

POLICY PAPER

ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES IN SERBIA AND THEIR EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Jelena Pešić & Jelisaveta Vukelić

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy

March 2023

INDEX

Introduction	2
A brief overview of evolution of environmental movement in Serbia	3
The advent of grassroots environmental initiatives	6
Current issues and recommendations	11
References	20

Introduction

The environmental movement in Serbia has been developing rapidly in recent years (Petrović, 2020; Fagan and Ejđus, 2020). It would not be wrong to claim that the citizens of Serbia are becoming more and more aware of environmental challenges and increasingly ready to get involved in various forms of political struggles in order to improve their environmental well-being¹. However, despite this recent evolution of the environmental movement and recognition of the importance of environmental issues, there are still many challenges that need to be overcome in order to fully unleash the potentials of the movement.

The rise of the environmental initiatives over the last years was to a large extent the consequence of the expansion of local and grassroots initiatives that succeeded in mobilising a significant number of citizens in street protests and through other forms of organised collective actions in making their claims over environmental problems they were faced with. The success of these citizen-led initiatives was significant to the extent that they even managed to exert enough pressure on decision-makers at national level and make them comply with their demands. Two examples of relatively successful initiatives testify to this. In the case of the struggles against small hydro-power plants (SHPPs), a ban on their construction in protected nature areas was achieved in 2021 after numerous protests of local residents and activists, including supporting actions of international organizations, specialised in the protection of rivers, aimed at different European institutions and at mobilisation of the citizens of the EU countries². Also, in the case of the initiatives against lithium exploitation, at least temporarily, the construction of a lithium mine in the Jadar River basin was suspended in 2022, following

¹ <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Serbia/Serbia-new-environmental-protests-214325> (accessed on 23 January 2023).

² <https://n1info.rs/vesti/nacelnica-zabrana-izgradnje-mhe-u-zasticenim-podrucjima/> (accessed on 23 January 2023).

the massive outbursts of dissatisfaction by both the local residents and citizens at the street protests all over Serbia.³

A brief overview of evolution of environmental movement in Serbia

The history of environmental conflicts in Serbia is not a long one. During the socialist period (1945–1990), environmental conflicts broke out only sporadically, and rarely as an expression of an organized effort to problematize specific environmental issues (the only exceptions were anti-nuclear protests during the 1980s, see in: Petrović, 2020). Even the period of early post-socialist transformation (1990–2000) did not bring significant changes to this situation. Environmental issues were marginalized, while civic activism focused on more urgent problems of delayed democratization. Thus, the incentives towards the establishment of the environmental movement were not particularly strong.

In the period after the year 2000, Serbia was faced with the intensification of the process of economic and political post-socialist transformation, but also with the process of European integration. These processes, each in their own way, paved the road to the rise of environmental initiatives (Börzel, 2009; Fagan, 2010). While economic transformation brought property ownership transformation, an influx of foreign investments and the opening of the country to international corporations bringing new environmental challenges (including dirty technologies, the implementation of which was facilitated by the porous implementation of environmental laws and standards), the EU accession negotiations brought about a growing interest in environmental issues within public discourse due to the fact that Serbia had been obliged to harmonise its legislation with the *acquis* and to implement European green policies (for example, energy transition or circular economy) (Börzel and Buzogany, 2019). Finally, political transformation brought about impulses towards new forms of democratic governance, including further

³ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-brnabic-vlada-rio-tinto-jadar/31663448.html> (accessed on 12 August 2022).

development and expansion of the civil society sector, and within it, environmental organisations. As a consequence, the number of professional environmental organizations grew. Many of these organizations were built from scratch and stimulated by foreign donations. The processes of European integration have thus resulted in incentives for the formation of the environmental public sphere and environmental civil society, but also in encouragements towards the establishment of participatory environmental governance.

While the European Union has been actively promoting partnerships between the non- governmental sector and the state, with a focus on establishing an institutional mechanism for the participation of environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in decision-making processes, it also provided selective support to strengthen the capacities of professional organisations. This approach, although beneficial to professional NGOs, has had an unintended consequence of overlooking the voices critical over the model of economic development oriented solely towards economic growth, bypassing pre-existing environmental organisations and grassroots initiatives that were potentially deprived of the resources or capacity to compete for funding and donor support (Petrović, 2020; Vukelić, Petrović and Kukuridi, 2021). Furthermore, despite the EU's efforts to promote deliberative mechanisms and participatory modes of governance, they have not been fully implemented due to a lack of political will and constant resistance coming from ossified bureaucratic structures within the state administration (Wunsch, 2018; Fagan & Wunsch, 2018). In the end, the amendment of environmental laws and their harmonization with regulations and standards in the EU did not necessarily bring their full implementation, but, as was often the case, selectivity in application followed by the absence of control mechanisms.⁴

