



Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans

May 2022

Acknowledgements

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Donor



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Table of Contents

	List of abbreviations	1
	Executive summary	2
1	Introduction	4
	Methodology	6
2	Environmental protection activism and initiatives in the Western Balkans	7
3	Environmental activists' and civil society organizations' perspectives	14
4	Regional dimensions of environmental activism movements	19
5	Conclusions: looking ahead	21
	Recommendations	23

List of abbreviations

1

CEE Central and Eastern Europe/ean

NGO/CSO Non-governmental
organization/Civil society organisation

EED European Endowment for Democracy

EU European Union

HPP Hydroelectric power plants

SEE South-Eastern Europe

UNESCO United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization

WB Western Balkan/the Western Balkans

'The environment is where we all meet; where we all have a mutual interest; it is the one thing all of us share'
Lady Bird Johnson

This report analyses environmental activism in the Western Balkans (WB)^[1], identifying what has worked and what has proven challenging, and exploring the role played by exchange of knowledge and experience at the regional level. From this it outlines lessons that could help future environmental protection and coalition building initiatives to maximize their impacts from local up to national, regional, and international levels.

Across the region, air, water and soil pollution levels are disturbingly high. Public health is continuously jeopardized by air pollution, while industrial waste and construction initiatives pose serious challenges to public well-being and the protection of the region's natural environment and resources. Despite this, the region's environmental activists and NGOs have shown not only that there is room for improvement, but also that collaboration as well as proper awareness raising is key and can lead to positive change. Most of the movements, projects or initiatives shared by research participants involved environmental protection or conservation activism. Key concerns were: clean air, HPP construction, protecting rivers against pollution, conservation of the natural environment through the creation or implementation of relevant laws, opposing environmentally damaging construction initiatives, and opposing harmful or irresponsible waste disposal practices.

Many had succeeded in their immediate aims. According to participants, successful strategies to continue to replicate and adapt may involve: the use of scientific research evidence, translating locally-felt environmental problems into wider support for change, clarity on positive action the public and policy-makers can take, involvement of young people, working in coalition with partners at multiple levels (local-national-regional-international), raising the profile of environmental issues in electoral debates and stepping up peaceful protests.

**Environmental Activism
in the Western Balkans
May 2022**

^[1] Western Balkans/Western Balkan region/six WB countries (WB6) in this report refers to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia.

Despite the strong adverse effects of different forms of pollution on citizens of the WB6, and intensification of public awareness, environmental activism, and civil society year by year, WB6 governments are not keeping up. The current state of play in combating environmental challenges in the region remains, despite many years of investment and encouragement as part of EU accession efforts and the emergence of a WB Green Agenda, far from promising.

In the face of limited resources and a challenging political environment, civil society and activists in the WB have shown their vital potential to generate public awareness and demand, translate this into behaviour change, engage communities in problem-solving initiatives and conservation efforts, and push for sound environmental policies.

Civil society will continue to have a vital role in maintaining pressure for green policies to be implemented, drive accountability, and support learning and adaptation – while acting as a watchdog for new initiatives that have the potential to harm the environment.

To enable and support civil society and activists to play this role to the full, governments and donors should:

- Provide long term resources to civil society actors engaged on these issues to raise public awareness, share information on how the public can call for and take effective environmental action, press for policy and practice change, as well as learn from, exchange and collaborate with each other;
- Ensure civil society and activists can play a full and active role within environmental policy processes;
- Support further research in support of environmental change processes at national and regional levels.

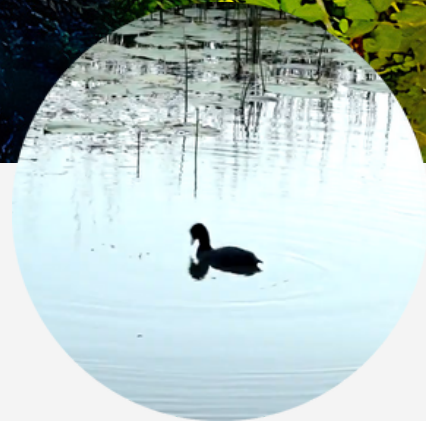
For their part, drawing on the experiences and suggestions shared by research participants, civil society activists and NGOs should:

- Continue to exchange and learn from one another about effective strategies, approaches and messages for achieving change – and foster deeper collaboration between socio-economic rights and environmental movements;
- Intensify public awareness raising, while further exploring incentives for participation in civic initiatives and effective ways to overcome barriers to government-CSO cooperation.

