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From Local Streams to Regional Dreams: Envisioning a Just Green Transition in the Western Balkans

Aida Kapetanovic

Abstract

The implementation of the EU Green Agenda for the Western Balkans has led to a surge in hydropower projects in the region. These initiatives faced the opposition of peripheral rural communities, resulting in local conflicts that scaled to the regional level with the support of environmental organizations and experts. These conflicts represent a new form of environmental mobilization in the region, engaging local communities marginalized from civil society activism. Through a case study of the regional network "Let's Defend the Balkan Rivers," this paper explores the key issues driving mobilization for river protection and the mechanisms that enabled local struggles to scale to the regional level. It employs frame analysis of media content, movement documents, and semi-structured interviews with activists to examine the movement's cultural repertoires of collective action. It argues that grassroots opposition to hydropower projects has unveiled interconnected issues of environmental threats and democracy. Furthermore, it highlights how a deep emotional attachment to rivers motivated local communities to engage in collective action, fostering solidarity that bridged local rootedness with transnational cooperation. Drawing on environmental sociology, political ecology, and social movement studies, the research aligns with emerging scholarship from post-socialist Eastern Europe, which seeks to situate locally embedded forms of environmentalism within broader academic debates and global trends.

Keywords: Grassroots environmentalism, river protection, regional network, green transition, frame analysis

Introduction

With the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, the countries in the region committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2050, motivated by the goal of EU accession (Berishaj, 2021) and the urgency to tackle the impacts of climate change and rising temperatures (Kovacevic, 2021). This commitment unlocked investments and subsidies for renewable energy, that was directed towards expanding power generation capacity, rather than prioritizing energy efficiency improvements in outdated infrastructure (Gallop, 2021). In a water-rich region, investments in the hydropower sector emerged as the most suitable strategy to align with the EU agenda, while tackling economic, energy, and environmental challenges (Dogmus & Nielsen, 2020; Gallop, 2021). Between 2012 and 2024, more than 3,000 hydropower plants were planned, with small hydropower plants (SHPs)—generating less than 10 megawatts—accounting for over 90% of the projects (Schwarz, 2025). To be attractive to investors, these projects were subsidized by the state through a feed-in tariff system, that ensures the purchase of produced energy for 12 to 15 years at four times the market price. While benefiting from substantial incentives, SHPs have contributed only marginally to overall energy production, accounting for approximately 3.6% of the region's total electricity generation (Gallop, 2021). Moreover, SHPs fall under the category of water abstraction or run-of-river plants, which differ from traditional dams as they channel water through a system of pipes directly from the riverbed, without significant storage capacity. As a result, they divert large portions of water over long distances, significantly impacting even the smallest rivers and creeks (Schwarz, 2022).

Local communities in peripheral rural areas that rely on the rivers for water supply were mostly affected by these projects. Witnessing dry river beds, logging of large areas of forests for access roads, and construction machines showing up without notice, they started opposing these projects. Local struggles unfolded across the region, gaining the support of environmental organizations and experts and scaling to the national and regional level. These river protection mobilizations represent a significant shift in the region's environmental activism. Challenging traditional NGO-led environmentalism, these movements were driven by peripheral rural communities that have long been marginalized from political participation and often stigmatized as nationalist and conservative. Therefore, they have often been overlooked by academic scholarship and framing of civil society activism (Bilic & Stubbs, 2015). Conversely, grassroots resistance to small hydropower projects managed to unite local initiatives, environmental activists, and experts,

fostering coordinated efforts for river protection. Led by movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, the network “Let’s Defend the Balkan Rivers” was established to enhance cooperation and mutual support in defending the region’s natural resources.

This paper explores the issues that fostered grassroots mobilization for river protection and the cultural repertoires that facilitated the development of local struggles into a regional network. It builds on previous research on river protection movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and the current case study of “Let’s Defend the Balkan Rivers”. It combines environmental sociology, political ecology, and social movements studies, exploring the social and political implications of environmental threats, and the cultural and symbolic dimensions of local environmental conflicts. This perspective aligns with emerging scholarship on environmental activism(s) in post-socialist Eastern Europe, which seeks to situate locally embedded forms of environmentalism within broader academic debates and global trends.

The following sections will explore the theoretical framework and methodological approaches used in this research, followed by empirical sections that include the case study of the regional network and frame analysis. The concluding section will discuss the main findings and their implications.