The specific emergence of environmental civil society in Serbia has had an impact on shaping public discourse, leading to a stronger presence of environmental issues in the public arena. However, despite this course of development, environmental issues have often failed to resonate with citizens (Petrović, 2020; Vukelić, Petrović and Kukuridi, 2021). One of the reasons was the widespread perception of environmental agenda as externally imposed and discursively shaped in accordance

⁴ More on the EU conditionality and environmental policy in the accession processes, see in: Baker, 2015.

with the priorities of European environmental policies and the accession negotiations, rather than as an expression of everyday living experiences and needs of the citizens (Petrović, 2020). Therefore, the first decade of 2000s has been marked by the failure of citizens' mobilisations around environmental issues. Environmental issues were mainly covered by donor-driven ENGOs, that were building their own capacities and transnational ties. However, they were also perceived as being ineffective in their actions, lacking support from below and authenticity, and criticized over depoliticization of environmental struggles (Fagan, 2004; Petrova and Tarrow, 2007; Cisar, 2010; Fagan and Carmin, 2011; Buzogany, 2013; 2022; Fagan and Sircar, 2015).

Table 1. The EU accession process and building of environmental movement in Serbia

Incentives	Results	Obstacles	Results
Harmonisation of local environmental legislation with <i>acquis communautaire</i>	Green public sphere --- > environmental issues in public discourse	Selective implementation of adopted laws, insufficient control mechanisms	Environmental issues failed to resonate among citizens
Implementation of green policies		Contradictory effects of implementation of green policies (green energy transition) – irreparable effects on nature and communities	Negative sentiments towards the EU supported green policies
The EU support --- > raising capacity of environmental non-government organizations	Environmental civil sector	Selective support towards professional ENGOs and neglecting grassroots environmental initiatives	Asymmetrical power balance and rise of distrust between grassroots and professional organisations
The EU support for the establishment of governance mechanisms that imply a partnership relationship between CSOs and the state	Participatory environmental governance	Poorly developed mechanisms of citizen participation in decision-making processes at the local and national level. Low external political efficacy	Radicalization of environmental initiatives, street politics

The advent of grassroots environmental initiatives

Over the past decade, with growing authoritarian tendencies coupled with the perceived unresponsiveness of different institutions to citizens' demands (Pešić et al., 2021) and democratic backsliding (Bieber, 2018; Lavrič and Bieber, 2020), institutional politics in Serbia paved the road to various forms of protest and participatory politics (Pešić and Vukelić, 2022). Grassroots mobilizations intensified especially when the negative effects of the Great Recession and austerity measures accumulated, leading to resurgence of street discontents and civic activism (Pešić and Petrović, 2020). A multitude of different grassroots initiatives resulting from the resistances to various austerity measures surfaced (starting from students who protested against the increase in school fees, through mothers whose social benefits for maternity leave were reduced, to tenants who refused to pay excessive heating bills).

Along with these, citizen-led initiatives struggling against various forms of environment degradation also started to emerge. Some of these initiatives were coupled with public expressions of discontent with neoliberal policies of urban development (especially in Belgrade) and investor-led urbanism⁵, but also with broader anti-government marches and protests (Vukelić, Petrović and Kukuridi, 2021). More recent grassroots environmental initiatives in Serbia included protests against the construction of two hydropower plants in south-west Serbian town Brodarevo in 2012⁶, a number of initiatives against small hydropower plants in rural communities in south-east and south-west Serbia⁷, massive protests against air pollution caused by the use of fossil fuels⁸ or produced by international companies

⁵ For example, initiatives against investor-led urbanism, organized by *Ne davimo Beograd* (Do Not Let Belgrade Drown), an organization that evolved from urban grassroots initiative to political movement that entered the Serbian Parliament as part of the coalition *Moramo* (We Must) in 2022 general elections, or *Savski nasip* (The River Sava Embankment), organization focused on protection of the banks of river Sava in Belgrade.

⁶ <https://bizlife.rs/47902-protest-zbog-izgradnje-brana-na-limu/> (accessed on 20 January 2023).

⁷ <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/thousands-rally-against-small-hydropower-plants-on-mt-stara-planina/> (accessed on 20 January 2023); <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/19/serbia-s-greens-mobilise-against-threat-to-mountain-rivers-09-17-2018/> (accessed on 20 January 2023).

