Banovina*, mentioned above. Two other major subtopics of the discourse of helpfulness appeared to be national sentiments as well as a creeping impatience and unease with what was sensed to be a too passive Croatian state in the immediate support of the earthquake victims. My study is thus an inquiry prompted by personal impressions. I utilized an open approach to coding, with codes generated while reading the material (as opposed to looking for certain, previously set, codes). This allows for a holistic account of the given material, as rightfully requested for critical discourse analyses (Reisigl 2018).

Helpfulness and the Mediated Public After the Petrinja Earthquakes

The following data analysis allows some insight into the composition of the “discourse of helpfulness” while also discussing specific thematic features and rhetorical devices. As Brigitta Busch shows, media are “sites of discourse struggles” (2009, 579), which in online media are often accompanied by the less authorized but also highly outspoken opinion-making through readers’ comments. Gwen Bouvier and David Machin observe a fading power of the (journalistic and expert) author in the light of social media allowing everyone to feel like an informed author of some sort: “Readers in the social media environment expect to be engaged in a level way, already as knowers and as having specific interests and ways of viewing the world” (2018, 183).

As the leading Croatian politicians’ public statements show, official political discourse is led by rhetorical devices and strategies of performance that differ from media articles and readers’ comments. The latter correspond to what Lilie Chouliaraki has analyzed as different kinds of “proposals for action” (2008, 832) by the media and according reactions or “moral agency” of the “spectators” of distant suffering (2008, 842; cf. Boltanski 2004). Chouliaraki conceptualizes three types of moral agency: “the spectator voyeur,” “the spectator philanthropist,” and “the

spectator protester,” each showing their own degree of engagement with the mediated suffering of others, with the “protester” being closest to taking actual political action (2008, 842–4).

While such spectator types are relevant for my analysis, the “discourse of helpfulness” after the Petrinja earthquakes in fact came with a fourth kind of moral agency, as many of the people hearing about the disaster took direct action in the form of field help. This “spectator activist,” as I will call them, goes far beyond the many pleas for financial and material donations distributed in all three analyzed newspapers. They ventured directly into the earthquake region in order to provide help. With this immediate on-site action, they themselves became a part of the news coverage on the help provided for the earthquake victims, thereby adding to the multi-layered statements and evaluations forming the discourse of helpfulness. It is within such agency-related accounts that the moralist discourse of what was “good help” and what was not emerged, and who was perceived as in “need of help” in the first place.

State Official Discourse-Making in the Face of the Human Catastrophe, and Their Contestation

With politicians being among the first to publicly comment on the natural catastrophe that hit south-central Croatia, I will outline the contribution of three of them to the discourse of helpfulness in some detail before I turn to the newspaper and reader comments. While their rhetorical choices in reacting to the earthquakes set tones highly different from one another, they had in common that they produced a top-down and institutionalized discourse, and as such were contested by journalists, and even more so by individuals in the comment sections.

Natural disasters such as earthquakes are crises for the nation state through which political leaders may “bolster performance-based legitimacy” (Schneider and Hwang 2014, 637) as citizens in such a “setting of anxiety and ambiguity” (Edelman 1998, 132) are more than usually (self-)perceived as depending on the state and its problem-solving abilities. The symbolic meaning of any crisis becomes evident in how different interest groups, and one of these are the elected political leaders, take highly variegated approaches towards solving the crisis. As Florian Schneider and Yih-Jye Hwang put it, “disasters are not merely natural phenomena, but political events in and of themselves” (2014, 637).

Accordingly, in their first reactions to the Petrinja earthquakes, Croatian political leaders resorted to different political performances. Prime minister Andrej Plenković, president of state Zoran Milanović, and Petrinja’s mayor at the time,

Darinko Dumbović, in their statements, reflected both their political functions and the expectations connected to them, but also the broad variety of possibilities in addressing catastrophe. I conceptualize the rhetorical styles represented by the three politicians as “technical” (Plenković), “empathetic” (Milanović), and “dramatizing” (Dumbović).

