

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“They’ll have to give up the smartphones and take notes in paper notebooks”: Discourse, power, and meaning-making in degrowth media presentations in the semi-peripheral context

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Information

Received 10 April 2025

Accepted 6 April 2026

Online 14 October 2026

Keywords

degrowth movement

media framing

power relations

environmental politics

critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Abstract

This article employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how Croatian media represented degrowth in the aftermath of the 9th International Degrowth Conference held in Zagreb in 2023. By analysing 38 articles published shortly after the event, the study identifies a polarized media landscape structured around three dominant narrative framings: traditionalist-populist, paternalist-denialist, and ecological-transformative. These narratives portray degrowth as a threat to national prosperity and identity, dismissed as impractical or naïve, or framed as a legitimate response to ecological and social pressures. Situating these representations within Croatia’s semi-peripheral, post-socialist context, the analysis shows how media framings intersect with long-standing developmental aspirations, public attitudes toward environmental and social justice, and local political dynamics. By deconstructing the discursive strategies through which degrowth is legitimized or delegitimized, the article contributes to understanding how environmental alternatives are negotiated in public debate and highlights the importance of context-sensitive communication in efforts toward socio-ecological transformation.

1. Introduction

Degrowth and post-growth ideas have emerged as a radical scientific and political critique of the growth-oriented economic paradigm, addressing intertwined crises of ecological degradation, resource overuse, and widening social inequalities (Durand et al., 2024; Kallis et al., 2025). Grounded in ecological economics and political ecology, degrowth proposes a

deliberate, democratic downscaling of production and consumption in high-income societies, while advancing redistribution and global justice. It challenges the assumption that capitalist economies can achieve sustainability without reconfiguring growth-dependent institutions and rejects the cultural hegemony of gross domestic product (GDP) growth as an unquestioned societal goal. Instead, degrowth scholarship has highlighted alternative measures of well-being, such as conviviality, equity, and ecological resilience, and has foregrounded the need for structural transformation, rather than mere technological substitution (D’Alisa et al., 2016; Kallis et al., 2018). Although these ideas have gained traction within both academic and activist communities, they remain contentious in wider public and political discourse, often provoking polarized interpretations.

This paper examines how degrowth was represented in Croatian mass media following the first in-person International Degrowth Conference after the global pandemic, *Planet, People, Care*, held in September 2023 and supported by the Zagreb municipal government. The conference brought together international scholars, activists, and local actors, making Zagreb a temporary focal point for global debates on the viability and desirability of degrowth. As such, it offered Croatian media a rare opportunity to engage with a topic that had surfaced only sporadically before. The resulting coverage provides a revealing case for studying how degrowth enters public discourse in a semi-peripheral setting where economic convergence with Western Europe remains central to national identity and political imagination.

The Croatian case is especially instructive because degrowth debates intersect with the legacies of the post-socialist transition, the transformations of the 1990s, and the expectations associated with European integration. In contexts such as Croatia, critiques of consumerism, economic expansion, and growth-oriented development may appear threatening not only to prevailing policy paradigms but also to long-standing aspirations of ‘catching up’ with Western Europe. Negative framings of degrowth in Western media—often cast as a fringe, radical, or subversive agenda—further shape domestic responses, reinforcing interpretations that equate degrowth with stagnation, regression, or political extremism. At the same time, visions of “alternative hedonism,” as articulated by Soper (2020), illuminate how prosperity might be reconceived to resonate with universal aspirations for meaningful work, shared social life, and ecological security. These debates are salient in the Croatian

context, where older generations retain memories of alternative development trajectories rooted in public wealth and social provision, and where tensions between material aspirations and ecological constraints remain acute.

While empirical analyses of media discourse on degrowth remain limited, emerging studies demonstrate that media shape, filter, and polarize public understandings of post-growth imaginaries. Research from Norway, Italy, Scotland, and Germany has documented the persistent marginalization of degrowth within mainstream outlets and the dominance of techno-optimist or depoliticized narratives that sideline systemic critiques (Capasso, 2021; Battaglia, 2023; Sagvosdkin, 2025). Post-socialist scholarship, meanwhile, highlights the specific historical legacies of the semi-periphery, namely, transformation fatigue, scarcity experiences, and the pervasive discourse of catch-up development, which condition public reception of systemic alternatives. Our study builds on this growing body of work by examining how these global and regional dynamics unfold in the Croatian media landscape when degrowth is projected into the public sphere through a high-profile international event.

Understanding media representations also requires recognising the media's role as a key mediator between academic debates and public perceptions. Media coverage does not simply describe degrowth; it constructs, contests, and refracts its meaning through framing choices, rhetorical strategies, and value-laden filters. Following this logic, we situate Croatian media narratives within broader political and cultural tensions in a semi-peripheral, post-socialist context. We show how mass media re-articulated degrowth at the intersection of ecological limits and growth aspirations, while simultaneously revealing deeper struggles over political identity, economic direction, and social order in contemporary Croatia. This analysis thus contributes to a broader understanding of how degrowth ideas circulate, collide, and are politicised in public discourse.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines Croatia's post-socialist legacy and its relevance for understanding the reception of degrowth, including the evolution of public attitudes documented in recent surveys. Section 3 introduces our methodological approach, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and details the corpus and analytical procedures. Section 4 presents the empirical findings, identifying three dominant narrative framings in Croatian

media: traditionalist-populist, paternalist-denialist, and ecological-transformative. Section 5 discusses these findings in relation to existing literature and broader European patterns of media polarization around degrowth. Finally, Section 6 summarizes the paper's contributions and highlights avenues for further research on post-growth imaginaries in semi-peripheral contexts.

2. Socio-historical context: attitudes to degrowth in Croatia

Croatia's engagement with "limits to growth" debates dates back to the 1970s, when it was still part of socialist Yugoslavia. The 1972 Stockholm conference received notable media coverage and was followed by various civil society reactions throughout the 1970s. Most notable was the presentation and contextualisation of the 1972 Club of Rome report, which analysed specific growth imperatives and constraints (Supek, 1978). Eventually, it led to public political discussions over the growth orientation of one of the federal republic's long-term development plans (Plut, 1985). In 1971, the Yugoslav federated state addressed environmental issues in its Five-Year Plan by introducing environmental protection for the first time in national development planning. The state also organized the first assembly of the Yugoslavian Council for the Protection and Improvement of Human Environment, bringing together all relevant actors in environmental matters and declaring itself a social movement (Lay & Puđak, 2014). The initiative reflected awareness of the 'limits to growth' debates within the official self-governing socialist ideology, but over the next two decades, it gave way to international neoliberal imperatives, internal bureaucratization, and a disconnect between goals and actions (Hirvilammi et al., 2024; Oštrić, 1992). Topics related to degrowth continued to feature in parts of academia, but the concept was explicitly revived following the translation of *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (D'Alisa et al., 2016).¹

The Croatian term for degrowth, *odrast*, which was also used in the translation of the 9th International Conference's title and the accompanying public festival events, has the potential to spark wordplay in articles and titles, both positive and negative. In Croatian and other related Slavic languages, *odrast* carries the connotation of "growing up" or "maturing,"

¹ This is also the period when the media mining tools employed in this analysis start to capture articles explicitly discussing *odrast* (the Croatian translation of 'degrowth'; see 3. Analytical Approach below).

a semantic association that does not accompany the English-language term degrowth. The Croatian edition of *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (D'Alisa et al., 2016) explicitly states that the term's intended connotations are "growing up," "maturing," and "taking responsibility for one's actions." However, the analysis of media discursive events² presented below often exploits the overlap with the concept of growing up for ironic effect, as in 'when you grow up, you'll have to give up what is dear to you,' as if the present signifies a careless innocence of childhood. Thus, nuances of the Croatian translation illustrate the context of degrowth advocacy and its opposition, both of which are encoded in the very use of language, a context in which pushback against a transformative proposal occurs.