⁸ For example, *Ekološki ustanak* (Ecological Uprising), organized on 10 April 2021 by the movement *Odbranimo reke Stare planine* (Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina) and supported by more than 45 ecological organizations

operating in Serbia (such as steel factory Hesteel in Smederevo⁹, mining company Zijin Copper in the city of Bor¹⁰ or tire plant Linglong in Zrenjanin¹¹), protests against Rio Tinto's Jadar project regarding the lithium mine in the Jadar valley¹² and a number of similar initiatives against planned mining projects all over Eastern and Western Serbia¹³, etc.

It is correct to say that environmental activism has become the backbone of civic activism in Serbia over the past few years. Additionally, environmental issues have developed into one of the key political issues at the national level, with several political parties making it a focal point of their agendas¹⁴. Some grassroots initiatives have managed to progress from being localised expressions of dissatisfaction to larger nationwide protests. Their success can be attributed, among other things, to their ability to effectively mobilise citizens and leverage favourable political opportunity structure. This includes protests against democratic backsliding or discontent with various government policies¹⁵, but also to their ability to obliterate existing ideological cleavages.

(<https://balkangreenenergynews.com/rs/ko-sve-dolazi-u-beograd-na-ekoloski-ustanak-10-aprila/>, accessed on 10 May 2022), or several protests organized by Eko straža (Eco Watch) in 2022 (<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/eko-straža-u-beogradu-protest-narod-protiv-trovaca-13-novembra/>, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/protest-beograd-zagadjenje-vazduh/32161141.html>), accessed on 19 January 2023).

⁹ Protests organized by organization Pokret Tvrđava (Fortress Movement) in Smederevo (<https://balkangreenenergynews.com/protest-held-in-serbias-smederevo-against-pollution-from-china-owned-steelworks/>, accessed on 19 January 2023).

¹⁰ <https://n1info.rs/english/news/a641477-massive-protest-in-bor-over-pollution/> (accessed on 19 January 2023).

¹¹ <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/srbija-zrenjanin-linglong-fabrika-protest-gradjanski-preokret-zagadjenje/6298667.html> (accessed 20 January 2023).

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/05/rio-tinto-lithium-mine-thousands-of-protesters-block-roads-across-serbia> (accessed 20 January 2023).

¹³ For example, protests of the residents against lithium exploration in village Dobrinja in western Serbia (<https://balkangreenenergynews.com/villages-across-serbia-demonstrating-against-arrogant-investors-lithium-explorers-are-not-welcome/>, accessed on 2 February 2023), or protests of the residents of the town of Majdanpek in Eastern Serbia against mining of the hill Starica by the company Zijin as part of the expansion of the copper mine (<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/majdanpek-aktivisti-vratili-zastave-kineske-kompanije-zidjin-zbog-ometanja-rudarskih-aktivnosti-56-radnika-poslao-na-prinudni-odmor/>, accessed on 17 January 2023).

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-60230813> (accessed on 20 February 2023).

¹⁵ <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/08/31/green-shoots-in-serbia-a-worry-for-ruling-party-and-opponents/> (accessed on 25 January 2023)

Some grassroots initiatives, particularly those opposing the construction of small hydropower plants (SHPPs), have been able to expand their protests and even transnationalise their claims (Pešić and Vukelić, 2022; Piletić, 2023). Their achievement can be attributed to the focus on issues that are relevant beyond just the local or national level, such as the protection of mountainous rivers and pristine nature in the Western Balkans region. In addition, these initiatives received significant support from international environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) specialising in conservation of rivers and experienced in transnational arena.¹⁶ International ENGOS administered support and valuable expertise¹⁷ to launch joint initiatives aimed at influencing the EU institutions or mobilising the EU states' public opinion and exerting pressure on national power-holders ("the boomerang effect") (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Buzogany, 2022; see also: Pešić and Vukelić, 2022).

There were other initiatives that were unsuccessful in expanding their protests beyond the local level. Some of them went after a diffuse strategy that lacked focus on specific issues. Others mobilised around local issues that did not have the potential for national or transnational expansion. A large portion of them lacked the necessary experience, resources and knowledge to establish broad coalitions, liaise with organisations operating in transnational arenas or join existing transnational advocacy networks.

There is also the specific case of the initiative against lithium exploitation in the Jadar valley and the protests against the company Rio Tintos' mine project. Namely, considering that it was an issue localised to Serbia, the potential for regional cooperation was somewhat lower than in the case of protests and actions against small hydro-power plants. However, given that the planned mine was situated close to the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, a number of environmental organisation from the neighbouring country expressed their support to organisations from Serbia

¹⁶ Some of them are: RiverWatch (<https://riverwatch.eu/en/tags/serbia>) and its campaign Save the Blue Heart of Europe (<https://www.balkanrivers.net/en>), CEE Bankwatch Network (<https://bankwatch.org/tag/serbia>), European Water Movement (<http://europeanwater.org/actions/country-city-focus/848-protecting-rivers-from-dams-and-hydropower-plants-projects>), Earth Law Center (<https://www.earthlawcenter.org/balkan-rivers>), or Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (<https://www.garneaupe.org>) and its campaign European Tribunal in Defence of Aquatic Ecosystems (<https://www.rightsofnaturetribunal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/EN-Verdict-Balkans-sin-firmas.pdf>).