Prime minister Andrej Plenković chose a highly formal approach to address the issues caused by the Petrinja earthquake. In one of his first statements, after outlaying some details on the damage the earthquake had caused as well as the work of aid organizations, he indirectly referred to the earthquake which took place in Zagreb in March 2020 and promised financial help from the state budget:

Unfortunately, we have had a lot of experience already this year with resolving these most urgent matters, such as roof trusses, outer walls and everything which falls under interventional measures. There is also the possibility of budget reallocation in the ministry of building and state property; here, minister [Darko] Horvat will be urging the matter so that we will help our fellow citizens in Petrinja, Sisak and in the other areas.¹ (Plenković: Pomoći ćemo, *HINA*, 28 December 2020)

Plenković’s statement in Petrinja on 28 December 2020 referred only to material losses, because it was the second and heavier earthquake on 29 December which led to seven fatalities. His rhetoric was clearly driven by the wish to communicate the government’s effort to stand with those who suffered material loss. As in almost every other of Plenković’s addresses to the earthquake victims, here too he squeezed in a number of details and bureaucratic information that set the tone. Any attempt at showing emotional support and compassion was undermined, as was the case with his introductory adverb “unfortunately” (*nažalost*). As prime minister, Plenković was surely expected to concentrate on the technical, administrative side of how to master this (and any other) national crisis. Given that soon after the state and its institutions were publicly evaluated as not helpful enough (see below), Plenković by virtue of his office was pressured to repeatedly emphasize, in his statements, what was done.

As will be shown later in more detail, the widespread unease with the state’s performance was often put in context with praising, even heroicizing, individual volunteers’ efforts. State representatives engaged in criticizing the lack of structure and coordination in such individual and collaborative hands-on on-site help initiatives. Plenković however chose an affirmative rhetoric, while still expressing his expectations that such activities be better coordinated

¹ All translations from Croatian by the author.

in a future crisis. He envisaged state institutions to take over many essential aid activities:

[...] the response is very strong and we really appreciate the efforts that many of our fellow citizens, who spontaneously organised themselves, have made in different cities, municipalities, the villages here, and who came to single households where people needed help. I believe that of that ... of that we can be proud. I once more thank them all! Now, it will be good to structure all this activity and organise it in the most efficient way. (Plenković se zahvalio građanima, *Aljazeera Balkans*, 5 January 2021)

Thus, the tone set by Plenković shows several layers that were paradigmatic of the political discourse, such as technical issues, expressions of consolation, as well as a mutual depreciation of both state-induced help and spontaneous volunteers. These issues were complemented by the two other central political figures in the direct aftermath of the earthquake, Zoran Milanović and Darinko Dumbović.

The rhetoric chosen by state president Zoran Milanović was highly empathetic and built upon his own unease when experiencing the earthquake in Zagreb. He expressed his understanding for anyone in fear. While pointing to the mental stress for the victims of the earthquakes, he connected his survey of the material damage with a consolidating prospect of the future rebuild. He did that by mentioning how the local church (probably the Church of St. Lovro in the center of Petrinja) was destroyed during the war of the 1990s, and subsequently rebuilt. His message was, thus, that material damage can be overcome. While such an expectation might be somewhat out of the limb for non-clerical buildings, his statement is representative of many other comments which connected the earthquake's damage with the war-related destruction of the region in the early 1990s:

In Zagreb it was ... it is uncomfortable, causes fear in people and unease, and in me, too. I mean, if you are not afraid ... it is human to be afraid, so that I believe that this is the biggest punch for people—fear. When you feel how things are sinking underneath you, shaking around you ... what has been devastated and damaged will be rebuilt. Rebuilding is a problem, but the smaller problem actually. [...] this church here was levelled to the ground, this is a wholly newly built church ... so, it was levelled in '92, something that has not happened in every city, but, well, here it has, so that the city has been quite damaged, in human as well as in emotional and material respect. (Državni vrh u posjetu, *Portal 53, Petrinjski Radio*, 28 December 2020)

Such war-related rhetoric was also dominant in statements of Petrinja's mayor Darinko Dumbović. He too placed the earthquake immediately in the context of other catastrophes, referring in his speech in front of journalists to both the war of the 1990s and the current pandemic:

Voice-over: “Petrinja’s mayor Darinko Dumbović took the prime minister and the president on a tour around the centre of Petrinja to give them a picture of the degree of the damage.”