1. Introduction

4

Although environmental issues and concerns are increasingly impacting people's everyday lives and recognized as a shared challenge, it remains difficult to secure effective environmental policies and achieve an environmentally friendly way of living. One reason for this is the complexity of environmental issues themselves – policy and behaviour change requires shifting incentives, structures, norms and habits in a wide range of interconnected areas.^[2] Yet the first step towards the change needed is being taken by social movements and environmental activists who are working to build public and political awareness of the case for change.



Environmental activism can be defined as the coming together of various groups of individuals and organizations that work in collaboration in social, scientific, political and conservational fields with the main purpose of addressing environmental concerns.^[3] Underpinning all environmental movements, protests, rebellions, riots, strike waves, and revolutions is **collective action**.

'Collective action can take many forms – brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, prosaic or dramatic. Collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to representative institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities.'^[4]

The continuous rise in the profile of the environment in politics reflects growing concern at the scale of the ecological crisis confronting humanity.^[5] Environmental activism in the 21st century draws attention to climate change, air and water pollution, nuclear power, acid rain, waste, urbanization, transportation, sustainable development, and so on. WB countries are not exempt from these global challenges, and they have intensified in recent years due to rapid growth. Yet the WB6 are failing to respond.

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

^[2] J. Connelly et al., *Politics and the Environment* (third edition), 2012, New York: Routledge.

^[3] S. Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 1994, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

^[4] Ibid.

^[5] N. Carter, *The Politics of the Environment* (second edition), 2007, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



In other post-socialist countries that have already joined, the European Union (EU) is the driver of formal change, but behavioral compliance is far more difficult to achieve.^[6]

The WB6 are reacting in a similar way, but their people face greater social, political, and economic difficulties than those in neighbouring countries. Nonetheless, there is growing interest in environmentalism, aided by the popularization of the ecological issues in the mass media, public campaigns, environmental education initiatives targeting younger generations and the incorporation of ecology in school curricula in the last decade.^[7]

This report analyses how WB environmental activism is playing a role in shifting awareness and creating pressure for change. It seeks to understand what has worked and what has proven challenging, and explore the role played by exchange of knowledge and experience at the regional level. From this it suggests conclusions and recommendations that could help future environmental protection and coalition building initiatives to maximize their impacts from local up to national, regional, and international levels.

**Environmental Activism
in the Western Balkans
May 2022**

^[6] T. Borzel & A. Fagan, 'Environmental governance in South East Europe/Western Balkans: reassessing the transformative power of Europe', 2015, *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 33(5), pp 885–900. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263774X15608985>.

^[7] J. Petrović & D. Stanojevic, 'Environmental activism as a new form of political participation of the youth in Serbia', 2012, *Sociologija*, 54, pp 387–399. <https://doi.org/10.2298/SOC1202387V>.



Methodology

The report draws on primary and secondary data sources.

The primary element consisted of nine in-depth key informant interviews with representatives of environmental organizations, activists and other relevant individuals in the six WB countries, as well as two interviews with external actors, including a European Commission (EC) representative and a representative of a European non-governmental organization (NGO).

Drawing on the Delphi online technique,^[8] interviews were semi-structured around 11 open-ended questions. Secondary sources were used to compare regional activism with wider concepts and trends, and to identify further examples of environmental activism in recent years. All interviews were anonymous, to enable participants to speak freely.

**Environmental Activism
in the Western Balkans
May 2022**

[8] M. Petty, 'An alternative to focus groups: group interviewing using the Delphi technique online', 2017, SNAB Global Blog, <https://www.snabglobaldevelopment.com/blog/an-alternative-to-focus-groups-group-interviewing-using-the-delphi-technique-online>, (accessed 20 November 2021).