¹⁷ <https://www.balkanrivers.net/en/scientists> (accessed on 20 February 2023).

in their struggle against the project.¹⁸ Although there were networks of professional organisations operating at the regional and European level that provided initial support¹⁹, no international campaigns, as in the case of the resistance towards piping rivers all over Western Balkans, were launched. Local organisations, associated through joint initiatives, thus tried to start their own campaigns and to externalise the issue of lithium exploitation in Serbia²⁰, but also strived to join new transnational networks and organizations specialised in actions against dirty mining and operating beyond European context. Transnationalisation took place here primarily through the diffusion of discourses, experiences and repertoires of action, externalisation of local grievance, but also certain efforts were made to liaise local organizations to transnational networks and to engage in joint actions (Pešić and Vukelić, 2022).

Grassroots environmental initiatives primarily addressed various entities such as local or multinational corporations, government agencies and local authorities, which were seen as the main contributors to environmental degradation; however, there were also voices who openly criticized the implementation of the EU policies. Both in the case of the protests against SHPPs and in the case of the protest against lithium mining, the implementation of European environmental policies – adoption of the EU energy *acquis* and the European Green Deal – is recognized as indirect cause of potential environmental hazards or irreversible forms of environmental destruction (see more on that in: Mišić and Obydenkova, 2022; Pešić and Vukelić, 2022; Piletić, 2023). The environmental challenges faced by Serbia have thus brought to light the tensions between Europe's goals to achieve climate neutrality and energy transition, and the potential impact of implementing green policies on both the environment and local communities, revealing underlying hidden costs associated with the Europe's Green Deal (Antonowicz-Cyglicka, 2021).

The voices of environmental grassroots movements expressing discontent have increasingly been discursively framed in terms of struggles against extractivist

¹⁸<https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/aktivisti-iz-bih-protiv-rio-tinta-pruzili-podrsku-savezu-ekoloskih-organizacija-srbije/> (accessed on 3 March 2023).

¹⁹ <https://bankwatch.org/tag/lithium-mine> (accessed on 21 February, 2023).

²⁰ <https://marssadrine.org/en/signing-jadar-declaration/> (accessed on 21 February, 2023).

agendas of multinational companies and implementation of neoliberal policies of privatisation of natural resources and land/water grabbing (Piletić, 2023). Many perceived these environmental challenges as a consequence of wider phenomena, i.e. of the modern colonialism and environmental imperialism, and this perception was particularly noticeable within initiatives targeting various mining projects throughout Serbia (Rio Tinto project of lithium exploitation being only one of them who caught the most of public attention).²¹ When local activists referred to the narratives typically developed within environmental movements opposing projects led by big capital and operating in regions or communities that are considered less economically developed in global terms (environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed/ marginal environmentalism; see: Dwivedi, 2001; Martinez-Alier, 2002), they often perceived environmental degradation in Serbia through the lenses of political and economic dependence. Multinational capital, supported by local national elites and sometimes even supranational political and economic institutions were recognised as responsible for implementing the extractivist agenda (Pešić and Vukelić, 2022; Vukelić and Pešić, 2022; Piletić, 2023).

Taking into account these new perspectives emerging from the grassroots environmental struggles, their potential is twofold:

1. Positive, when fused with movements, political parties or professional organizations adopting universal human values or encouraging and empowering citizens to participate in the processes of decision-making on their local communities and on their own environmental well-being. Voices that are critical towards neoliberal policies and unequal distribution of ecological risks have potential to transnationalise if they are able to recognize the shared problems and grievances of different communities at local, regional, or global arenas, and to join existing or create new advocacy networks that could challenge dominant models of economic development and power structures.

²¹ For example, Jadar Declaration, signed by organisations from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Portugal, Chile and Spain, fighting against lithium exploitation: <https://drustvenaakcija.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/The-Jadar-Declaration.pdf> (accessed on 21 February 2023).