2.1. Popular attitudes according to surveys

The existing survey research on degrowth-compatible social attitudes in Croatia—and in comparable Central and Eastern European contexts—provides an important backdrop for interpreting the sharply polarized media reactions analysed in this paper. Since the early 2010s, comparative studies (e.g. Domazet & Marinović Jerolimov, 2014; Telesiene & Gross, 2017) have shown that Croatian citizens consistently express high levels of environmental concern yet have been hesitant to endorse far-reaching systemic changes typically associated with degrowth. Initially, public opinion reflected a general awareness of ecological limits and global injustice (Domazet & Ančić, 2017), and expectations that more affluent countries should lead radical transformation remained widespread. By the late 2010s and early 2020s, however, a notable shift appeared: deeper survey analyses (Brajdić Vuković et al., 2020) revealed stronger support for redistribution, care, and social justice, while subsequent national surveys (Cik, 2021; Domazet & Brajdić Vuković, 2025) indicated growing scepticism toward techno-optimist promises and increasing public concern over the environmental costs of dominant development paths.

These patterns are central to understanding how Croatian media representations of degrowth resonated with or clashed with underlying public sentiments. Survey findings show

² Media discursive events are the specific moments when media texts enter public debate, functioning as instances in which meanings are produced, framed, and circulated. In line with Fairclough's and Van Dijk's CDA traditions, these events comprise the news articles, commentaries, and interviews that activate particular linguistic choices and evaluative stances, allowing us to analyse how broader social representations and value-orientations shape the reception of degrowth in the semi-peripheral context.

that while explicit opposition to degrowth remains limited, segments of the population still associate calls for material restraint with fears of sacrifice, economic insecurity, or political agendas they distrust. This aligns with the broader challenge identified by recent behavioural research in high-income contexts (Krpan et al., 2025): public acceptance of degrowth-aligned proposals is shaped not only by substantive arguments but also by perceptions of fairness, identity, and political framing. The Croatian survey trajectory, therefore, mirrors a tension between growing readiness to question growth and persistent anxieties about the implications of systemic transformation. Presenting these survey patterns here clarifies that media narratives did not emerge in a vacuum; they interacted with, amplified, or countered existing public predispositions. This helps explain why some framings gained traction and why others provoked defensive reactions during the concentrated period of post-conference media attention.

2.2 City endorsement

Against this backdrop, Zagreb's political transformation further shaped the reception of degrowth. In 2021, Tomislav Tomašević and the Green-Left Coalition won the mayoral elections, ending two decades of Milan Bandić's rule, whose governance was often associated with clientelism and opaque management (Sarnow & Tiedemann, 2023). The new administration embraced policies of sustainability, transparency, and social justice, positioning Zagreb within a broader European municipalist trend in which progressive coalitions emerged in response to ecological crises and dissatisfaction with traditional elites (Tiedemann, 2024). This shift was symbolically reinforced when the mayor officially endorsed and opened the 2023 9th International Degrowth Conference, recalling his own participation at the 2014 4th International Degrowth Conference in Leipzig. For the first time, an international degrowth gathering received an explicit municipal backing, amplified by the keynote address of IPCC vice-chair Diana Ürge-Vorsatz. This institutional recognition elevated degrowth onto the national stage, but also exposed it to media contestation, particularly given the administration's ongoing struggles with issues such as post-earthquake recovery and waste management (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2023; Thompson et al., 2025).

The conference was accompanied by an open-access discursive and artistic festival that engaged the international scholarly community with local culture and politics, as announced

in advance in the national media. Moreover, as the growing literature attests (Milan, 2023; Thompson et al., 2025), Zagreb itself was the seat of an “exemplary radical municipalist platform” (Thompson et al., 2025, p. 14) built on the unification of classical left-liberalism with anti-capitalist eco-socialism. Degrowth, together with commoning, is listed among its normative origins, but the tensions of governing towards social justice and metabolic change (cf. the waste management issue in the city of Zagreb; Thompson et al., 2025) already face the challenge of breaking through media opposition to changing material practices.

Our Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) aims to examine the variety of media discourse on degrowth, including justifications, proposals, and public support, as well as reactions to the municipal government’s public endorsement of the conference. We examine how mass media shapes degrowth narratives, including the discursive lines mobilised in response to the conference and its prominent guests. It highlights the media’s role in reinforcing polarised social attitudes and activating power-laden framings that draw on the fears of degrowth opponents identified in survey research.

2.3. Media landscape

The final contextual characterization is the overview of the media landscape in Croatia. The media outlets themselves operate in a space of uncritical adoption of free-market principles within Croatia's post-socialist historical trajectory (Car & Bilić, 2023). Policymakers often demonstrated insensitivity toward the nuanced ways media pluralism could be conceived, prioritizing economic liberalization over democratic communication needs. This laissez-faire approach to media policy frequently failed to balance market forces, raising critical questions about who gets to speak, on behalf of whom, when, and under what conditions. Media privatization emerged as a central process during this transition, transferring numerous socially and democratically relevant communicative functions to private businesses (Mosco, 2009). This shift to privatization created fertile ground for corruption, as economic imperatives began to overshadow the media's societal responsibilities.

Private enterprises, driven primarily by profit motives, often failed to uphold the media's crucial role in fostering informed and participatory democracies. Media capture further exacerbated these issues, as control over information was subtly and systematically exerted

through ownership concentration, financial dependencies, censorship, and even cognitive capture (Stiglitz, 2017)³. In this environment, media outlets increasingly became tools for private and political agendas, undermining public trust and eroding the foundational principles of democratic communication. The dominance of market logic marginalized voices critical of mainstream narratives, limiting access to diverse perspectives and reinforcing structural inequalities. As a result, Croatia's post-socialist media development underscores the urgent need to reevaluate policies that prioritize economic efficiency over media pluralism and democratic values (Car & Bilić, 2023).

3. Analytical approach

This study investigates how degrowth was represented in the Croatian media, focusing on the framing and normative undertones shaped by media discourse following the 2023 9th International Degrowth Conference⁴. It employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary research method to examine media representations of the degrowth conference and related topics, particularly regarding the city's endorsement. By analysing media coverage of the conference, the study seeks to understand how narratives may shape public perceptions of degrowth and how the event's political context is constructed. We aim to uncover the popular political tropes underlying the surface meanings of phrases describing degrowth in the media.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to studying the relationship between language, power, and society (Van Dijk, 2016). It emphasizes that discourse is never neutral but is always situated within normative struggles and power relations (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). CDA thus provides tools for examining how media discourses construct social

³ Media capture refers to situations in which media organisations become dependent on, aligned with, or indirectly controlled by powerful political or economic actors through mechanisms such as ownership concentration, financial pressures, or informal influence networks. Rather than merely reflecting the outcomes of post-socialist privatisation, media capture denotes a systematic alignment of editorial agendas with these actors' interests, shaping what is reported and how. Cognitive capture describes the subtler process through which journalists, editors, and commentators (unconsciously?) internalise dominant economic or political assumptions leading them to reproduce prevailing value-orientations even without direct interference. Unlike ownership privatisation, which alters who legally controls media outlets, cognitive capture concerns the shaping of professional norms, interpretive frameworks, and taken-for-granted viewpoints that guide everyday reporting.

⁴ *(Planet, People, Care: It Spells Degrowth! – 9th International Degrowth Conference, 2023)*

realities, legitimate or delegitimate actors, and reproduce or challenge hegemonic ideologies⁵. Among the different traditions of CDA, our analysis is directly informed by Norman Fairclough's (1993) three-dimensional model, which distinguishes between (1) textual analysis, (2) discursive practice (production and circulation of texts), and (3) social practice (the wider socio-political context). While Fairclough's framework originated in the 1990s, Van Dijk (2016) remains widely used for its clarity and applicability to media discourse (e.g., Machin & Mayr, 2012). We draw on this model as a structuring device, while acknowledging subsequent developments in CDA. For instance, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach highlights how discourse is linked to mental models and shared social representations (Van Dijk, 2016). While our analysis is structured primarily around Fairclough's three-dimensional model, it is also compatible with Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach (2016), which emphasizes how media discourse contributes to the formation of shared social representations and ideological schemas. Although we did not analyse audience cognition directly, our identification of recurring narratives and framing patterns reflects the collective representations of degrowth circulating in Croatian media. In this sense, our study engages with Van Dijk's perspective by examining how media discourse constructs and reproduces socially shared meanings, particularly regarding the legitimacy or illegitimacy of degrowth as a socio-economic alternative.