2. Environmental protection activism and initiatives in the Western Balkans

7

In the 1990s, conflict engulfed much of the WB region, and patterns of conflict or cooperation have played a central role in shaping the region's economy, society, and environment in the decades since.[9] Many environmental decisions were (and still are) made by central government. Although national legislation allows citizens to participate in decision-making, in reality citizens and local communities have very few opportunities to influence decisions whose environmental consequences shape their lives. In many ways, civic environmental activism and movements in the region have arisen as a reaction to this discrepancy.

Civic movements can contribute to a healthy civil society and a better connection between individuals in society and their state. Yet environmental civic movements are new phenomena in the region. They have arisen out of different communities' reactions against the direct impacts of environmental pollution/degradation on their health and everyday life.

Environmental activism has achieved some important successes in recent years. In **Albania**, the Vjosa River case has attracted national, regional and even international attention. The campaign to protect Europe's wild rivers, 'Save the Blue Heart of Europe', started in 2012. It took on new local significance in 2017 when thirty European scientists began exploring the river's ecosystem, and developing plans for the construction of two HPPs. In 2018, environmental protests and activism successfully stopped the construction of the HPPs on the river. The case was reviewed in light of the Bern Convention (International Treaty for the Conservation of Nature), and the hearings recommended that Albania suspend any HPP projects on the river. At the same time, the European Parliament recommended that Albania review its renewable energy strategy in order to reduce the country's reliance on HPPs.[10] Meanwhile, Hollywood star Leonardo DiCaprio made multiple calls asking the Albanian government to protect the Vjosa River.[11] Despite the success to date, it remains to be seen whether the government will grant full protection status to the river.

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

[9] European Environmental Agency (EEA), 'Driving forces that shape environmental futures in the Western Balkans', 2021, Brussels: EEA, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/western-balkans>, (accessed 23 November 2021).

[10] J. Donner, & V. Mazreku, 'Albanian Environmental Movement in European Context', Milieukontakt International, n.d, <http://milieukontakt.net/en/wpcontent/uploads/2011/12/Environmental-movement-albania.pdf>, (accessed 26 November 2021).

[11] Exit News, 'Leonardo DiCaprio Calls for Public Pressure on the Albanian Government to Protect the Vjosa River', 2021, Exit News, <https://exit.al/en/2021/03/11/leonardo-dicaprio-calls-for-public-pressure-on-the-albanian-government-to-protect-the-vjosa-river/>, (accessed 10 December 2021).

Another example of successful environmental activism was the campaign to stop the import of chemical weapons for destruction in Albania, which shocked public opinion.[12] Citizens and activists threatened to unleash civil unrest, and the request to import the weapons was then quickly brushed aside by the government.[13] A similar situation emerged later the same year over the import of waste in general. Environmental activists again campaigned together to condemn this and to demand a referendum on the issue. The alliance collected more than 64,000 signatures to request a referendum on two articles of the law that allowed waste imports into Albania.[14] The request was then approved by the Constitutional Court, and the government moved swiftly to ban waste imports in response.[15]

Thirty years after the collapse of communism, and more than two decades after the end of the bloody wars in the region, environmental activism in **Bosnia-Herzegovina** (BiH) remains, as in much of the WB region, in its infancy. Yet it still provides examples of successful activism. In 2017, a group of dedicated grassroots environmental activists staged a 500-day-long protest in BiH against the construction of a new HPP on the Kruščica river.[16] To date, there are plans to construct over 400 small HPPs in BiH, and over 100 have already been built.[17] The campaign, led by local women activists who later became known as the **Brave Women of Kruščica**,[18] met with many obstacles, including physical violence and arrests. Yet it helped to safeguard access to fresh drinking water for local residents while staving off risks posed by the projects to the habitat of many animal species.[19]

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

[12] A.Vidishiqi, & A.Blua, 'We Are Not A Dustbin': Albanians Balk At Reported Chemical Weapons Plan', Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/albania-syria-chemical-weapons/25168165.html>, (accessed 26 November 2021). W. Feuersenger, 'Albania Struggles with Environmental Challenges', Deutsche Welle (Editor: S. Phalnikar), 2012, <http://www.dw.de/albania-environmentchallenges/a-16343222>, (accessed 26 November 2021).

[13] B. Likmeta, 'Albanians Oppose Hosting Syria's Chemical Weapons', 2013, Balkan Insight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/11/13/albanians-protest-against-syria-s-chemical-weapons/>, (accessed 26 November 2021).