2. Negative, if environmental discontent is being instrumentalised by organisations appropriating local environmental grievances for their own purposes and incorporating them in broader political (sometimes even nationalist, racist and exclusionary) agendas that do not necessarily follow the interest of the communities. If this type of appropriation is combined with acquiring of discourses and practices that are exclusionary and that set barriers to the creation of broader coalitions and alliances (even advancing into green ethnic nationalism), their potential of transnationalisation of environmental grievances remains weak, and ultimately, does not increase the capacity of local communities nor lead to the development of mechanisms for participation of different interest groups in decision-making processes. The result can be further marginalisation of local communities and intensification of existing inequalities.

Current issues and recommendations

Despite the recent advent and success of grassroots environmental initiatives, they face several challenges in the long-term perspective, especially when it comes to their sustainability.

Grassroots environmental organizations in Serbia at first typically developed as middle-class, urban initiatives gathered around specific environmental issue caused by investor-led urbanism or by the poor implementation of ecological laws by local authorities. The main causes of these citizen-led initiatives are environmental degradations coming from air, water or industrial pollution, while the main motive is declining quality of life of urban population. Recently, we have witnessed the emergence of community-based initiatives of among rural populations who are deprived of resources and struggling for their immediate livelihoods. Sometimes, these initiatives evolve and transcend the prime causes for their organising, by broadening the scope, professionalising of their activities, or by growing into movements or even political parties operating at the national level (as in the cases of Ne davimo Beograd or Ekološki ustanak). However, most of the time, they depend on the enthusiasm of the activists and their willingness to fight for the causes that are of vital importance. Therefore, one of the main challenges is the lack of resources

and sustainable funding for the civil society sector in general, and specifically for local and grassroots environmental organizations which often struggle to carry out their activities effectively in long-term perspective, being forced to rely on the exhausting volunteer effort of citizens and activists. Still, it also should be added that a number of grassroots initiatives choose not to depend on aid coming from different donors and willingly maintain their activities solely by relying on the resources invested by their activists²².

Secondly, grassroots initiatives sometimes lack experience in institutional and non-institutional political struggles, effective organization and cultural capital (expertise). Therefore, they are often dependent on the support they receive from professional ENGOs or even political parties and organisations but also on the broader community to achieve their goals. This situation is characteristic especially for initiatives organized within marginalized and rural communities. However, in recent years we are witnessing that environmental protection experts are increasingly initiating or providing active support towards grassroots initiatives and professional organisations²³, often serving as transnationalising agents of local environmental issues.

The lack of resources, effective organization, experience in political struggles, contacts, know-how etc., often reduce their coalition potential, especially with regards to capacity and ability to compete for the funds or to participate in international advocacy networks and coalitions. This is especially important when it comes to experience with institutions and civil sector organizations and networks operating at the EU level, which can be of great importance for the internationalisation and transnationalisation of local environmental issues and in creating opportunities to put pressure on decision-makers, both at the national and the EU levels.

The study by Vukelić, Petrović & Kukuridi (2021) highlights an asymmetrical development of professional and grassroots environmental organisations in Serbia,

²² Good example is initiative Eko straža (Eco Guard): <https://ekostraza.com/nacin-finansiranja/> (accessed on 4 March 2023).

²³ For example, Nacionalna ekološka asocijacija (National Ecological Association - NEA) engages a whole range of professionals and consultants through its Bord of Experts (<https://nea.rs/index.php/strucni-savet-nea/>; accessed on 4 March 2023).

with a significant tilt in favour of the former. This imbalance can be attributed to the influence of donor policies, which have unwittingly impeded the growth and development of grassroots organizations while providing, at the same time, more favourable opportunities for professional organisations.

Despite occasional cooperation between professional ENGOs and grassroots initiatives, distrust sometimes develops between them, weakening the environmental movement in general and the potential effectiveness of these struggles. Professional environmental organizations commonly have paid staff, more generous resources, they are focused on broader issues that may be of national or even in some cases of regional and international importance. Sometimes, grassroots, citizen-led organisations may feel that their voices are not being heard enough, that professional organizations are not adequately representing concerns of the local community or even trying to co-opt their achievements. Conversely, professional organizations may feel that grassroots organizations lack the necessary expertise and experience to address complex environmental issues effectively (Vukelić, Petrović & Kukuridi, 2021).

The lack of mutual trust and a pervasive reluctance of professional and grassroots organizations to engage in substantive collaboration can undermine effective environmental movement in Serbia, but also perpetuate the existing power imbalance. For example, if the perception that environmental struggles are being appropriated by professional NGOs prevails among citizens and local activists, a potential decline in their motivation to continue with their engagement is expected. Furthermore, the negative representation of non-governmental organizations in the media or by political elites can also potentially induce distrust among grassroots activists towards professional organizations, overlooking and neglecting the expertise and know-how professional organizations can bring.