Furthermore, Wodak & Meyer's (2016) discourse-historical approach emphasizes intertextuality and the embedding of discourse within broader historical contexts. These perspectives underscore that discourse analysis involves multiple levels of meaning: linguistic, social, and historical, all of which must be considered. Liu & Guo (2016) note that contemporary developments in CDA include the incorporation of corpus linguistic techniques—such as keyword analysis, collocation, and distribution patterns—alongside the rise of multimodal CDA, which augments textual analysis with visual and other semiotic modes. Although these trends highlight CDA's adaptability and interdisciplinarity, Fairclough's

⁵ In this paper, we use the term "ideologies" from a CDA perspective as the shared, often implicit systems of meaning, values, and assumptions that shape how social issues are interpreted and communicated. Together with "value-laden," "normative," and "worldview-based," it denotes the underlying interpretive frameworks through which media discourse organizes perceptions of social reality and authority. In a few places where it follows the charge levied in media reports, well known historical descriptions or references cited, it can refer to rigid or partisan worldviews, but this should be clear from the context.

(1993) three-dimensional model remains a foundational framework because it effectively connects micro-level textual features with broader social practices and ideologies (Liu & Guo, 2016) and allows for systematic and reflexive examination of discourse. Its continued utility is demonstrated by recent studies that apply Fairclough's model to contemporary issues, such as the analysis of the Danish HPV vaccine controversy (Mohr & Frederiksen, 2020), and an examination of news discourse on COVID-19 in The New York Times (Mai & Jocuns, 2023).

In operational terms, our study focuses on two concepts particularly relevant for media discourse: framing and narratives. Framing refers to how media texts highlight certain aspects of reality while obscuring others, thereby promoting specific problem definitions and causal interpretations (Entman, 1993). Narratives are broader storylines that link events and actors into coherent plots, often with moral or ideological implications (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Together, frames and narratives provide the building blocks through which media discourses position degrowth as legitimate or illegitimate. This enables us to not only analyse the textual features of media articles, but also the discursive strategies and broader ideological implications of how degrowth was represented in Croatian media. We focus on the key discursive strategies employed in these articles, such as framing, word choice, metaphor use, and the representation of political ideologies or worldviews.

In line with CDA (Fairclough, 1993), we start with a "social problem," that is, a socially relevant issue reflected in discourse and open to contestation. In this study, the social problem is defined as the manner in which the concept of degrowth was introduced into the public debate in Croatia through media coverage of the Zagreb conference. By "transformation," we follow Fairclough's (1993) understanding of CDA as a critical analytical practice: transformation does not refer to empirical social change, but to the explanatory and reflexive potential of discourse analysis itself. By identifying dominant narratives, discursive strategies, and exclusions, CDA contributes to transforming how a social phenomenon is understood by making its underlying assumptions and normative effects visible and by opening space for alternative interpretations.

When applied to this particular case, CDA guides the research questions along the lines of:

1. How was the concept of degrowth represented in Croatian media during and after the 9th International Degrowth Conference in Zagreb (2023)?
2. What discursive strategies were employed to legitimize or delegitimize degrowth in public debate?
3. How did different orientations of media outlets (e.g., conservative, progressive, alternative) contribute to the construction and circulation of the relevant narratives?

The narrative analysis was conducted through close reading and interpretive synthesis, consistent with CDA approaches that emphasise meaning-making and ideological or normative framing rather than software-based coding (Fairclough, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). All articles were read in full. We examined recurrent linguistic and rhetorical elements (e.g., word choice, metaphors, evaluative adjectives, framings of political actors). Taguette, an open-source qualitative text annotation tool, was used solely to support the organization of textual material, including identifying frequently occurring terms and retrieving relevant excerpts; all analytical interpretations and identification of discursive lines were conducted manually by the authors; Taguette did not perform any automated analysis or coding.

Narratives were reconstructed inductively by clustering recurring framing patterns into three higher-order narrative categories. This interpretive procedure revealed that none of the articles adopted a neutral stance; all engaged evaluatively, either positively or negatively, with the concept of degrowth. To mitigate interpretive bias, all articles were read in full and analysed comparatively, with analytical claims grounded in recurring patterns across the corpus rather than isolated examples. Interpretations were continuously cross-checked against the empirical material and discussed among the authors to ensure consistency and reflexive awareness.

As aforementioned, our analysis followed the three-dimensional model of CDA outlined by Fairclough (1993), which distinguishes between textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. To make this procedure transparent, we present the steps we applied in our study as follows:

First, we delineated the corpus. The material consisted of 38 articles retrieved through the Retriever platform and supplementary Google search, covering the period immediately after the 2023 Zagreb Degrowth Conference (September 2023) until January 2025. Articles were drawn from a range of online news portals with differing political orientations, which are listed in Appendix 1.

Second, we carried out a textual analysis. This step focused on identifying linguistic and rhetorical features such as recurrent keywords, evaluative expressions, metaphors, and framings that signalled whether degrowth was constructed positively or negatively. Articles were read in full, and attention was paid to how tone, style, and lexical choices contributed to a supportive or dismissive stance.

Third, we considered the political orientation of the outlets where the articles appeared, as reported in media studies of the Croatian context. This step allowed us to situate the positive and negative framings within the broader spectrum of mainstream, conservative, and alternative media voices, without attempting a comprehensive mapping of the media system as a whole.

Finally, the narratives were discussed in light of their broader implications for how degrowth enters public debate.

These implications informed reflections made on how the discourses resonate with, or stand in contrast to, prevailing normative positions, which are outlined in Section 5. Thus, CDA served as a heuristic for connecting textual and narrative patterns to broader questions about social and ecological futures. This critical perspective allows us to uncover how media discourses reinforce or challenge dominant normative positions, particularly regarding environmentalism, economic growth, and political power.

3.1. Data collection and sample description

We used the TakeLab Retriever platform (Dukić et al., 2024), an AI-driven semantic search engine for Croatian news outlets, to assemble our corpus. The Retriever platform employs natural language processing techniques—such as lemmatization, named-entity recognition,

topic modelling, and indexing of phrases—to enable precise retrieval of articles. Importantly, the platform was used solely to locate and compile relevant articles (e.g., matching keywords such as “odrast,” including its grammatical and translated variants), and to provide metadata (publication dates, outlets, URLs). No AI was used to interpret or summarize texts; the interpretation and CDA were performed entirely manually by the authors. Search terms were restricted to the Croatian word “odrast” (the official translation of “degrowth”) and the English term “degrowth” to capture both local and international framings of the concept while avoiding false positives related to the homonym “odrastanje” (“growing up”; cf. Section 2 above for translation note).

The Retriever platform allows for additional restrictions (e.g., entities, themes, sections; see Dukić et al., 2024), but in our case, only language-based constraints were applied. To ensure completeness, we supplemented the Retriever corpus with a manual Google search for “odrast” across online news portals, which yielded several additional articles not yet indexed by Retriever. This step was taken because Retriever, while systematic, did not yet cover all Croatian media portals at the time of data collection. To mitigate the limitations of Google searches, including personalization and variability in results, the search was performed in a depersonalized browser setting (cleared cache, logged-out mode), and all seven result pages were examined systematically. The final dataset, therefore, combines Retriever results with these supplementary findings.

We did not pre-select outlets based on audience reach; however, several of the included portals are among the most visited in Croatia, according to Peruško & Vozab’s (2017) categorization. The political orientation of media outlets is based on the media polarisation index developed by Peruško and Vozab, which positions Croatian news brands along a left–right spectrum according to patterns of audience use and trust derived from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*. Our analysis focuses exclusively on online news portals, which include digital editions of previously print-based outlets, public service media, commercial platforms, and alternative independent outlets. We did not include broadcast or strictly print-only media. Considering this study employs a textual CDA approach, it is based on a corpus of written online articles that are comparable in form, accessible for systematic analysis, and searchable using consistent criteria.