Dumbović: “After the homeland war, after Covid, now the earthquake. Everything has hit us and that has not been easy for us. Petrinja remains a town that has gone through quite some, let’s say, frustrations; however after this we don’t want Petrinja to be the destination of all kinds of frustration. This is Petrinja. If we do not react immediately and if, in fact, we will only be passers-by [*prolaznici*] today, we need to be passers-by that leave their trace. I mean, we will not wait for a solution; we always have to have a solution; and the solution is to have a solution and not to have no solution. I expect at least a couple of millions on the municipal bank account by tomorrow, so that I can cover people’s stables, roof tiles and so on. This then is concrete help.” (Državni vrh u posjetu, *Portal 53, Petrinjski Radio*, 28 December 2020)

While Dumbović’s rhetoric can be characterized as “dramatizing” because of his analogy of a town suffering in several frustrating events, it is obviously aimed at raising awareness for the victims and the plight of the local population, as well as at raising money to be able to organize the rebuilding of Petrinja. Given the presence of the state’s leading politicians, his message addressed multiple receivers. His argumentative *circulus in probando* in calling for a solution by stating that not having a solution is not a solution is indicative of his addressing both those expecting a solution in the near future and those being expected to provide such solution(s). What the circular reasoning discloses even more, though, is his own dilemma of being part of both groups. While the broadcast statement was an appeal to the Croatian public to financially help his suffering town, which he made even clearer when he called for craftspeople to come and help with the emergency rebuilds, the mentioning of the *prolaznici* (“passers-by”), of which he makes himself a part by using the first person plural, undoubtedly rather addressed the two men standing nearby, Milanović and especially Plenković. Dumbović’s wording clearly implied the (unwanted) possibility of the two politicians being in Petrinja only to show up in front of cameras and disappear without any solution. Such tendency of people, not just politicians, to instrumentalize the catastrophe for their own ends was a widely discussed trope that would become stronger in the following days in the public discourse on who was helpful and who was not.

Discourse Strands in Media Articles and Readers’ Comments: Constructing Good and Bad Help

The “discourse of helpfulness” following the Petrinja earthquakes in both traditional and social media was quick in establishing a hegemonic position on who was to praise, namely anyone who wanted to help the region in ways that counted

as good: local actions aimed at providing temporary housing in caravans; donating writing materials to school children; feeding abandoned animals; or allowing families to take a break by providing them with a warm shelter on the Adriatic Sea. Such activities were covered widely in the media. Likewise, foreign states' donations of mobile homes, financial means, and field help were welcomed throughout. Yet, the same was not true for many—not to say most—Croatian state institutions and their attempts at easing the situation in the field, with some exemptions such as the professional firefighters.

I illustrate this neat division into “good” and bad “helpers” (or anticipated “non-helpers”) in this and the following section, before turning to the third major discursive figure around helpfulness after the earthquakes: the “needy”. All three discourse strands were based on evaluations, first-hand impressions, and, especially, on what has been called “discourse positions” (Jäger 2019, 75), that is subjective features and ideological stances. After the Petrinja earthquakes, these discourse positions were enforced through moralizing opinions about which help was useful and which was not. Such convictions were widely communicated in the mediated public sphere and omnipresent in the social media, where strong opinions and unnegotiable stances are a matter of normalcy rather than exception (Reagle 2015, 173).

Not just the earthquakes but also the current Covid-19 pandemic have been permeated by discourses of non-understanding, exclusion, and mutual silencing. Their shape is straightforward in their apparent clarity. Nuances, doubts, and uncertainties are easily rejected. In their book *The Politics of Moralizing*, Jane Bennett and Michael J. Shapiro have elaborated the subject of such moralizing politics: “The moralizer presents her substantive positions as having a high degree of internal coherence and purity, thus drawing upon the aesthetic and psychological appeal of clarity and simplicity” (2002, 3). How people perceive a given discourse based on their own ontological premises thus is an important part of how this very discourse is shaped, what is negotiated, and what is left out of it, both in the more guided and authoritative sphere of media discourse and in the reactions to it in the comments sections, as well as in social media.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, the discourses of helpfulness in all media were profoundly charged with emotions. Psychological research on emotion has shown that “affective information constitutes the very basis for every estimate of subjective ‘value’ or ‘utility’” (Hartley and Sokol-Hessner 2018, 351), something which can be neatly demonstrated with the newspaper and commentary material analyzed here. While different kinds of emotions play their part in the affective reaction to natural disasters, a central one in fact is the expression of love, which Susanna M. Hoffman (2020b, 158) has described as belonging to the third stage of emotions after a disaster, following horror and grief. This has been

somewhat ignored in research of catastrophes and crises, but is clearly perceivable as a major topos after the Petrinja earthquakes:

Not romantic love, but the burst of human spirit love that carries with it the impulse to aid and give solace to one another. *Agapi*, in Greek, feelings for others, not *erotas*, passion for an intimate. Love is a word never mentioned in conjunction with disasters: too sloppy, too mawkish, too feminine. But, there is no denying its emergence. (Hoffman 2020b, 158)

While feelings of love may have been a major motivation for those who undertook the many immediate field trips to the Petrinja region from other parts of Croatia, these helpers themselves received many highly affective support messages in both the newspapers and the comments accompanying them. Such support even increased when minister of construction Darko Horvat on 9 January 2021 announced part of these efforts (he especially addressed helpers providing warm meals) to not be necessary anymore, as the state infrastructure was then ready to take over (Horvat o podjeli hrane, *Dnevnik.hr*, 9 January 2021). On 1 January 2021, the head of Croatia's civil protection, Damir Trut, had already pointed out how the unorganized help that had been massively provided by soccer fan clubs posed a problem for the aid agencies, as these people blocked the streets. The situation in the field was chaotic because of the many voluntary helpers:

What the fans have organised is based on the wish to help, and that is okay, but at that moment it was no good. They should have waited a couple of hours or days. What did they do? They blocked everything, and the services could not pass through. We now have had some days of people wobbling around here, drinking and fighting on site. We had to deal with them instead of the affected people. I respect them all, I was a fan too, they have heart and strength, but if there are 2000 of them here, and they are a bit wild, this causes us problems. Maybe they could organise eventually, but not 1600 of them at once. (Blotnej and Šiprak, Pomoć prije stigla, *24 sata*, 1 January 2021)

After such instances of criticism uttered by state officials, the already overwhelming support and thankfulness expressed on social media for those going to the region with the intent to help regularly peaked.

While the choice of words alone displayed a lot of love as expressed in Croatian newspapers and the corresponding comments, a multimodal perspective allows for an even better grasp of how love was communicated, especially in discursive subtopics (codes) such as “solidarity”, “support for the helpers”, and “thankfulness”. The analysis of the interplay of linguistic and pictorial message-making shows how, next to emojis of the national flag, little (red) hearts featured high in the commentary sections. These visual expressions of emotional devotion typically came in conjunction with affirmative, supportive, or uplifting texts:

Veliko ste srce ❤️❤️❤️

(“You have [lit. you are of] big hearts”) (Comment on Prodan, *Velika misija kuhara volontera, Novi List*, 7 January 2021)

Svaka čast dečki, vi ne brojite krvna zrnca. Svima pomažete Bog vas blagoslovio, dao vam zdravlje i sreću. 🙌❤️🇨🇷

(“Well done boys, you don’t look at the differences [lit. you don’t count blood cells]. You help everyone, may God bless you, and may he give you health and happiness”)² (Comment on Rebac and Krištafor, *Spasili ga Bad Blue Boysi, 24 sata*, 2 January 2021)

The subtopic of love and emotional devotion was not limited to readers’ comments. Newspaper articles carried and spread messages of affirmative emotions, too. And while the functional register of the journalistic genre dissected from the commentators’ straightforward style of directly addressing the helpers, the rhetoric of appraisal was no less salient. What is more, a dominant feature was a blend of praising both the individual helpers and the whole (Croatian) nation for their empathy and devotion:

The nation has reacted to the horror of the earthquake like an avalanche. Unanimous, united in the effort to help without regard for the fact that this is usually the primary, initial reaction of state institutions. The nation has been completely uninterested in anything but rescuing human life, mostly from suffering. This is a new good morning to Croatia, and we truly hope that the people will not be silent in any other similar situation. (Prodan, *Velika misija kuhara volontera, Novi List*, 7 January 2021)

Croatia has united once again, the whole nation stood up to help Petrinja and the surrounding areas that suffered in the heavy earthquake. (Tironi, Filip Krovinović *skuplja novac za Petrinju, 24 sata*, 1 January 2021)