[14] B.Likmeta, 'Albania Court to Weigh Historic Trash Referendum' 2013, BalkanInsight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/02/12/albania-court-to-weigh-on-historic-referendum-request/>, (accessed 26 November 2021).

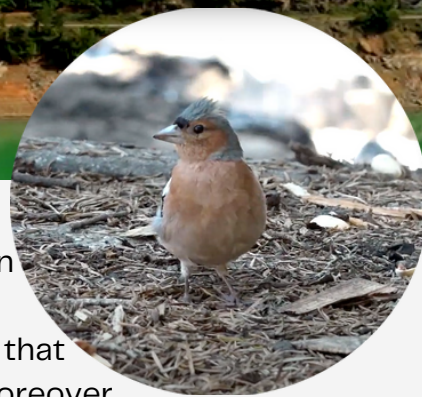
[15] B. Likmeta, 'Albania's New Government Bans Waste Imports', 2013, Balkan Insight, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-bans-waste-imports>, (accessed 26 November 2021).

[16] A. Heil, 'Bosnian Villagers Stave Off 'Mini-Dams,' But For How Long?', 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnian-villagers-stave-off-mini-dams-but-for-how-long-/30110892.html>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

[17] WWF, 'Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Stop All Small Hydro Development', 2020, https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?364551/Parliament-of-the-Federation-of-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina-to-Stop-All-Small-Hydro-Development, (accessed 27 December 2021).

[18] Euronatur, 'The "Brave Women of Kruščica" must fight again', 2020, <https://www.euronatur.org/en/what-we-do/news/the-brave-women-of-kruscica-must-fight-again>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

[19] D. Mijatović, 'Let us make Europe a safe place for environmental human rights defenders', 2021, Council of Europe, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/let-us-make-europe-a-safe-place-for-environmental-human-rights-defenders>, (accessed 27 November 2021).



The embryonic environmental NGOs operating in BiH are concerned that they lack capacity and remain dependent on foreign donor assistance. Although there are points of comparison, their development has been much slower than that of movements in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).[20] Moreover, BiH faces another big environmental challenge: it has the second-highest mortality rate from air pollution in the world.[21] Thus recent analysis underlines the need to tackle BiH's air pollution crisis, especially in the city of Tuzla, where pollution clouds can hang over the city for weeks at a time. In 2018 an environmental activism group consisting of health professionals in Tuzla joined the global initiative 'UnmaskMyCity', a health sector campaign for clean air in cities both to protect public health and tackle climate change.[22] With locals wearing face masks or gas masks in many of the region's major cities, environmental movements continue to grow.[23]

Despite the multiple challenges confronting the new state of **Kosovo** since its independence in 2008, here too environmental activism has achieved some success. In one case, largely thanks to the work of a coalition of NGOs in Kosovo, the World Bank withdrew from one of the Kosovar government's largest and most controversial projects.[24] The bank had previously agreed to finance the new coal-fired 'Kosova e Re' (New Kosovo) power plant in Obiliq.[25] Power plants are an important source of employment in Kosovo, with 5,000 people from Obiliq and neighboring villages working in the industry. Yet mining and industrial activities have also caused deep environmental damage and direct impacts on human health.[26]

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

[20] A. Fagan, I Sircar, 'Environmental Movement Activism in the Western Balkans: Evidence from Bosnia-Herzegovina', in eds. K. Jacobsson & S. Saxonberg, *Beyond NGO-ization* (1st Edition), 2013, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 213-236.

[21] Unmask My City, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina has the second highest mortality rate (per 100,000 population) from air pollution in the world, after North Korea', Unmask My City, <http://unmaskmycity.org/project/tuzla/>, (accessed 27 December 2021).

[22] HEAL, 'Spotlight on clean air for health in Tuzla, Bosnia', 2019, HEAL, <https://www.env-health.org/spotlight-on-clean-air-for-health-in-tuzla-bosnia/>, (accessed 30 November 2021).

[23] Investment Monitor, 'How China is enabling an environmental crisis in the Balkans', 2021, <https://www.investmentmonitor.ai/sectors/extractive-industries/how-china-is-enabling-an-environmental-crisis-in-the-balkans/>, (accessed 12 December 2021).