While professional NGOs can advance the movement expansion by delivering professional project management, expert knowledge and alliance-building skills, grassroots initiatives can contribute by mobilising various groups of citizens, recognising real-life problems and by motivating people to engage in joint collective actions. Therefore, in order to promote a more inclusive make-up of environmental movement capable of taking advantage of diverse potentials and contributions of

both grassroots and professional organizations, an action is required. One of the potential avenues is to design programs and calls that encourage cooperation between professional ENGOs and grassroots initiatives (Vukelić, Petrović & Kukuridi, 2021). Nevertheless, this type of intervention should be understood as one of the possible ones, avoiding to impose forceful cooperation of CSOs under umbrella initiatives which would potentially limit their activities.

Also, as our research suggests (Pešić and Vukelić, 2022; Vukelić and Pešić, 2022), recent environmental struggles in Serbia are characterized by considerable rise in distrust among citizens and grassroots environmental activists towards the intentions and the role of the EU and its representatives. This rise of distrust is fortified by de-coupling between regulatory and policy conditionality coming from the EU and increasingly distant prospects for Serbias' EU memberships (Baker, 2015), followed by disenchantment and fatigue of the citizens with the EU accession process (see more on this phenomenon in other accession countries, in: Devrim and Schulz, 2009). This assessment can be backed up by the public opinion survey results from 2022 which testified that less than half of Serbian citizens expressed their support towards the EU membership, which was not the case in previous years when the support was substantially higher.²⁴

Although activists identify and appreciate the importance of the European Union, both in terms of advancement of deliberative procedures in decision-making processes on environmental issues and in terms of the requirement towards harmonisation of national legislation and policies with high standards of environmental protection at the EU level, the lack of more decisive support of the EU representatives to the protests against the construction of the lithium mine spurred their mistrust over the EU's intentions to protect the environment on the European periphery (Vukelić and Pešić, 2022). On the other hand, the study on discursive framing of environmental struggles against the construction of SHPPs showed that significant number of activists also recognised potentially positive role of the EU institutions in exerting pressure on national power holders in order to comply with their demands for environmental protection (Pešić and Vukelić, 2022).

²⁴ <https://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Stav-gradjana-Srbije-prema-EU-2022.pdf> (accessed on 6 March 2023).

Research results (Pešić and Vukelić, 2022; Vukelić and Pešić, 2022) further demonstrate that representatives of professional organizations, although mildly critical of the EU the institutions regarding environmental challenges arising from the EU supported projects and policies, generally tend to develop more positive stance, perceiving them as potential allies in environmental struggles and as a driver in development of environmental civil society. This positive perception certainly should be attributed to their access to resources the Union is providing, including funds and avenues towards the EU institutions and transnational advocacy networks. More critical, sometimes openly hostile, attitude of the grassroots activists, on the other hand, is to some extent the consequence of their marginalisation within the environmental field, but also of insufficient awareness on the possibilities the EU networks can offer them and of lack of experience in terms of establishment the effective initiatives capable of successful policy claiming or internationalising local environmental grievances.

With this in mind, strengthening of the trust in the EU institutions is needed, alongside providing training to grassroots activists and organizations on the mechanisms that are available to them in an effort to effectively put their claims at the European level. In addition, action is essential to establish platforms for ongoing dialogue between the EU representatives in Serbia, government representatives, local authorities, professional ENGOs, local activists and other stakeholders, which would enable an expeditious reaction of all parties in case of environmental contentions and disputes.

Besides the internal tensions that arise within the movement due to distinctive potentials and unequal distribution of resources between professional and grassroots organizations, as well as divergent attitudes towards EU institutions, another challenge for establishing an effective environmental movement is the lack of political will among political elites and government agency representatives to provide support for environmental issues. Furthermore, the lack of transparency and accountability in environmental decision-making at national and local levels coupled with the reluctance of government institutions to include CSOs as an equal partner in environmental deliberation processes does not contribute to empowering these organizations to act effectively and engage in dealing with environmental

issues through institutional channels. As a consequence, a considerable number of environmental initiatives target the government and local authorities as accountable for environmental destruction and degradation, often resorting to radical forms of protests. Therefore, a more decisive and consistent engagement of the EU representatives is essential in terms of their requests addressed to the state authorities and institutions of Serbia to comply with the principles of accountability and transparency.