Stephen W. Dudasik’s typology of victims of natural disaster allows the conclusion that people throughout Croatia may, to different degrees, count as victims of the Petrinja earthquakes. The four types of victims are “event”, “context”, “peripheral”, and “entry victims”: The directly affected “event victims” are those killed, injured, and otherwise physically and psychologically traumatised. “Context victims” are those who suffer from the consequences of a disaster due to broken infrastructures and dysfunctional institutions and sociocultural conditions. “Peripheral victims” are people with personal links to the affected region and/or its people, while “entry victims” are people coming to the region in the direct aftermath of the event, mostly as helpers and journalists (Dudasik 1980, 328–9). In Croatia, these four types of

² Cited Croatian texts are given in their original form; errors contained in them have not been corrected.

victims constructed emotional bonds through messages of (nationalized) love, as shown above. Hoffman called this the “mutual ties” among victims: “Through love, the many victims, often unknown to one another and often considerably diverse, make mutual ties. The ties generally endure for a substantial period, and sometimes forever” (Hoffman 2020b, 158).

This positive and supportive discourse strand did not restrict itself to expressions of love and affect, but rather engaged in often gauging messages of appreciation altogether. While some aid agencies, let alone politicians and the government, were hardly ever the addressees of such appreciation, international helpers and domestic volunteers (and especially the above-mentioned soccer fan clubs) who organized and participated in on-site help received a lot of positive attention. Typically, accounts both in the newspapers and the comment sections ran like this:

The boys [*dečki*] cleaned the street with the army, with the police, they cleaned the destroyed building, they did not care about their own safety. I can only say to all BBB [Bad Blue Boys, name of the main soccer fan club from Zagreb]: ‘Kudos to you. I am indebted to you for the rest of my life.’ They came immediately to help my son and they did everything to make him [feel] better—Alma Šimić from Petrinja told us. (Rebac and Krištafor, *Spasili ga Bad Blue Boysi*, *24 sata*, 2 January 2021)

This quote was articulated in the context of the discussion triggered by the head of Croatia’s civil protection Damir Trut’s statements (see above). It is typical for the more nationally-oriented perspective that the discourse of helpfulness took in the tabloid *24sata*, while for the Rijeka-based daily *Novi List* this was lesser the case.

The following is an example of the many accounts that praised international help. Yet, with its focus on Serbia, it is representative also of a dominant trope in the paper’s coverage of the Serb minority in Croatia, *Novosti*:

Ever since visa[s] were eliminated for Serbian citizens it has never been harder to enter Croatia from that country. But even though it was never more complicated to pass the border, it hardly ever was more necessary than after the series of earthquakes that hit Banija. Solidarity has never known borders, which was proven once again. (Kožul, *Solidarnost*, *Novosti*, 4 January 2021)

Very often, appreciation of the volunteers was connected to negative evaluations of Croatia as a state. While appreciative discourse strands of “the good” were, despite a certain stress on soccer fans, manifold and nuanced, this was not the case with the opposite. The Croatian state was the main object of devaluation, ridicule, and anger, pointing to the immense reservoir of mistrust in everyday life, which overflowed in times of crisis. As featured above, when members of the general staff of the Civil Protection (*Stožer civilne zaštite*) on 30 December and later articulated

their concern over the chaotic situation in the earthquake region due to the high number of unorganized and unsupervised volunteers, this led to a huge backlash of both cynical and defensive reactions in support of such individual and bottom-up help actions. More than to vindicate the volunteers, though, the rhetoric of backing private helpers was used to excoriate state institutions, politicians, the government, and the Croatian state altogether. The following is a typical statement:

What general staff? When the people needed them most, they came to have lots of their pictures taken while others collected donations and organised help. Various states activated themselves sooner and brought help here while those clowns walked around and had themselves photographed in Petrinja, Sisak and other affected areas. If it wasn't for these little people [in the street] who immediately went to work, who knows how long people would have had to wait for help. The construction minister says that in 6–9 months the first shovel will be dug [into the earth] to build new houses in the affected region. Shame to the state. (comment on Uremović, Poslikali se, otišli, *24 sata*, 5 January 2021)

Such state-shaming rhetoric was a central feature of the discourse strand on “the bad”. The critical evaluation of the government was unisono enough to amount to a harmonizing characteristic of the discourse of helpfulness. Somewhat recapitulating the impatience of both journalists and commentators with the performance of the Croatian state on the day after the second earthquake was this comment by a reader of *24sata*: “Everyone is helping, only the state 0 points” (*Svi pomažu jedino država 0 bodova*) (comment on Weiss, Austrija šalje 80 kontejnera, *24 sata*, 30 December 2020). The remark summed up the overall sense of the Croatian state’s unhelpfulness in the direct aftermath of the catastrophe. Yet, while the mills of administration and bureaucracy grind slowly, this state-focused antipode in the discourse of helpfulness showed much readiness to ignore that some of the smoothest operations of first aid in the region were conducted by state institutions, such as the widely praised professional fire brigades.