[24] Reuters, 'World Bank pulls out of Kosovo coal power plant project', 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/worldbank-kosovo-idUKL8N1WQ518>, (accessed 12 December 2021).

[25] NS ENERGY, 'Kosova e Re Power Plant', 2019, <https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/projects/kosova-e-re-power-plant/>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

[26] G. Klinaku, 'Promoting a greener way of life in Kosovo', 2021, EU Regional Communication Programme for Western Balkans, <https://webalkans.eu/en/stories/promoting-a-greener-way-of-life-in-kosovo/>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

Kosovo's fight for environmental protection, as in the case of concerns about the environmental impact of 'Kelkos Energy' company's HPP projects, was quickly transformed from a protest for environmental rights into a protest for human rights.[27] Protests over air pollution levels in Prishtina have been intensifying yearly, with occasional success, as in Obiliq. Support from donors are enabling and fostering the transition to strengthen the capacities of environmental movements and NGOs. They are ensuring that activities, such as environmental awareness initiatives, can become longer-term campaigns, allowing for more strategic planning and development.

For years in **Montenegro**, the government has been accused of sidelining environmental concerns – exploiting the country's rivers and coastline in service of corrupt political elites.[28] Ecological concerns have arisen in particular over the construction of a new highway on a picturesque river canyon that is protected by law. Most of the Tara river's flow through Montenegro has been contaminated by the release of thousands of tons of gravel, soil, and waste into the river stream. It was this that prompted the rise of environmentalism in the country.

As the press states, the delayed 42-kilometer section of Montenegro's Bar-to-Boljare highway is already under intense scrutiny given its impact on strained public finances.[29] Under public pressure, the company building it requested permission to repair a damaged 500-meter section of riverbank on the UNESCO-protected Tara River traversed by the highway.[30] However, the rehabilitation was planned to take place on the river flow and the floodplain's key biodiversity area.[31] An environmental coalition therefore filed a complaint with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which has designated the river's 78km canyon as a world heritage site.[32]

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

[27] Amnesty International, 'Kosovo: Baseless lawsuits against environmental activists dropped in victory for freedom of expression', 2021, Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/10/kosovo-baseless-lawsuits-against-environmental-activists-dropped-in-victory-for-freedom-of-expression/>, (accessed 15 December 2021).

[28] S. Kajosevic, 'Montenegro Probes Chinese Highway Builder's Damage to Protected River', 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/03/montenegro-probes-chinese-highway-builders-damage-to-protected-river/>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

[29] H. von der Berlie, 'The billion-dollar motorway leading Montenegro to nowhere' 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/05/07/the-billion-dollar-motorway-leading-montenegro-to-nowhere>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

[30] S.Kajosevic, 'Montenegro's Chinese Highway Constructor Offers to Repair Ruined Riverbank', 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/05/10/montenegros-chinese-highway-constructor-offers-to-repair-ruined-riverbank/>, (accessed 12 December 2021).

[31] B. Moskov, 'A Bad Joke: Montenegrin Environmentalists Slam Chinese Pledge To Fix Damage To UNESCO River', 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-chinese-tara-canyon-damage-unesco-bridge/31256794.html>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

[32] Environment South East Europe, 'The Tara River in Montenegro has once again become a mud', 2020, <https://environmentsee.eu/the-tara-river-in-montenegro-has-once-again-become-a-mud/>, (accessed 23 November 2021).

The coalition of environmental organizations accused the government of ignoring 'unprecedented ecocide' and warned of the destruction of fish populations and other wildlife in the river.[33] The environmental coalition then informed the EU Delegation to Montenegro about the case.[34]

In this case, environmental activism prompted the government to hold a special session of parliament near the Black Lake in the town of Žabljak. Here, the Minister of Ecology, Spatial Planning, and Urbanism said that state institutions would have to work together in order to save the country's environment.[35] Facing mounting pressure, Montenegro's government has promised to turn a new page in environmental protection, but environmental activists remain unconvinced and are still campaigning regarding environmental protection day by day.[36]

For almost a decade, **North Macedonia** has been the venue for a struggle to protect land and air from mass pollution as a result of investment by foreign companies in copper, gold, and silver mining.[37] The country also faces environmental problems typical of the region, including air and water pollution, especially around Skopje, as well as the decline of its forests. Of particular concern is air pollution from metallurgical plants.[38]

In February 2016 a coalition of 21 environmentalist groups and NGOs from across North Macedonia organized protest marches as well as blockades of institutions and streets to campaign for environmental rights.[39] This informal coalition against air pollution staged a series of protests in North Macedonia and gathered thousands of people in Skopje, Tetovo, and Bitola.