Theoretical Framework

This research builds on theoretical debates at the intersection between environmental sociology, political ecology, and social movements studies. It draws on the concept of environmental justice, which emphasizes the social and political dimensions of environmental issues by linking the unequal distribution of environmental harms with exclusion from decision-making and lack of recognition of specific communities, identities, and cultures (Escobar, 2008; Martinez-Alier et al., 2016; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014).

Scholarship on Locally Unwanted Land Use (LULU) movements has highlighted how local struggles opposing large-scale projects are able to articulate broader values such as democracy and the defense of common goods (Della Porta & Piazza, 2008). Additionally, literature on water struggles has underlined the connection between resistance to the commodification of water and claims for democracy and sovereignty (Muehlebach, 2023). However, local environmental conflicts can generate diverse interpretations of locality and of place, shaping different political

choices regarding land and resource use (Jerolmack & Walker, 2018; Kojola, 2020; Pellizzoni, 2014). Therefore, this research engages with literature that explores the cultural meanings attributed to place and how these shape collective identities (Massey, 1994; Ruiz & Domon, 2012) and collective action (Devine-Wright, 2009; Kojola, 2020).

This theoretical framework enables to align with recent research trends on environmentalism in post-socialist Eastern Europe which seek to situate local forms of environmentalism(s) in relation to global trends and broader academic debates. This scholarship challenges dominant literature on environmental activism and civil society in post-socialist Eastern Europe that has focused on processes of NGOization (Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2013) and Europeanization (Carmin & Vandever, 2004; Fagan & Carmin, 2011; Fagan & Sircar, 2015). It adopts a critical perspective toward normative approaches to environmentalism development in post-socialist Eastern Europe, which have utilized Western models and categories as benchmarks for analysis and evaluation, overlooking the specificities and potentials of local grassroots forms of environmentalism (Fagan & Buzogany, 2022; Jehlicka & Jacobsson, 2021; Müller, 2020). Shifting the focus on local forms of environmental activism(s), emerging scholarship explores socialist legacies of environmentalist practices and organizations (Jehlicka & Jacobsson, 2021; Kurtovic & Hromadzic, 2020), opposition to urban development projects (Fagan & Ejodus, 2022; Milan & Dolenec, 2023), and struggles over resources and environmental justice (Pesic & Vukelic, 2022; Rajkovic, 2020; Velicu & Kaika, 2017). This paper contributes to this body of literature, situating local and regional environmental struggles in relation to broader global dynamics and academic debates. It seeks to challenge dominant understandings of civil society in the post-Yugoslav context, where civic engagement is often associated with urban, middle-class, educated, NGO-driven activism (Bilic & Stubbs, 2015; Touquet, 2015), and rural peripheries are frequently stigmatized as conservative, backward, or nationalist (Bougarel, 1999; Gordy, 2000; Jansen, 2005).

Methodology

The research employs qualitative research methods derived from social movements studies. It adopts a case-study approach that provides a “thick” understanding of social events or processes (Snow, 2013) within their specific context. This methodology allows for an in-depth investigation of the regional network “Let’s

Defend the Balkan Rivers”, examining the mechanisms that enabled the scaling of local struggles to the regional level, its internal functioning, coordination, and outcomes. Moreover, frame analysis is employed to examine the meaning-making processes that characterize collective action. Frames are defined as interpretative schemes through which collective actors interpret reality and mobilize bystanders. Framing is approached as a processual, dynamic, and relational phenomenon that highlights the agency of movement actors in shaping interpretations that resonate within specific cultural contexts (Lindekilde, 2014; Snow et al., 2019).

The analysis draws on the movement’s public discourse based on materials retrieved online such as banners, protest speeches, documents, videos, media statements, as well as 34 semi-structured interviews with activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, building directly on previous doctoral research focused on the river protection movements in these two countries.

The Regional Network “Let’s Defend the Balkan Rivers”

In July 2021, 28 organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo*, Montenegro, and Serbia gathered in Sarajevo and launched the regional alliance “Let’s Defend the Balkan Rivers”. This initiative, led by activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, who had previously built transnational cooperation, aimed to develop coordination, mutual support, and knowledge exchange to address the threats of SHPs across the region. Two years later, in September 2023, a new regional gathering occurred in the municipality of Pluzine, in Montenegro, in the vicinity of the Komarnica River Canyon. There, new organizations from the region joined the alliance, reaching over 40 initiatives cooperating to tackle problems related not only to hydropower development but also to the expansion of critical mineral mining. The alliance advocates for the adoption and enforcement of laws to protect rivers and the environment, as well as the protection of activists from legal harassment and lawsuits filed by investors.