While some of the sources can be traced back to legacy print publications, all of them are currently accessed and evaluated as online content.⁶ In classifying media outlets by political orientation, we relied on their established editorial profiles as recognised in the Croatian media landscape. Outlets such as Narod.hr, Dnevno.hr, and Direktno.hr are widely identified in both academic literature and journalistic analyses as right-wing or conservative-leaning portals (Grbeša & Bebić, 2021; Newman with Richard Fletcher et al., n.d.; Peruško & Vozab, 2017; Plenković, 2021). While these outlets may present themselves as “independent” or “objective,” their editorial stance is consistently aligned with conservative political agendas, as reflected in content analysis by Croatian scholars (Peruško & Vozab, 2017; Grbeša & Bebić, 2021; Plenković, 2021). For transparency, we use the label “right-wing portals” descriptively, referring to this established scholarly and journalistic categorization, rather than as a normative judgment.

Identifying all articles mentioning “degrowth/odrast” published in Croatian media since 2014 allowed us to contextualise the unprecedented spike in media attention during the period of the 9th International Degrowth Conference in Zagreb (August 29–September 2, 2023). However, for the purposes of CDA, we restricted our sample to the 38 articles published in the months following the conference, i.e., from September 2023 until January 2025. This time frame captures the concentrated wave of coverage directly related to the conference, after which media attention subsided rapidly.

The broader time series (2014–2025) is presented descriptively (Figure 1) to illustrate the exceptional nature of the post-conference surge. We focused on the post-conference period because it marks the first time degrowth entered Croatian mainstream media discourse in a concentrated, polarized way. Prior to the conference, only a handful of sporadic mentions of degrowth appeared, mainly in alternative or independent outlets (e.g., related to book promotion events), without broader resonance in the public sphere. By contrast, the weeks immediately following the Zagreb conference saw a sudden surge in coverage across

⁶ Regarding independent media, Croatia does have a smaller but significant non-profit and third-sector media segment. These outlets—including forums like Lupiga.com or fact-checking organisations like Faktograf.hr—often rely on alternative funding models such as crowdfunding, grants, or journalistic associations. We note that some of our sources overlap with these independent platforms, but the majority are part of mainstream commercial or public media ecosystems.

mainstream, right-wing, and progressive platforms alike, making this the first significant occasion on which degrowth became a contested topic in national media.

The TakeLab Retriever platform ‘dug up’ a total of 52 articles since 2014 (28 after the conference), and additional ‘googling’ retrieved a total of 70 articles in the same period (38 since the conference) from 20 online news portals (listed in Appendix 1; some online versions of the printed media articles). Since 2014, there have been between one and four web postings per year (for a total of 32). After the conference, there were, on average, six web postings per week over one month (from the end of August to the beginning of October), totalling 38. We note that the descriptive figures presented here (number of articles, temporal scope, publication outlets) do not constitute research results but rather serve to transparently delineate the corpus of texts that constitutes the object of our CDA.

The media reports after the conference present the object of research, as they represent the reaction to the movement gathering and the assumed liaison with progressive politics. There is a natural cut-off to the loss of interest a few weeks after the conference, as the topic has been ‘spent’. All media quotations are the authors’ own translations from Croatian, replacing the names of notable public figures with their functions (administrative, political, or academic) in Croatian society for the benefit of international audiences. We also aimed to adequately translate Croatian idioms into English counterparts.

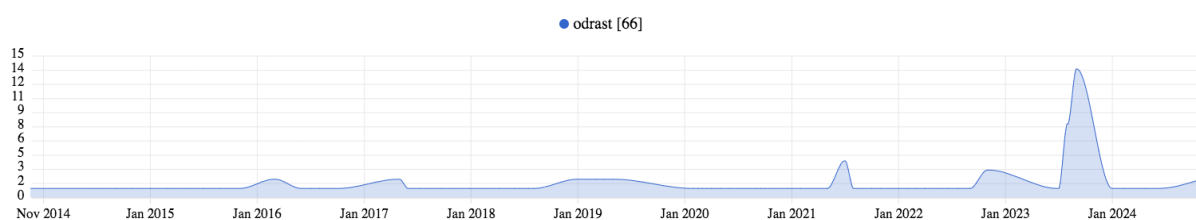


Figure 1: Media coverage of “degrowth” before and after the conference.

Note: This graph illustrates the frequency of web postings mentioning “degrowth” before and after the conference, highlighting the dramatic increase in media interest in the months surrounding the event. During the observed period, at and after the conference, there were 4 conference announcements that were not included in the analysis, 3 interviews (with keynote speakers and organizers), and 1 podcast transcript on degrowth. The rest were

degrowth-focused review articles, columns, and op-eds. (*Source: author's screenshot, source: Retriever 2025*)

4. Findings: media narratives on degrowth

Out of 34 articles that comprise the analysed sample, a total of 8 post-conference articles were positively connoted (including three interviews and a podcast announcement/summary), while 26 were negatively connoted. For analysis, all articles were read in full and categorized as “positive” or “negative” based on their evaluative tone and framing of degrowth (understanding or dismissive). No neutral or ambivalent stances were identified in the corpus. Following Entman’s (1993) definition of framing, we considered whether degrowth was presented in an engaged and legitimizing way (positive) or in a dismissive and delegitimizing way (negative). This involved attention not only to headlines, but to the tone, lexical choices, and argumentative strategies throughout the full text. Positive articles typically emphasized environmental and social justice, often citing academic research and conference organizers. Negative articles, by contrast, framed degrowth as radical or impractical, frequently associating it with political agendas or societal decline.

Entman (1993) reminds us that framing works by selecting certain aspects of reality while obscuring others, a process clearly visible in the way Croatian media foregrounded or dismissed degrowth. Similarly, Carvalho (2008) demonstrates that CDA of environmental reporting often reveals a binary opposition between supportive and antagonistic stances, which guided our interpretive distinction. Olausson’s (2009) study further illustrates how media discourses around climate change are polarized into narratives of responsibility versus denial, a pattern echoed in our corpus. Finally, a simple keyword count highlighted “radical” and “extreme” as prevalent in negative portrayals, reinforcing this evaluative distinction.

A clear distinction emerges between positive and negative articles based on their titles. The analysis and illustrations below show that the content aligns with the title’s tone. We call ‘positive’ all articles (and titles) that engage with degrowth and its descriptions in the literature or by proponents. These could also be called ‘engaged’, but they often carry a positive tone and conclusion along the lines of ‘given this premise, degrowth is a viable

conclusion.’ ‘Negatives’ are all those titles that aim to ridicule and distort the presentations of degrowth proffered by the movement or academic literature. They could also be called ‘dismissive’ and ignore the ‘this could be a conclusion if one were to accept these premises’ form of introduction to the topic. ‘Positive’ and ‘negative’ are retained as the most general classifications for simplicity, and don’t detract from further discourse analysis.

For instance, the following are considered ‘positive’:

Kohei Saito: Degrowth is redistribution. If you’ve taken too much, you need to give some back. [Bilten.org](#) (appendix 2.- source 4)

Some call the idea radical, others the last chance to save humanity. A dangerous logical fallacy. [Dnevnik.hr](#) (ap 2.-5)

What in fact is degrowth? [Faktograf.hr](#) (ap 2.- 2)

As can be seen, they do not necessarily endorse or promote degrowth, but engage with its various justifications and proposals, and reflect on them in the light of concerns expressed by academics and activists.

Negative titles, on the other hand, include:

Those who hope to implement deliberate degrowth stand no chance to be members of the European milieu [Poslovni.hr](#) (ap 2.-34)

Degrowth doctrine: it is no coincidence, [Zagreb city executive] were planning this chaos and disorder in Zagreb [Teleskop.hr](#) (ap 2.-23)

Degrowth is a green-left ‘progressive’ franchise that uses [Zagreb city executive’s party] to choke Zagreb [Narod.hr](#) (ap 2.-22)

They express denial of a universally assumed goal and are expressed in terms that oppose stability, terms usually negatively connoted (e.g., chaos, disorder, choke). Even when titles do not overtly signal bias, the political profile of the publishing portal often reveals the article’s tone. Negative articles predominantly appeared on right-wing or far-right portals (19 articles) and on some mainstream platforms (7 articles), while positive articles appeared on left-leaning/alternative portals (3 articles), mainstream outlets (3 articles), and science-focused publications (2 articles).