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

[33] Ibid.

[34] I. Todorović, 'Environmentalists alert UNESCO of 'ecocide' of Tara river in Montenegro', 2020, Balkan Green Energy News, <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/environmentalists-alert-unesco-of-ecocide-of-tara-river-in-montenegro/>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

[35] Reuters, 'Balkan green activists join forces in fight to save rivers', 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/balkan-green-activists-join-forces-fight-save-rivers-2021-07-03/>, (accessed 24 November 2021).

[36] S. Kajosevic, 'Montenegrin Activists Outraged by Arrests over Green Protest', 2021, Balkan Insight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/20/montenegrin-activists-outraged-by-arrests-over-green-protest/>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

[37] International Center for Nonviolent Conflict, 'Macedonians against Deadly Mines: The Struggle for a Clean and Safe Future', 2021, ICNC, https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/macedonians-against-deadly-mines-the-struggle-for-a-clean-and-safe-future/, (accessed 28 November 2021).

[38] Naturvernforbundet, 'Environmental issues in Macedonia', 2009, Naturvernforbundet, <https://naturvernforbundet.no/international/environmental-issues-in-macedonia/category939.html>, (accessed 28 November 2021).

[39] Balkan Insight, 'Macedonia's Greens See Red Over Deadly Smog', 2016, Balkan Insight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/02/03/macedonians-mull-more-protests-amid-deadly-smog-02-02-2016/>, (accessed 12 December 2021).

In 2019, citing the same environmental concerns, 'thousands of high school students and others staged a protest outside the main government building in Skopje, demanding authorities to take urgent action to tackle dangerous air pollution in many of the country's cities.'^[40] Meanwhile, in 2020, environmentalist groups and nature enthusiasts in North Macedonia joined villagers in the Shar mountain range for a protest to stop work on a small HPP in Leshnica. Eleven HPPs are already operational in the area and 15 more are planned in the country.^[41]

Meanwhile, in **Serbia**, an environmental movement named 'Let's Not Drown Belgrade', successfully protested the demolition of Belgrade's Savamala district to pave the way for a waterfront redevelopment project. Thousands of people joined waves of mass protests, and this had the immediate positive knock-on effect of boosting popular support for environmental activism.^[42] The movement has since provided inspiration for citizens to take forward other environmental initiatives, such as saving the city parks, and protesting against the construction of HPPs and waste disposal practices.^[43]

Activists regularly took part in these demonstrations – however small they were. In October 2019, the movement staged a protest against dangerously high levels of air pollution in Belgrade, which is among the most polluted cities in the world in winter.^[44] Activists launched a petition demanding that city and state authorities take immediate, concrete measures against air pollution.^[45] In another important battle, the environmental movement 'Let's defend the rivers of Stara Planina' has opposed the construction of mini HPPs in south-eastern Serbia. More recently, protests have emerged against a controversial mining project by the British-Australian company Rio Tinto in western Serbia.^[46]

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

^[40] AP News, 'North Macedonia: Hundreds protest dangerous air pollution', 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/2fd6f2f66d1d7508ea4416c04f5cc048>, (accessed 12 December 2021).

^[41] Balkan Green Energy News, 'Protest announced against small hydropower plants in North Macedonia', 2020, Balkan Green Energy News, <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/protest-announced-against-small-hydropower-plants-in-north-macedonia/>, (accessed 12 December 2021).


^[42] Reuters, 'Serbian activists rally against laws expropriation and referendum', 2021, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbian-activists-rally-against-laws-expropriation-referendum-2021-11-24/>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

^[43] Ibid.

^[44] Reuters, 'Belgrade joins world's most polluted cities as farmers torch fields', 2019, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-pollution-air-idUSKBN1X3293>, (accessed 27 December 2021).