The EU has already done a lot in providing support to the advancement of the civil society sector and to environmental initiatives within the enlargement region, creating a concrete plan in terms of changing legislation, strengthening the capacity of CSOs, and encouraging the development of deliberative decision-making mechanisms between central governments and the non-governmental sector. For example, by establishing the EU Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Turkey (TACSO), the EU is taking steps at improving capacities and strengthens the role of CSOs in the region.²⁵ Also, an important role in promoting European values and policies, in supporting reforms and in providing financial and technical assistance to candidate countries is played by the mission of the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).²⁶

However, the role of the EU is still important in supporting the development of the environmental movement in Serbia and in the Western Balkans region. One of the pathways is the reliance on the existing mechanism of Europeanisation (transnationalisation) to develop and put in place an effective system of environmental decision-making from below. In order to accomplish this goal, the EU **should continue** to:

²⁵ <https://tacso.eu/about-us/project-description/> (accessed on 5 March 2023).

²⁶

https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/european-neighbourhood-and-enlargement-negotiations_en (accessed on 5 March 2023).

- a) provide funding, training, and technical assistance to local environmental organizations, and thus help raise their capacity and strengthen their ability to advocate for the protection of the environment;
- b) foster organizations (both grassroots and professional) in developing expertise in specific environmental areas, as well as in proposing evidence-based policies;
- c) support the implementation of already adopted and development of novel environmental policies at the national and local levels. In this way, the EU can contribute to further building of environmental civil society in Serbia, promoting the advancement of environmental public sphere and to strengthening the environmental movement. Once established and stabilised, environmental civil society can exert reversal pressure towards implementation of environmental policies from below;
- d) promote transparency and accountability of the government and its agencies and local authorities, in order to ensure that the environmental laws that have been passed and harmonised with European standards are actually implemented;
- e) work on the promotion of participatory governance by encouraging deliberative procedures in decision-making processes that include consultations of authorities and policy makers with representatives of local communities and citizens, ensuring that interests of different social groups and stakeholders are taken into consideration.

Also, another set of actions should be dedicated to the **strengthening the cooperation between CSOs**:

- f) in order to foster the enhancement of the relationship between grassroots and professional environmental organizations operating in Serbia, the EU

should allocate funds and facilitate partnership between them, for example by launching calls for projects that specifically target joint initiatives and collaborative efforts, or by designing confidence-building initiatives between ENGOs and the grassroots organizations through which both sides could learn to appreciate their unique strengths and to benefit from mutual collaboration;

g) by designing targeted calls, the EU should initiate collaborative projects between transnational and local (professional and grassroots) organizations. In this way, it can foster the transfer of knowledge and skills and enhance the capacity of local organizations to expand their confidence and coalition potential and be effective in putting their claims out;

h) most importantly, in order to further encourage cross-border cooperation between professional organisations and citizen-led environmental initiatives from Serbia and neighbouring countries, the EU should promote shared understanding and cooperation on environmental issues, such as pollution control, natural resource management and biodiversity conservation or to design specially targeted calls for regional initiatives and environmental protection projects.

The final set of recommendations to the EU policy-makers is related to building/restoring citizens trust towards the EU institutions or the EU-endorsed projects and policies. In order to accomplish this goal, the EU should:

i) initiate the establishment of a platform for ongoing dialogue and interaction between various stakeholders and representatives of European institutions in Serbia, especially when it comes to environmental projects, laws or policies promoted by the Union. One example could be appointment of liaison officer between the EU institutions and citizens interested in environmental issues;

j) invest additional efforts in informing citizens and local communities about different mechanisms the EU is offering to the citizens and organisations from the accession countries in order to enable them to be more actively engaged in putting their policy claims at the national and the EU level.

*This policy paper was written by: **Jelena Pešić and Jelisaveta Vukelić**, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy.*

We express our gratitude to Luisa Chiodi and Aron Buzogany for their useful comments and valuable inputs. Also, we owe thanks to the participants of the policy event Civil Society, Political Contention and European Enlargement, held on March 2, 2023 at the University of Belgrade as part of the TraPoCo project, who contributed with their comments to the final version of this document.

References

Antonowicz-Cyglicka, A. 2021. Europe's Green and Digital Decade could be a raw deal for people and the environment in Serbia.

<https://bankwatch.org/blog/europe-s-green-and-digital-decade-could-be-a-raw-deal-for-people-and-the-environment-in-serbia> (accessed on 20 February, 2023).

Baker, S. 2015. EU Conditionality and Environmental Policy in South-eastern Europe. *Südosteuropa* 63 (3): 372-392.

Bieber, F. 2018. Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics* 34(3): 337-354.

Börzel, T. 2009. New Modes of Governance and Accession: The Paradox of Double Weakness. In: Borzel T. (ed.) *Coping with Accession to the European Union: New Modes of Environmental Governance*, London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Börzel, T., Buzogány, A. 2010. Environmental organisations and the Europeanisation of public policy in Central and Eastern Europe: the case of biodiversity governance. *Environmental Politics* 19(5): 708-735.