In line with CDA's qualitative and interpretive orientation, our aim was not to quantify the distribution of articles across narratives, but rather to reconstruct the discursive characteristics of each narrative. In this study, we use “discourse” to refer to broader, socially structured systems of meaning and assumptions. Our empirical analysis, however, focuses on “narratives” as coherent storylines through which these discourses are articulated in media texts, typically featuring specific actors, causal relations, and moral evaluations. The expression “discursive lines” is used descriptively to refer to recurring argumentative motifs or rhetorical elements within these narratives, rather than as a separate analytical category.

As Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) point out, discourses may overlap or coexist, but they can also be relatively distinct depending on the corpus under analysis. Similarly, Carvalho (2008) stresses that CDA is primarily concerned with identifying the ideological features and implications of discourse, rather than measuring their frequency. In our material, each article was therefore interpreted in relation to the narrative it exemplified most clearly. While narrative overlaps are possible in principle, in this corpus we did not observe significant hybridity: the articles predominantly reflected a single narrative at a time.

4.1. Traditionalist-populist narrative

The traditionalist-populist narrative positions degrowth as a direct threat to cultural, national, and societal stability. It frames degrowth as a “radical leftist” agenda, often conflated with socialism or communism, and portrays it as an externally imposed value orientation aimed at undermining Croatian traditions and sovereignty. The portrayal of degrowth policies as destructive equates them with pre-modern regression or chaos (e.g., urban decay, vermin tropes). While austerity is a longstanding anti-degrowth concept and a familiar topic in degrowth research and theoretical discussions (Watson, 2021), this narrative also carries strong nationalist undertones, framing degrowth as a foreign or elitist imposition “imported” from Western leftist circles. It seeks to delegitimize degrowth by appealing to fear, nostalgia, and cultural identity. It consolidates resistance among audiences wary of rapid societal changes.

The media's use of terms like "radical" or "extreme" underscores this value-laden framing. These terms are employed without elaboration, relying on their presumed connotation to delegitimize degrowth. For example, one article states:

[The conference] belongs to the radical left part of the political spectrum... containing all elements of the modern extreme left political current. [index.hr](#) (ap 2.-38)

[Left-wing radicalisation] has accelerated after the fall of communism, and Croatia has immediately after independence directly experienced that radical left – communism – has been supplanted on the European political scene by an even more radical, radical liberal left. [narod.hr](#) (ap 2.-15, emphasis in the original)

This unexamined use of "radical" acts as a rhetorical bogey, reinforcing anti-leftist sentiments without engaging with the substance of degrowth.

The intersection of political and normative critique is central to this narrative. Negative articles often conflate degrowth with criticisms of Zagreb's city government, framing the conference as evidence of a hidden leftist agenda. For example, "chaos and disorder" in the negative titles presented at the opening of this section claims that the city's (alleged) degrowth policies are deliberate acts of mismanagement intended to advance a radical agenda. It is also suggested that the conference itself proves that the left-wing orientation of the party governing Zagreb is "more radical" or "radical liberal" than hitherto known. That degrowth has a political movement and political subjects precisely within the party governing the City of Zagreb, and that the conference is the culmination of a long, hidden struggle to take power. The 'proof' rests on describing the 2016 Croatian translation of the well-known edited volume *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (D'Alisa et al., 2016) as follows:

The book is obviously a sort of a manifesto of groups gathered around alternative movements and trying to take over government by the use of political radicalism and exclusionary politics. [narod.hr](#) (ap 2.-22)

Right-wing and some mainstream media outlets portray the conference as evidence of a hidden, vaguely defined left-wing agenda. This narrative relies on conspiracy theories, accusing the establishment of secret plans to impoverish citizens, enforce eco-fascism, and depopulate the country, allegedly funded by foreign interests. For example:

All of this is produced far outside Croatia, and is imported into Croatia with a strong financial incentive from the original creators of this pseudo-environmentalist anticapitalist doctrine. [teleskop.hr](#) (ap 2.-23)

Karl Marx's seductive communist utopia is making a big comeback. [direktno.hr](#) (ap 2-37)

Besides being left, radical, and imported, degrowth is portrayed as a post-socialist austerity and a failure of some Eastern European regions to catch up with the development of Western European societies. These are accompanied by images of extreme poverty from Croatian peri-urban slum dwellings, which have mushroomed in Zagreb in post-socialist transition and vastly predate the current city government. It is only included suggestively, without explicit explanation, but associating degrowth with fetishisation of poverty as a sort of wilful extreme austerity. They also offer entertaining and self-orientalising tropes of vermin and wildlife, invocation of 'shameful' Eastern European regions and aspirations towards "European milieu", or graphic rendering suggestive of extreme material deprivation (e.g. ap 2-21).

In summary, the traditionalist-populist narrative is encapsulated in the following quote:

Not only [is the degrowth-supporting city government] totally incompetent, hypocritical and deceitful, not only have they converted Zagreb into a jungle ruled by rodents and wild boars, but they also want [our people] to be less numerous and poorer. [narod.hr](#) (ap 2.-17)

It suggests that the alleged encroachment of the city by game and vermin (resulting from wilderness rather than a tamed anthropogenic environment) is the result of gubernatorial inability and unwillingness to subdue it, topped by the fetishisation of depopulation and poverty. It is playing on the tropes of emancipation from nature, strict human control as a mark of ability, and moral betrayal of national propagation through demographic growth and enrichment.

4.2. Paternalist-denialist narrative

The second framing we have identified in the CDA is the "paternalist-denialist" narrative, so named because it combines two discursive strategies. On the one hand, it denies or

downplays the ecological and social limits emphasized by degrowth, insisting that continuous economic growth is both possible and desirable. On the other hand, it adopts a paternalist tone, portraying advocates of degrowth as naïve or ignorant of how capitalism and the economy ‘really’ work. This dual strategy both delegitimises degrowth and reaffirms the authority of mainstream economic common sense. Articles in this category often cite “market economy” as the only viable system, asserting that economic growth is necessary for societal progress. It is centred around the derogation of environmental and social justice goals as secondary to economic growth and stability, portraying degrowth advocates as idealistic or disconnected from ‘real-world’ concerns.

The framing emphasizes the ‘inevitability’ of growth, using arguments about technological innovation and resource substitution (e.g., techno-optimism), and frames degrowth as elitist or condescending, with advocates seen as imposing sacrifices on ‘ordinary people.’ Policies that do not prioritise growth are summarily presented as detrimental to social and economic development, and unjustified due to a false proclamation of global planetary boundaries and resource depletion. Complementarily, adherence to growth is identified with the necessity of a “market economy.” Consider, for example:

Each claim by the degrowth movement can be independently addressed, but most often they rely on examples that have been proven wrong several times in history. For example, the thesis of near depletion of resources is a hundred years old and not a single mineral or resource predicted to be exhausted has really been exhausted.
[index.hr](#) (ap 2.-38)

Market economy is the best and only system that can function. Ever since the technological innovation in the 18th century started generating ubiquitous social prosperity, governing policies regardless of the [ruling] system, have been directed at growth and expansion of the economy. [tportal.hr](#) (ap 2.-21)

Even more ominously, explanations of the degrowth movement’s origins and conceptual framework subtly undermine the legitimacy of its ideas, warning of a return to pre-transition economics. This came from a senior economics professor whose research focused on personal consumption (microeconomics):

People gathering around idea of degrowth in western countries today, says [economics professor], were prompted by the green transition and in part the feminist movement, mostly in the poorer countries (of the West); where the whole concept rapidly transforms into a neo-Marxist paradigm: redistribution of wealth, assumption that capital is not necessary for growth, change of ownership [of means of production], [economic democracy] and the like, which have partially been demonstrated at the time of Yugoslavia, and shown to be unsustainable. tportal.hr (ap 2.-21)

The lengthy quote does not outright ridicule either the socialist past or wealth redistribution, but points to the failure of the Yugoslavian state as equivalent to the impossibility of a socialist economy.