^[45] S. Slavkovic, 'In Serbia, the Fight for 'Green' Votes Turns Ugly', 2021, Balkan Insight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/23/in-serbia-the-fight-for-green-votes-turns-ugly/>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

^[46] E. Berra, 'Serbia, fighting for the environment in fragile areas', 2021, TraPoCo/Osservatorio balcani e caucaso transeuropa, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Projects2/TraPoCo/News/Serbia-fighting-for-the-environment-in-fragile-areas-212122>, (accessed 27 November 2021).



Other environmental battles over the use and exploitation of natural resources have only recently spread to Serbia. Those that take place in peripheral and marginal areas far from urban centers, in particular, are still little studied or are missing. In these areas, the citizens who mobilize are often directly affected by the problems caused by environmental exploitation – and often have fewer resources and capacities to gain the media attention and public support they need to make their struggles successful.

3. Environmental activists' and civil society organizations' perspectives

14

Having described the emergence of environmental activism in the region, and the similar causes around which it has mobilised across the WB6 countries, this section explores the experiences, challenges, future perspectives of the activists involved.



The activists and organizations interviewed had between three and twenty-five years' experience. In some cases, this illustrates long-standing recognition of the challenges faced by the region, but in others it reflects how awareness is rapidly increasing in the wake of the global green agenda of recent years and beginning to translate into accountability for environmental decision-making.

Respondents were asked to outline some of the **most successful** campaigns and movements that their organisations (or they personally) had led or been part of, both nationally and regionally. Most of the movements, projects or initiatives shared by research participants involved environmental protection or conservation activism. Key concerns were: clean air, HPP construction, protecting rivers against pollution, conservation of the natural environment through the creation or implementation of relevant laws, opposing environmentally damaging construction initiatives, and opposing harmful or irresponsible waste disposal practices.

Some of the most successful environmental activism movements managed to turn local campaigns into national, regional or international issues. These included:

- The Vjosa river case which attracted international attention, and the success in creating a national environmental movement day reaching across Albania;
- The effort to stop the construction of HPPs in Mavrovo, North Macedonia, and in Sutjeska and Hračava in Sutjeska National Park in BiH;
- Protests against mining project by the company Rio Tinto in western Serbia;
- The fight against the destruction of the Vrbas River in BiH;
- The campaign to close the Uborak landfill in Mostar, BiH.

Environmental NGO workers and activists unanimously affirmed scientific research-based analysis as the most successful element in their environmental activism campaigns. Another very important success factor was the connection between environmental campaigns and affected communities.

They also drew attention to cooperation and experience-sharing between organizations, mobilizing civil society and volunteers, and educating the public about key issues and actions they can take in response, as having been crucial for developing more successful initiatives and campaigns.^[47]

Research participants highlighted the critical role of young people in environmental and conservation movements. As one participant put it:

‘Aside from having a greater stake in the more distant future, young people are especially well-placed to promote environmental awareness simply because they often have better access to information about the environment than do their elders.’

Many organizations stated that youth activism is vital as a bridge between environmental thought and the instruments needed to bring them to life.

The main **challenges** faced by NGOs and environmental activists were:

- **Government-related challenges:** Incompetence, frequent changes of central and local government, corruption, lack of cooperation, legal action against CSOs and activists.
- **Internal challenges:** Lack of support and dependence on foreign donors, inadequate financial and human resources.
- **External challenges:** Insufficient understanding of state institutions; campaigns configured around the wrong goals; the view of NGOs as as income-oriented or proxies for donor interests; public and youth unawareness and apathy; limited collaboration from non-state actors; lack of expertise in relevant fields.

Interviewees saw national and regional campaigns as interconnected: local wins have regional significance, and the challenges faced are similar at national and regional levels. As one observed:

‘When it comes to national partners, we have a sense of common understanding since we all work in the same conditions, which are not particularly favorable for environmental NGOs. However, this sense of understanding broadens regionally, since most of the countries of the region have similar pasts and are at similar rates of development, and therefore are at the same state of understanding how important the environment is, and how important initiatives and education are when it comes to this matter.’