A leading role in the creation of the regional alliance was played by river protection movements that emerged in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Coalition for the Protection of Rivers of BiH was established in 2016, bringing together local initiatives, environmental organizations, and experts from across the country. One of the first local struggles occurred in the early 2000s when residents of the Fojnica municipality organized a blockade to protect the Zeljeznica River. In August 2017, a 500-day blockade in Kruscica, following an

attack by special police, inspired other local initiatives. In 2020, residents along the Neretvica River protested against 15 small hydropower projects. Meanwhile, inhabitants of Foca mobilized against illegal construction on the Bjelava River. In East Sarajevo, two young girls who led protests in defense of the Kasindolska River were sued for defamation by a Belgian investor, fostering an anti-SLAPP campaign in response. Beyond coordinating and supporting local struggles, in July 2022, the Coalition achieved a ban on new small hydropower projects July 2022 in the Federation of BiH Entity. Currently, hydropower projects threaten the upper course of the River Neretva, under the administration of the Republika Srpska Entity. Due to the filling of the Ulog hydropower plant reservoir, in summer 2024, the river recorded historically low water levels. Several other projects are planned on the upper Neretva, including the Gornji Horizonti project. Diverting water for power generation, this project threatens to significantly reduce the river flow and cause saltwater intrusion into fertile lands in Herzegovina. Activists are calling on the Republika Srpska authorities to declare the upper course of the Neretva a protected area. The support of the regional alliance is playing an important role in their efforts to protect the river.

In Serbia, the movement opposing small hydropower projects emerged from the villages of Stara Planina, a mountain range in southeastern Serbia, at the border with Bulgaria. In 2018, residents of the villages of Temska, Paklestica, Topli Do, and Rakita organized themselves through the Alliance of Local Communities and later formed the movement “Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina”, which brought together environmental activists and experts from across Serbia. While the movement successfully secured the ban of small hydropower projects from the Spatial Plans of Dimitrovgrad, Pirot, and Knjazevac, local struggles continued in other parts of Serbia. In December 2022, in the village of Dadince, in the municipality of Vlasotince, locals organized a four-month-long blockade to prevent the construction of an SHP on the Rupska River. During their struggle, they were visited by the “Brave Women” from Kruscica and other activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, who, through this gesture of solidarity, expressed the deep connections between river protection struggles in the region. Although small hydropower projects were canceled from the spatial plans of a dozen municipalities, no ban was obtained at the national level. For this reason, local struggles continue and are increasingly supported by the regional alliance. These include the defense of the Studenica River near the town of Usce in the municipality of Kraljevo, opposing the construction of the seventh SHP in the area. Since local authorities have ignored multiple petitions

against the project, local organizations submitted a complaint to the Bern Convention. They argue that the Studenica River is a key ecological component of the Golija Nature Park and Biosphere Reserve and that the project goes against the explicit will of the local population. Another local struggle is currently being fought in the municipality of Prijepolje over the Ratajska River, which is the source of water supply for the residents of the villages Ratajska and Ravne. Local residents and environmental organizations have launched a legal campaign for the protection of the river through the establishment of a protected area.

Local struggles supported by the regional network include efforts to protect the Komarnica River and its canyon in Montenegro from the construction of a hydroelectric dam that would flood the canyon to create a reservoir. Local organizations and experts have demonstrated the immense value of the Komarnica Canyon in terms of biodiversity and nature conservation, hosting a quarter of Europe's most important habitats for plant and animal species. The Komarnica River is protected as a Natural Monument and Nature Park, and it has been proposed to increase its level of protection through EU and international legislation and the establishment of a National Park.