Similar narratives label degrowth as unrealistic, claiming that it cannot achieve a high quality of life for everyone because it requires advanced technological development, which is supposedly impossible in degrowth societies. These criticisms of degrowth do not engage with either degrowth literature or the technology literature (which was also heavily debated in a special thematic stream at the conference), while the possibility of societies not driven by the priority of economic growth is rejected primarily on the grounds of a different axiomatic value base. This narrative seeks to maintain the status quo by discrediting degrowth as incompatible with modern complex societies. It uses a veneer of rationality to mask an underlying value-laden resistance.

Interestingly, this narrative implicitly critiques degrowth's social dimension. It frames degrowth advocates as elitist and condescending, suggesting that their policies impose sacrifices on ordinary people. This is exemplified in the following claim:

[The ideological and young attendees] weren't told that in "degrowth" they'll have to give up [their smartphones] and take notes in paper notebooks, and the only phone will again be the black Bakelite one in the hallway. narod.hr (ap 2.-11)

Such arguments paint degrowth as both impractical and hypocritical, undermining its credibility among mainstream audiences. Because it is delivered from the (assumed) position of experienced economists, supposedly hardened through historical experience, it dismisses

the basic degrowth premises from a paternalistic ‘senior male’ position, strongly coupled with a denial of the severity of environmental limits and the ongoing crisis.

4.3. Ecological-transformative narrative

The final framing identified, the only one that has a positive portrayal of degrowth, highlights the interconnected goals of ecological sustainability and social equity, sometimes presenting degrowth as a moral imperative. It is grounded around core themes such as the impossibility of infinite growth on a finite planet and degrowth as a pathway to address the climate crisis and reduce inequality. Degrowth is framed not only as a necessary solution to the ecological crisis but also as an opportunity for societal improvement, rather than a sacrifice. The concepts invoked include, among others, realism about the climate situation, the necessity of adjusting to ecological limits, and the identification of the root causes of environmental degradation within the dominant global economic system. While the arguments presented in these articles largely reproduce well-known positions from the degrowth literature, what is analytically significant for the discourse analysis is the way they are mobilised in the media.

First, the positive coverage legitimizes degrowth primarily through a discourse of expertise. Articles frequently cite scientific authority, academic research, or the international stature of the Zagreb conference to frame degrowth as a credible, evidence-based position. This reliance on expert discourse functions as a key strategy of legitimation, directly contrasting with paternalist framings that dismiss degrowth as naïve or uninformed. Second, these articles consistently situate degrowth within a normative framework of social and ecological justice. Rather than portraying it as a threat, they present degrowth as a progressive orientation that seeks to address ecological crises, reduce inequalities, and promote solidarity.

This framing presents degrowth not merely as a technical or economic adjustment but as a transformative societal project. For these reasons, we refer to this discursive pattern as the “ecological–transformative” narrative. What is significant here is not the novelty of the arguments but the way degrowth is represented as a legitimate, knowledge-based response to contemporary challenges. While it also draws on ‘rationality,’ ‘necessity,’ or ‘moral

superiority' to argue for degrowth over limitless growth, it does not offer specific, locally rooted concepts or an explicit eco-socialist critique of capitalism.

In the supportive media reports, the critique of capitalism is rooted in its environmental consequences. To illustrate:

Therefore, it is not possible to speak of good accumulation or sustainable growth in the service of meeting social needs, because that essentially means speaking of good capitalism — and equally of good exploitation. To emerge from the current crisis, which is inextricably both ecological and social, means to break away from the logic of endless capital accumulation and from the subordination of crucial decisions to the logic of profit. [...]

And maybe controlled degrowth is therefore the best we are left with, especially if the “alternative is the destruction of life on Earth.” ideje.hr (ap 2.-36)

There are also reasoned responses to the denial of resource limits, explaining how limits are reached even before the very last unit of a substance disappears (cf. the economics professor above).

We live the end of nature and end of history today. We no longer predict “peak oil” for we have already passed it – “peak oil” has been passed when we started relying on fracking and tar sands, which had for decades been dismissed as unprofitable, and when we started keeping oilmen alive through state subsidies so that we might maintain our way of life. ideje.hr (ap 2.-36)

Furthermore, these articles do not refer to the city government or political parties. Instead, they focus primarily on presenting degrowth as an unfamiliar idea that was the central theme of a large international conference. Besides the arguments based on the existence of 'planetary boundaries' of environmental degradation, there are also those that conclude that degrowth invites a new social contract, often because the current model is deemed “irrational” or “auto destructive.”

Instead of constantly emphasizing it, economic growth should be halted at the global level in order to make the world a better place for all people and to save the planet

from a climate catastrophe that is inevitable under the current system. [dnevnik.hr](#) (ap 2.-5)

This narrative draws on broader philosophical debates about the purpose of growth. Supportive articles question traditional metrics of national success (e.g., GDP) and advocate for alternatives that prioritize well-being and equity. For example:

Growth has kept alive the fairy tale that the poorest will one day be able to access the lifestyle of the richest — a social dead end. The end of growth, as we envision it, will lead us to rethink redistribution through tools such as maximum acceptable incomes and a reconsideration of the concept of inheritance. [novosti.hr](#) (ap 2.-1)

It's about reintegrating the economic sphere into the social one through its abolition or transcendence — that is, as the outcome of a necessary anthropological mutation. The idea emerges that a sustainable, just, and progressive society can only be a moderate one. [ideje.hr](#) (ap 2.-35)

These arguments position degrowth as an opportunity for societal improvement rather than a sacrifice, reframing the concept as a pathway to rediscovered “sobriety,” “sufficiency,” and “local resilience.”

[Newly found sobriety] enables prosperity for all thanks to local self-sufficiency, decentralized political autonomy, enhanced by social, environmental and cultural protectionism. [ideje.hr](#) (ap 2.-35)

5. Discussion

As critical scholars, we approach degrowth not as a single, uncontested truth but as one among several frameworks for rethinking ecological and social futures. Our position is informed by the literature on degrowth as a normative orientation toward ecological sustainability and social justice, while acknowledging that different perspectives and solutions exist both within and beyond the degrowth field. In line with the positions found in this and similar periodicals, the orientation is operationalised as a planned, democratic downscaling of production and consumption aimed at reducing ecological footprints while securing well-being and equity. Across different versions and criticisms of the term, the common

understanding contains a challenge to the growth imperative (even if just as an intellectual position); prioritization of global ecological limits; invocation of redistribution and socio-ecological justice; and reorganization of society around care, autonomy, and collective flourishing rather than GDP expansion.

The media coverage of the 9th International Degrowth Conference in Zagreb reveals a stark value-laden divide, reflected not only in the tone but also in the framing strategies employed. Supportive articles drew heavily on academic literature, such as *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (D’Alisa et al., 2016), and emphasized the ecological and social justice dimensions of degrowth. Critical reports, by contrast, were short, alarmist, and dismissive, focusing on local politics rather than conceptual content. They framed degrowth as radical, elitist, or economically dangerous, while omitting testimonies from organizers and international participants. Such polarized coverage demonstrates the media’s ability to either legitimize or marginalize alternative economic imaginaries through selective emphasis (Entman, 1993).

Our analysis identified three dominant narratives: the traditionalist-populist, the paternalist-denialist, and the ecological-transformative. The traditionalist-populist narrative framed degrowth as a dogmatic, partisan threat, conflating it with socialism or communism, and portraying it as externally imposed. This framing drew on tropes of national decline and cultural erosion, resonating with broader right-wing populist rhetoric in Europe that often links environmental policies to threats against sovereignty and social order (Kulin et al., 2021). The paternalist-denialist narrative, on the other hand, mobilized techno-optimist arguments, emphasizing innovation, substitution, and the inevitability of growth. Such accounts echoed global depoliticisation strategies documented in studies of climate and energy debates, where technological fixes are framed as sufficient and structural critiques are sidelined (Haikola et al., 2021). By contrast, the ecological-transformative narrative, aligned with international degrowth scholarship, stressed social justice, ecological limits, and democratic participation, but remained marginal in mainstream Croatian outlets.