Constructing the Region and Its Inhabitants: The Needy

The third and last discourse strand to be elaborated here is on the “event victims” of the natural catastrophe—the people who were directly hit by the earthquakes. For many, the shaking earth was a psychologically demanding event that left them in fear and shock, just as president Zoran Milanović addressed in his above-quoted first speech in Petrinja. For many, though, it was also a moment of material and physical loss and suffering. Traveling the region months afterwards, I observed people awaiting their second winter in mobile homes and containers next to their still

devastated houses, and heard stories for example of teenagers who were afraid to go into certain rooms of their house, in which they could not feel secure anymore.

Being at the receiving end of the discourse of helpfulness, the earthquake victims were not saved from moralising interpretations as regards their status of being in need or not. While investigative journalists by the definition of their trade tended to speak with the earthquake victims rather than just about them, the opposite is true in readers' comments. Seldom in the early days after the earthquakes were "the needy" able to contribute to the discussions in social media and on the newspapers' websites. Typical features of this discourse strand were emotional reporting, modesty, and expressions of gratitude, as the following newspaper excerpt on an individual donation of a car for a young father exemplifies:

Restraining tears, Luka Turković, father of two daughters, with the third on her way, said in a low voice that he will never be able to reciprocate the Jožić family's benevolence. – There are no words to express my admiration and respect for you and your lady Tereza, as you showed yourself in a light in which only parents can shine. If I had not two, soon three, little children, I would not accept the gift with which you, after hard days and the destructive earthquake that hit us in Petrinja, brought light and happiness to our family, who was left without a roof over our head. (Rukavina, Unijeli ste svjetlost i radost, 24 sata, 4 January 2021)

This story received quite some attention in comments on the paper's webpage and on Facebook, with one of them apparently coming from a close relative of the donation receiver. This person posted a highly critical evaluation:

Unfortunately, my brother. He has no driver's licence, he did not even spend 2 min. volunteering, did not stay a minute in Petrinja after the earthquake, came back to get the car and went back to Zadar WITHOUT A LICENCE. He may be my brother, but this is a disgrace. So many people lost their cars, houses and he who never made an effort and did not even have anything to lose, got a car. And once again, HE GOT A CAR AND HAS NO LICENCE. Kudos for the dispositioning of things to those who need them. But if you keep distributing, and organising, like that, Petrinja will not recover anytime soon. (comment on Rukavina, Unijeli ste svjetlost i radost, 24 sata, 4 January 2021)

There were many such contradicting stories, and the critical judgement of donation distribution was rather typical for many codes the discourse of helpfulness encompassed. The usual content of the discourse strand on "the needy", though, was one of modesty and gratitude, and of the specificities of rural life, together with bad living conditions that had existed also before the earthquakes, mostly due to devastation during the wars of the 1990s, and the region's being somewhat "forgotten" generally. The difference between the earthquake region and other parts of Croatia is striking, in fact. This came as a surprise to many of the helpers and added to a sense of otherness of not only the region but also the people in need.

Novi list quoted a helper from an Adriatic island who compared life in the earthquake region to how people elsewhere had lived more than hundred years ago:

And this huge difference in living conditions fully became visible only after coming back to our homes. I still cannot grasp that half an hour drive from Zagreb, the Snow Queen [a ski trail near Zagreb] and all wonders of the world, people actually live like it was the 19th century. (Trinajstić, U tri dana, *Novi list*, 9 January 2021)

The Petrinja region, despite a lot of natural beauty, is not known for its touristic value nor is it a much-travelled transit route, meaning people without personal acquaintance are likely to never visit. This sense of alienness found its echo in and somewhat confounded the discourse of helpfulness with regard to the national unity propagated otherwise.