The regional movement exhibits a heterogeneous composition. Originating from local struggles of communities inhabiting small villages and towns, it evolved into a broader mobilization that encompassed diverse constituencies. This included younger NGO activists, as well as academics and experts whose engagement contributed to the struggles through data-driven arguments. The repertoires of contention employed by the movement are equally diverse, reflecting both institutional and disruptive strategies (Tilly, 2019). On one hand, activists deploy legal and bureaucratic tools, including litigation, petitions, and participation in public consultations, to challenge the procedural legitimacy of environmental impact assessments and permit processes. Additionally, there has been strong advocacy for legislative measures, beginning with demands for a ban on small hydropower projects. On the other hand, more confrontational tactics such as mass protests, blockades, and the physical guarding of rivers underscore the embodied and spatial dimensions of resistance, emphasizing the river not only as a natural resource but as a contested socio-ecological space. Furthermore, activists engaged in direct action practices such as riverbank clean-ups, the restoration or creation of beaches and recreational spaces, as well as cultural and artistic events, all of which contribute to the symbolic and material reclaiming of riverine landscapes.

Framing River Protection: From Local Struggles to Regional Cooperation

“Water is the source of life and cannot be subject to privatization and trade. Water is not personal property but a human right” (ACT, 2021). This statement, issued by one of the organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina following the first regional meeting, reflects shared aspects of the framing activity that united communities across the region in defense of the rivers. First of all, it draws on the frame of life that underpins the struggle for river protection. Rivers are understood as vital sources of life for the communities that depend on them for water and sustenance, as well as for the flora and fauna they support. From the very beginning, local communities used slogans like “rivers are life” and “water is life,” expressing how rivers constitute their mean of survival. The articulation of this frame, however, was not limited to the survival of the inhabitants, but was extended to an ecological understanding of riverine ecosystems in which both human and non-human are embedded and interdependent (Hromadzic, 2024; Rajkovic, 2020). This frame extension (Snow et al., 2019) enabled the scaling of the issue from a local concern to a broader meaning that mobilized environmental activists and experts across the region. Promoting the privatization and commodification of rivers, small hydropower projects were perceived as a threat to life itself. This framing aligns with the conceptualization of water struggles as forms of vitalist politics (Muehlebach, 2023) that unveil the destructive logic embedded in neoliberal capitalism, which expands extractive practices into all spheres of existence. In contrast, water movements articulate counter-politics that center life itself as the foundation of value, resisting the reduction of living systems to commodities. Moreover, the resistance to SHPs confronts the undemocratic mechanisms that characterize the approval and construction of hydropower projects, which include the exclusion of local communities from decision-making processes, widespread corruption in the allocation of concessions, and the prioritization of private over public interest. Framing the projects in terms of democratic deficit, the movement exposes the deep entanglement of ecological degradation with questions of political participation, the rule of law, and sovereignty. The framing of these injustices resonated with a broader critique of the political and economic processes that characterized the post-socialist transition in the region, referring to the implementation of neoliberal policies that led to the privatization of public assets and are now targeting natural resources (Kurtovic, 2022). These were embedded into systems characterized by widespread corruption, which cemented the collusion between private and public actors. Acting as “growth machines” (Della Porta & Piazza, 2008), they promote a form of

development that prioritizes economic and political benefits for private actors, to which the interests of citizens and the environment are subordinated. By framing river protection as a matter of democracy and justice, the movement makes visible the inherently political and social dimensions of water struggles (Muehlebach, 2023). In doing so, it aligns with broader conceptualizations within environmental justice and political ecology that emphasize access to natural resources, participation in decision-making, and power asymmetries in environmental governance (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014).

Emotions play a crucial role in the movement's framing activity. At the local level, the motivation to engage in collective action is driven by a profound emotional connection to the rivers, which inhabitants express through positive emotions, individual and collective memories, ways of life, and legacies passed down through generations. The rivers shape the places where people grew up, learned to swim, fished, and nurtured relationships. Confronted with the threat of destruction, this emotional attachment to the rivers became explicit, creating a cultural repertoire for collective action (Devine-Wright, 2009; Kojola, 2020; Threadgold et al., 2018). By framing the rivers as possessing transcendent value, local communities convey an emotional rationale for taking action to defend them (Ruiz & Domon, 2012) standing in opposition to the market logic that drives their destruction. Place-based attachments often serve as powerful cultural repertoires in local environmental conflicts, when landscapes imbued with deep symbolic meaning are threatened by environmentally harmful projects. However, such attachments can foster conservative or exclusionary notions of belonging to place (Massey, 1994; Pellizzoni, 2014). In contrast, within the regional river protection movement, local attachments were rearticulated into a shared sense of "we-ness" (Hunt & Benford, 2004) that transcends local boundaries and connects diverse constituencies. Locals framed their emotional and material attachment to rivers as a tie to their immediate territory, which simultaneously links them to others across the region. This connection was expressed not only symbolically, but also through concrete acts of solidarity, as exemplified by the Brave Women of Kruscica participating in the blockade of the inhabitants of the village of Dadince, in Southern Serbia. In addressing them, one of the Brave Women expressed the shared nature of their fight for the Balkan rivers. Echoing this sentiment, an activist from Montenegro remarks: "We are close, we have interconnected nature, our rivers have no borders. We share the same problems with our neighbors. And our strength lies in unity." (Interview retrieved from documentary film "The Wave of Unity", Panic & Stanimirovic, 2023)