Börzel, T., Fagan, A. 2015. Environmental governance in South East Europe/ Western Balkans: Reassessing the transformative power of Europe, *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 33(5): 885-900.

Buzogány, A. 2013. Selective Adoption of EU Environmental Norms in Ukraine. *Convergence á la Carte. Euro-Asia Studies* 65(4): 609-630.

Buzogány, A. 2022. Natural Allies? External Governance and Environmental Civil Society Organizations in the EU's Eastern Partnership. *Problems of Post-Communism*, DOI: [10.1080/10758216.2021.2025404](https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.2025404).

Cisar, O. 2010. Externally Sponsored Contention: The Channelling of Environmental Movement Organizations in the Czech Republic after the Fall of Communism, *Environmental Politics* 19(5): 736– 755.

Devrim, D, Schulz, E. 2009. Enlargement Fatigue in the European Union: From Enlargement to Many Unions. *Working Paper*. <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/wp13-2009-devrim-schulz-enlargement-european-union.pdf>

Dwivedi, R. 2001. Environmental movements in the global south: outline of a critique of the “livelihood” approach. In: Hamel, P., Lustiger-Thaler, H., Pieterse, J. and Roseneil, S. (eds.), *Globalization and Social Movements*, 227–247. Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave.

Fagan, A. 2004. *Environment and Democracy in the Czech Republic – The Environmental Movement in the Transition Process*. UK, Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.

Fagan, A. 2010. *Europe's Balkan Dilemma: Paths to Civil Society or State-Building?*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris.

Fagan, A., Carmin, J. (eds.). 2011 *Green Activism in Post-Socialist Europe and the Former Soviet Union*. London: Routledge.

Fagan, A., Sircar, I. 2015. *Europeanization of the Western Balkans. Environmental Governance in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Fagan, A., Wunsch, N. 2019. Fostering institutionalisation? The impact of the EU accession process on state–civil society relations in Serbia, *Acta Politica* 54: 607–624.

Fagan A., Ejdus F. 2020. Lost at The Waterfront? Explaining the Absence of Green Organisations in the Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own Movement, *Environmental Politics*, DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2020.1720473.

Keck, M. E., Sikkink, K. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Lavrič, M., Bieber, F. 2020. Shift in Support for Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Western Balkans. *Problems of Post-Communism* 68(1): 17–26.)

Martinez-Alier, J. 2002. *The Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cheltenham: Edward Elger.

Mišić, M., Obydenkova, A. 2022. Environmental conflict, renewable energy, or both? Public opinion on small hydropower plants in Serbia, *Post-Communist Economies*, 34:5, 684–713.

Pešić J., Petrović, J. 2020. The Role and the Positioning of the Left in Serbia's 'One of Five Million' Protests. *Balkanologie* 15(2) <https://doi.org/10.4000/balkanologie.2576>.

Pešić, J., Birešev, A. and Petrović Trifunović, T. 2021. Political Disaffection and Disengagement in Serbia. *Sociologija* 63(2): 355–380.

Pešić, J., Vukelić, J. 2022. Europeanisation from below at the semi-periphery: The movement against small hydropower plants in Serbia, *Sociologija* 64(1): 5–27.

Petrova, T., Tarrow, S. 2007. Transactional and Participatory Activism in the Emerging European Polity: The Puzzle of East Central Europe. *Comparative Political Studies* 40(1): 74–94.

Petrović, J. 2020. Ekologija na periferiji Evrope. *Stvaranje ekološkog pokreta u Srbiji*. ISI FF. Beograd.

Piletić, A. 2023. Renewable energy and EU-led authoritarian neoliberalization: small hydropower in Rakita, Serbia and the upscaling of environmental struggles. *Globalizations*, DOI: [10.1080/14747731.2023.2167985](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2023.2167985)

Vukelić, J., Petrović, M. Kukuridi, A. 2021. Environmental Activism in Serbia: Challenges to Cooperation Between Professional and Grassroots Organisations. *Balkanologie. Revue 'études pluridisciplinaires* 16(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/balkanologie.3485>.

Vukelić, J., Pešić, J. 2022. Transnationalisation vs. Green Nationalism: Discursive Framing of Recent Environmental Struggles in Serbia, paper presented at the international conference: *Transnational Political Contention and European Integration*, Universität für Bodenkultur 21-22 September, 2022, Vienna, Austria.

Wunsch, N. 2018. *EU Enlargement and Civil Society in the Western Balkans. From Mobilisation to Empowerment*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

With the support of the **Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union** under the **Jean Monnet Network “Transnational Political Contention in Europe”** (TraPoCo) (GA 620881).

The EC’s support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors. The EC cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union