What is more, and mostly not mentioned in the newspaper coverage, is the fact that many of the people in need after the earthquake are a part of the Serb minority. On 30 December 2020, Milorad Pupovac, a long-standing and prominent politician of the Independent Democratic Serbian Party (*Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka*, SDSS), was quoted in *Novosti* (Svim stradalim treba pomoći, *Novosti*, 30 December 2020) as saying that everyone affected by the earthquake, regardless of their ethnicity, was in need of help. On 2 January 2021, another article in *Novosti* (Bačić, Bojimo se da će nas zaobići, *Novosti*, 2 January 2021) pointed to many among the Serb minority living in remote areas of the region, where help was not as easily provided as it was in Petrinja and other better-connected settlements. Altogether, references to ethnicity did not feature very highly in utterances about the people in need. If they appeared, they did so rather indirectly, as in the “blood cell”-metonym in one of the reader comments above. *Novosti* did refer, often indirectly, to Serbian (and Romani) people being among the most vulnerable. The silencing of ethnicity in the other two media outlets comes as a surprise. Altogether, *Novosti* and Croatia’s Serbian politicians were those who were in constant danger of becoming the “attacked messenger” in this realm of the discourse of helpfulness.

In general, the depiction of “the needy” was a mixture of othering, emotionalism, and compassion, focusing on the donation receivers’ modesty (*skromnost*) and gratitude, but also war-related rhetoric. Often, these codes were connected with invocations of national unity and expressions of love, connecting them to the issue “the good help” provided, as a quotation of one of the victims shows, who found refuge in Rijeka:

One who did not save anything but herself, her medicine and cell phone, and whose flat, just as the whole building, is under the diggers, is the pensioned journalist of Radio Petrinja, Marela Modrić:—Thanks to everyone who helped us. You know, we Croats are such a nation that when nothing is bothering us, we fight, and very harshly so, but when something happens, there is no nation more united than we are. (Mrkić Modrić, Desetero Petrinjaca, *Novi list*, 8 January 2021)

This excerpt from a longer article on a group of people hosted at the seaside invoked a broad selection of topics relevant for the discourse of helpfulness, such as gratitude, the destruction of homes, national unity, and solidarity. Given that the discourse strand on “the needy” was not grounded as much on convictions and critical stances as the other two were, it regularly came about in personal testimony, which left somewhat more room for diverse and individual voices. Yet, the frequency of the allegory of donation receivers as thankful and modest shows that not even they were spared from the highly affective and persistently moralist evaluations of all actors involved.

Conclusion: Moralism in the Discourse of Helpfulness After the Petrinja Earthquakes

The discourse of helpfulness in the immediate aftermath of the Petrinja earthquakes of December 2020 was fractured and multi-layered, as my analysis of parts of the Croatian press shows. While material-technical disaster response and political appropriation of disaster management have been central research topics in anthropology and related disciplines, affective responses are somewhat less clear to grasp and have only recently been taken more into consideration (Hoffman 2020b). The material on helping I analyzed was filled with emotional reactions and moralising assessments, mostly, but clearly not only, due to the inclusion of individual readers’ comments in my assessment. Emotions as well as moralism (Bennett and Shapiro 2002, 4) ran high in assessments of volunteer operations, politicians’ statements, and individual victims’ suffering. And with strong emotions being the base for strong values and belief systems, a great range of the reactions to the earthquake and its handling were, consequently, not just affective but highly evaluative in nature.

While politicians’ first reactions revealed different ways of approaching a matter as delicate and sensitive as a region and its people in need after a natural catastrophe, they went together with the very moment when a spectatorship of the Petrinja earthquakes emerged. Many of these spectators did not just stay in an observing and distant mode, but morphed into helpers—“spectator activists”, be it on- or off-site. This (large) group of people became a central element of the discourse of helpfulness. Clearly overcoming the stage of voyeurism, the “spectator activists” leave behind mere philanthropism and protest, as indicated by Chouliaraki (2008). Just as the actual event victims, they are turned into a mediated and therefore scrutinised and opinionated matter.

Ultimately, while aiming at reducing the damage done by nature, the public negotiation of acts of help during an acute crisis bears great potential of doing harm itself. Everyone, it seems, is in constant danger of being put under critical observation, for various and sometimes valid reasons. While the “good” are praised and the “needy” are pitied, none of them can ever be sure not to be turned, in an instant, into the “bad” in the eye of the moralist public opinion.

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