Her statement highlights the foundations of regional solidarity and unity within the regional river protection movement. On the one hand, it reflects a shared recognition of the common challenges and threats faced by local communities across national borders. On the other hand, it unveils the awareness of the ecological interconnectedness of the region, where rivers and ecosystems transcend political boundaries. In this context, activists articulated the frame of unity as a collective action frame that responds to both shared grievances and ecological interdependence, constructing solidarity and cooperation as the primary means for advancing environmental justice across the region.

Conclusions

The regional movement “Let’s Defend the Balkan Rivers” has brought to light the wide-ranging environmental, social, and economic consequences of hydropower development in the region. Emerging from local opposition to small hydropower projects in peripheral rural communities, the movement expanded by linking dispersed struggles and fostering collaboration with environmental organizations and experts. This process was enabled through the development and articulation of shared interpretive frames that gave meaning to collective action. Among the first frames to shape the regional narrative were the frame of life and the democracy frame, which together articulate a broader claim to the right to water. The frame of life emphasizes the ecological interconnectedness of rivers and broader ecosystems, opposing their commodification. In turn, the democracy frame exposes patterns of political exclusion, the prioritization of private interests, and systemic corruption in environmental decision-making, situating the movement within wider demands for environmental justice. The locals’ rationale for taking action was grounded in the deep emotional attachment to rivers that triggered the reaffirmation of place-based collective identities. These localized experiences of belonging scaled up into a transnational sense of unity, based on a shared belonging to rivers and a collective commitment to protect them. Through the regional alliance, this unity was transformed into structured cooperation and mutual support across diverse local efforts, framed by activists as the most viable strategy for achieving common goals.

Ongoing efforts are focused on translating these demands into concrete legal and policy initiatives at various scales. A significant initial success has been the legal ban on small hydropower projects, achieved in many municipalities and at the entity level in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, further advocacy

is necessary to secure a ban at the national level. While the ban is a major step forward, it has limitations, as it applies only to new concessions for small hydro-power projects and does not ensure permanent protection. Therefore, broader efforts for river protection have intersected campaigns for biodiversity and forest conservation to achieve the highest levels of protection through the establishment of National Parks and integration into EU and international legal frameworks. In this sense, regional cooperation is crucial for defining common strategies and advocating for transboundary cooperation by the authorities. Additionally, there is a need for concerted efforts to enhance expert, data-driven knowledge regarding the threats posed by the mining of critical raw materials. The movement is also addressing democratic deficits by building anti-SLAPP awareness and promoting local community participation in decision-making and environmental governance. While a top-down approach to the green transition in the region has revealed contradictory environmental, social, and political effects, the coordinated struggles for river protection in the Balkans are creating opportunities for solutions to emerge from local communities. These solutions are grounded in local knowledge and experiences and advocate inclusive and democratic processes. This bottom-up initiative could pave the way for meaningful efforts toward a just green transition in the region.

This paper engages with the growing body of literature on environmentalism in post-socialist Eastern Europe by situating local and regional environmental struggles within the context of broader global dynamics and ongoing academic debates. By analyzing the cultural repertoires of river protection struggles and mechanisms of regional cooperation in the Balkans, this research challenges conventional understandings that often marginalize rural communities and their grassroots activism. It highlights the potential and specificities of locality and place-based belonging in developing environmental movements. By integrating theoretical frameworks from environmental sociology, political ecology, and social movement studies, this research seeks to contribute to the discourse on environmental activism in the region and offers insights into the broader implications for environmental and climate justice. Ultimately, it aims to foster a more inclusive understanding of environmentalism that recognizes the vital role of local communities in shaping sustainable futures.

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