These patterns resonate strongly with findings from other contexts. In Norway, Capasso (2021) observed that media coverage polarized degrowth and “green growth,” presenting the latter as pragmatic and policy-compatible, while depicting the former as unrealistic or radical.

Similarly, Sagvosdkin (2025) shows that leading British and German media frame degrowth as a fringe or subversive idea, thereby reinforcing mainstream growth-oriented imaginaries. Battaglia (2023) found that alternative well-being metrics were consistently marginalized in Italian and Scottish media, where GDP remained the dominant reference point; a trend mirrored in Croatia, where degrowth proposals were overshadowed despite the international significance of the Zagreb conference. More broadly, Morse (2011, 2013) shows that media engagement with alternative indices tends to be episodic and event-driven, helping explain why Croatian coverage spiked during the conference but failed to sustain broader debate. Kielar and Scuttari's (2024) analysis of South Tyrol's tourism moratoria similarly highlights how media debates over degrowth-related policies are mediated by lobbying and stakeholder struggles, echoing the Croatian case, where local party politics shaped reporting.

Taken together, these studies indicate that Croatian media dynamics are not unique but part of wider European patterns of polarization, marginalization, and selective visibility of degrowth. At the same time, the Croatian case reveals distinctive post-socialist inflections. Negative narratives often invoked the failures of Yugoslav socialism, presenting degrowth as synonymous with scarcity, shortages, and failed modernization. This conflation reflects what Pungas et al. (2024) describe as the dominance of "catch-up development" discourses in Eastern Europe, where economic growth is equated with national progress and Western convergence. Gebauer, von Jorck, and Pungas (2023) further emphasise how the traumas of post-1989 transformations, namely, inequality, instability, and "transformation fatigue," foster defensiveness toward proposals for systemic change. In this context, degrowth is not just dismissed as radical but actively feared as a return to past hardships. Such legacies shape a particularly sharp version of the paternalist-denialist narrative, in which neoliberal enrichment and individual competition are celebrated as markers of progress, while alternatives are stigmatized as regressive.

Furthermore, the exclusion of conference organizers' voices and the limited engagement with scientific sources in critical articles can be understood through the lens of Herman and Chomsky's (2002) propaganda model, which emphasises how structural and ideological filters shape media coverage. In our corpus, degrowth was often framed through elite economic and political perspectives that reaffirmed the necessity of growth, while alternative viewpoints

were marginalized or treated as ideologically suspect. This filtering process did not require explicit censorship but operated through selective sourcing, framing, and privileging of market-oriented expertise. At the same time, our findings support Castells' (2013) argument that media power lies in the ability to construct social meaning. Croatian media did not merely report on degrowth but actively defined its public significance, associating it with political radicalism, economic regression, or ecological necessity depending on the outlet. These discursive constructions shaped the symbolic legitimacy of degrowth, illustrating how communication power operates in semi-peripheral contexts where competing developmental imaginaries remain deeply contested.

Despite these challenges, there are openings for more resonant degrowth narratives. Positively connoted articles in Croatia emphasized themes of ecological justice, municipal governance, and citizen participation, aligning with proposals for democratic alternatives to growth-centric development (Liegey & Nelson, 2020). However, as both Domazet & Ančić (2019) and Domazet & Brajdić Vuković (2025) note, degrowth advocacy must go beyond ecological imperatives to engage with lived experiences, cultural identities, and the socio-economic anxieties of post-socialist societies. This echoes the findings of Kulin et al. (2021), who found that public support for environmental policies is contingent on their alignment with local values. In Croatia, resonant narratives might build on traditions of municipalist governance, collective provision of public services, food sovereignty, and humanist-Marxist ecological thought from socialist modernity.

In sum, the Croatian case contributes to the emerging literature on degrowth and media in two ways. First, it confirms broader European patterns of polarization and marginalization: degrowth is framed as radical, unrealistic, or subversive, while techno-optimist framings dominate. Second, it demonstrates how post-socialist legacies of transformation, scarcity, and catch-up development discourses produce distinctive regional inflections, making degrowth particularly vulnerable to dismissal. Future research should explore these dynamics across other semi-peripheral contexts to clarify the extent to which such narratives are unique to post-socialist histories or are part of broader global repertoires of anti-degrowth discourse. It should also engage with the strategies of depoliticisation and decontextualization of degrowth proposals, which distract from the bigger picture that degrowth addresses.

Finally, this study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single national media environment and textual news articles only, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, our temporal scope is limited to the post-conference period, whereas earlier mentions of degrowth in Croatian media were only described contextually. Third, translation issues surrounding the Croatian term “odrast” (which overlaps with the word “odrastanje,” meaning “growing up”) pose challenges for search and still yield variable results. Finally, as a CDA study, we analyse discursive constructions of degrowth in media texts but do not assess audience reception or the actual effects of media representations, which remain beyond the scope of this contribution. While media effects on audiences are an important question, our focus here is on discourse itself rather than on reception studies or effects. We therefore limit our claims to representational patterns in media coverage.

6. Conclusion

This Critical Discourse Analysis has shown that media narratives surrounding the 9th International Degrowth Conference in Zagreb reflect broader societal tensions in Croatia and across the wider Eastern European semi-periphery. While degrowth offers a substantive critique of the unsustainable trajectory of growth-dependent economies, its reception in Croatian media remains sharply polarized and dominated by pushback against socio-ecological change. Negative portrayals typically frame degrowth as a radical, left-wing threat to national prosperity and identity, invoking fears of austerity, eco-authoritarianism, and wantonly disruptive political agendas. By contrast, positive coverage emphasizes the environmental urgency underpinning degrowth but often falls short of exploring its deeper political implications or its practical relevance in the local context. Explaining the full causes of this divergence lies beyond the scope of the present analysis, but the pattern clearly warrants further research, especially in comparison to core Western contexts.

From a critical discourse analytical perspective, this pushback can be understood as part of a broader struggle over interpretive frameworks through which environmental and economic alternatives to growth are evaluated. The repeated invocation of “radical” as a loaded descriptor works to delegitimize degrowth not only as an economic proposition but also as a political orientation associated with supposedly discredited state-socialist projects.

Meanwhile, populist framings cast degrowth as foreign, conspiratorial, or technologically regressive, while more high-brow paternalist-denialist responses sidestep engagement with ecological limits by reaffirming growth as the unquestioned norm.

Importantly, we do not suggest that these patterns amount to a coordinated intellectual resistance to degrowth in the European semi-periphery. Rather, they reveal a persistent value orientation in the media and in Croatia's contemporary political landscape, which resists the core premises of degrowth thinking and sustains growth-centric understandings of progress and development. This value orientation becomes particularly pronounced when degrowth intersects with local political actors, international networks, and municipal agendas, in a way that allows the conference and its messages to be publicly interpreted as a real existing prefiguration of alternatives to the status quo.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Funding

Research leading to this paper was partly supported by the Ethics and Social Challenges project of the Institute of Philosophy in Zagreb in the period 2024–2027, reviewed by the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia and financed through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan by the European Union – NextGenerationEU.

Use of artificial intelligence

AI tools were used solely for language editing and proofreading, including corrections to grammar, spelling, and stylistic consistency. All substantive content, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are the responsibility of the authors.⁷

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⁷ The editorial collective wishes to note that since this publication was accepted, the journal has revised its policy on use of artificial intelligence and will no longer accept content prepared using generative AI. The new policy is indicated in the [guide for authors](#) and discussed in an [addendum to the journal's manifesto](#).

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Appendix 1: Overview of media coverage by source, orientation, and stance

Source (Database)	Media Outlet	Political Orientation	Article Tone	Number of Articles
retriever google	Jutarnji.hr	center	1 positive 4 negative	5
retriever	Narod.hr	extrem right	negative	9
retriever	dnevno.hr	extrem right	negative	1
retriever	direktno.hr	extrem right	negative	2
retriever	teleskop.hr	right-wing / conservative	negative	2
retriever	index.hr	liberal / center-left	negative	1
google	ideje.hr	alternative / science	positive	2
retriever	faktograf.hr	alternative / progressive	positive	1
retriever	novosti.hr	alternative / progressive	positive	1
google	slobodna dalmacija.hr	center-right	positive	1
retriever	glas slavonije.hr	center	conf. announcement	1
retriever	tportal.hr	center	1 negative 1 conf. announcement	2
retriever	24sata.hr	center / tabloid	1 negative 1 conf. announcement	2
retriever	net.hr	center / tabloid	negative	1
google	tris.com.hr	alternative /progressive	1 conf. announcement	1
google	dnevnik.hr	center /tabloid	positive	1
google	bilten.org	alternative /progressive	positive	1
google	poslovni.hr	centre-right	negative	1
google	lider.media.hr	centre-right	negative (zapravo je ovaj neutralan)	1
google	maxportal.net	right wing / conservative	negative	1
	liberal.hr	liberal / center left	negative	1

Appendix 2: Articles published after the conference with links

Source	Media Outlet	Link
1	portal novosti	https://www.portalnovosti.com/vincent-liegey-odrast-nas-poziva-da-povratimo-osecaj-granica/
2	faktograf.hr	https://faktograf.hr/2023/09/08/sto-je-zapravo-odrast/
3	liberal.hr	https://www.liberal.hr/manifest-odrasta-bio-je-lani-medu-bestsellerima-pati-od-istih-nedostataka-kao-i-ranije-kritike-slobodnog-trzista-100
4	bilten.org	https://www.bilten.org/?p=45379
5	dnevnik.hr	https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/svijet/odrast-ideju-o-kojoj-mnogi-raspravljaju-a-rijetki-je-razumiju-podrzao-i-tomasevic---801472.html
6	lidermedia.hr	https://lidermedia.hr/komentari/miodrag-sajatovic-ideja-odricanja-od-rasta-bdp-a-dobiva-neocekivane-pristase-158907/
7	maxportal.hr	https://www.maxportal.hr/premium-sadrzaj/politicar-upozorava-tomasevic-pokrovitelj-degrowth-konferencije-pokreta-koji-nas-zeli-osiromasiti
8	narod.hr	https://narod.hr/hrvatska/sto-je-sve-obiljezilo-mandat-tomislava-tomasevica-ideologija-jakusevac-roditelji-odgojitelji-odrast-vodovod
9	jutarnji.hr	https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ne-odrast-nije-novi-komunizam-a-znate-li-zasto-su-u-jugoslaviji-kucanski-aparati-trajali-cak-50-godina-15420042
10	24sata.hr	https://www.24sata.hr/news/mozemo-gura-politiku-odrasta-ne-treba-vam-to-odustanite-od-novoga-vecega-i-skupljega-934977
11	narod.hr	https://narod.hr/hrvatska/beck-kako-gradskoj-travi-uvesti-odrast-ukidanje-potrebno-a-i-uvođenje-nepotrebno
12	dnevno.hr	https://www.dnevno.hr/vijesti/mozemo-je-izaslo-iz-ormara-tomasevic-vise-ne-skriva-svoje-namjere-2215608/
13	narod.hr	https://narod.hr/hrvatska/je-li-ovo-sala-zagreb-izgleda-kao-urbana-dzungla-a-tomasevic-sada-ima-novi-plan
14	teleskop.hr	https://teleskop.hr/hrvatska/politicar-upozorava-faktograf-je-izisao-iz-ormara-besramno-brani-mozemovce-pa-oni-bi-trebali-sami-sebe-blokirati/
15	narod.hr	https://narod.hr/hrvatska/distopijska-vizija-hrvatske-mozemo-zeli-vladati-drzavom-kao-bi-to-izgledalo-pogledajte-zagreb
16	slobodna dalmacija	https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/hrvatskom-se-siri-radikalna-ideologija-kojom-zaludenici-marxom-vracaju-komunizam-na-mala-vrata-sto-je-taj-odrast-1324316
17	narod.hr	https://narod.hr/hrvatska/herman-vukusic-mozemo-je-sekta-tomasevic-hoce-da-nas-je-sve-manje-i-da-smo-siromasni
18	direktno.hr	https://direktno.hr/domovina/slavonski-mrki-nerast-ne-marxov-odrast-promovira-ono-cemu-tomasevic-briljira-cijelo-vrijeme-325856/
19	narod.hr	https://narod.hr/hrvatska/i-novosti-propagiraju-odrast-kakve-veze-ekosocijalizam-ima-s-manjinskim-temama
20	narod.hr	https://narod.hr/hrvatska/saric-vrhovna-zapovjednica-oruzanih-snaga-rh-ivana-kekin-odrast-domovini

21	tportal.hr	https://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/radikalna-ideja-oko-koje-se-okupljaju-neomarksisti-mozemovci-i-feministi-sto-je-to-odrast-foto-20230910
22	narod.hr	https://narod.hr/hrvatska/goluza-odrast-je-zeleno-lijeva-progresivna-fransiza-koja-kroz-mozemo-gusi-zagreb
23	teleskop.hr	https://teleskop.hr/hrvatska/doktrina-odrasta-nema-slucajnosti-tomasevic-i-njegova-zamjenica-dolenec-planirali-su-ovaj-kaos-i-nered-u-zagrebu/
24	net.hr	https://net.hr/danas/vijesti/holy-o-zbrinjavanju-otpada-u-zagrebu-mozemo-je-nastupalo-iz-pozicije-populistickog-aktivizma-pa-im-se-tadasnja-obecanja-danas-obijaju-o-glavu-e57d7dae-4964-11ee-a922-fe44469ef6a3
25	narod.hr	https://narod.hr/hrvatska/marksisticko-zelena-konferencija-u-zagrebu-u-organizaciji-tomaseviceve-ideoloske-radionice
26	glas slavonske	https://www.glas-slavonske.hr/528826/7/Neogranicen-ekonomski-rast-vise-nece-bit-moguc
27	tris	https://tris.com.hr/2023/08/odrastimo-i-odbacimo-iluziju-o-rastu-u-zagrebu-izlozbe-rasprave-predavanja-i-medunarodna-konferencija-o-odrastu/
28	tportal.hr	https://www.tportal.hr/kultura/clanak/zna-li-sto-je-degrowth-whw-poziva-na-otvorenje-izlozbe-planet-ljudi-skrb-to-se-zove-odrast-20230823
29	24sata.hr	https://www.24sata.hr/news/9-medunarodna-konferencija-odrasta-i-tjedan-odrasta-na-nekoliko-lokacija-u-zagrebu-923380
30	jutarnji.hr	https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/zagreb/mozemo-u-zagrebu-promovira-ideju-odrasta-iza-svega-stoji-japanski-marx-evo-o-cemu-se-radi-15371096
31	jutarnji.hr	https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/kako-su-liberali-napadom-na-odrast-ubili-dijalog-kao-i-komunisti-sezdesetih-15373613
32	jutarnji.hr	https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/zagreb/mozemo-uvodi-novi-poredak-promovira-ga-tomaseviceva-zamjenica-trazi-se-radikalan-drustveni-reset-15372981
33	jutarnji.hr	https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/deset-zapovijedi-odrasta-ili-uvod-u-socijalnu-kataklizmu-15375084
34	poslovni.hr	https://www.poslovni.hr/hrvatska/tko-nam-jerno-misli-provoditi-odrast-nema-sanse-bit-dio-europskog-miljea-4409712
35	ideje.hr	https://ideje.hr/matko-mestrovic-drustveni-fetisizam-i-ideja-ne-rasta/
36	ideje.hr	https://ideje.hr/avangarda-odrasta-je-zapad-vec-ga-zivi-nevoljko/
37	direktno.hr	https://direktno.hr/kolumne/je-li-filozofija-odrasta-koju-promovira-mozemo-samo-nova-prikrivena-komunisticka-utopija-za-21-stoljece-326812/
38	index.hr	https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/tomasevic-i-mozemo-podrzali-radikalno-lijevu-ideju-o-zaustavljanju-rasta-sto-je-to/2492680.aspx