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

^[47] For example, one respondent described four main success elements in an environmental activism campaign: ‘1. Networking of organizations and joint activities; 2. Support from donors for implementation of activities; 3. Popularization and mass dissemination of key results to be achieved; 4. Cooperation with foreign NGOs – sharing experiences and positive practices.’ Another respondent stated that: ‘Organization for environmental activism movements is key. Communication among activists, lawyers, experts in natural sciences, and relevant institutions. Transparent management in order to gain the trust of the public.’

Another participant explained that bringing together local and international stakeholders as part of a common endeavor can be challenging:

'We mostly cooperate with EU partners or locals on the site. Working with one without the other is almost impossible but they have different perspectives and different goals, so it's our job to be the buffer zone between them, which isn't easy.'

Cooperation at regional level can be challenging but adds important depth of expertise and experience on practices in other countries, and thus brings results. As one interviewee observed:

'Coalitions with other organizations help raise the impact our projects and initiatives have, since the larger the number of partners... the number of participants and volunteers will also be higher, therefore the impact will be much broader.'

Many interviewees felt that the success of their environmental protection initiatives and environmental activism lay largely in the areas of communication, dialogue and public discourse; for their part, governments and other responsible state bodies had remained deeply uncooperative and, despite improvements in some areas, had taken little action in response. As one respondent stated:

'The non-governmental sector in Serbia is very active and attempts to solve environmental problems in a positive way in most cases, however in many areas the laws are not fully harmonized with EU laws, and there is a lack of understanding at local, regional and national level.'

Another respondent highlighted the lack of knowledge and the need for environmental education:

'I think there's a gap in knowledge and knowledge distribution. More constructed knowledge should be given to the youth.'

Nonetheless, shaping public perceptions on environmental issues is by no means straightforward. In response to questions about whether activism is leading to public behavior changes, respondents stated that they find it most effective to work with communities on specific projects. In just a few years the public understanding has been slowly evolving from what was a very low level of environmental awareness. As one participant puts it:

'We aim for this change and we think that our activities have started to give concrete results, well there is a large part of the population that does not respect the nature where they live, well no matter how small the result still shows that the change has begun.'

If today people are more environmentally aware, this growing awareness often begins with concern over the health consequences of environmental degradation. As another participant explained:

'I think people are slowly learning that they can't trust mainstream media because they are heavily influenced by the government. They are more and more relying on social media which is more difficult to censor, so they can gather the needed information. An important thing is the impact that comes from negative examples. The more people know about ecological catastrophes in their country or region, the bigger chance they will start activating and treating the environment better.'

Overall, there was optimism for the future, amid a feeling that public perceptions on environmental issues are slowly shifting:

'Keeping in mind that just a few years back, the broad audience in Albania was not informed at all about environmental issues, it seems that this is slowly changing. People now are more aware of the issue, even though they mostly relate it with the health consequences it may bring.'

In terms of future priorities, all participants agreed that intensifying awareness raising to reach more people is vital. Boosting public involvement in environmental civic initiatives requires not only by educating and informing the public but by creating incentives for action and behaviour change.

They also identified the need to raise their game in reaching and changing the behaviour of state bodies, lawmakers, opinion shapers and decision-makers to attain needed changes in the region's economy and way of life. They suggested more civic peaceful protests to convince central governments to take action, and making greater use of elections as a moment to bring home the central importance of the environment for the future economy, public health and well-being, and to invite public scrutiny of parties' and candidates' environmental records and commitments. When asked to identify national and regional priorities, one participant commented:

'The government and institutions are corrupt and inefficient, and this impacts on all other social spheres. We need a lot of law changing, but even when the laws are adequate, the system lacks people with the will to act on and implement them. That's why nobody can be an eco-activist without being a political activist, a human rights activist.'

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When asked to identify **key messages**, participants suggested raising awareness about how the environment is closely linked to health, wellbeing and the future, and to promote more open-minded, less individualistic behaviours that involve participating in a shared process of change. Noting that environmental protection in the WB is complicated by the region's deep-rooted social, economic and political problems, they agree that the environmental movement and socio-economic rights movements in the region need to cooperate for tangible progress to be possible on environmental protection. According to one participant, a 'middle way' between the environment and socio-economic development is needed:

The population of the region is focused on immediate things like not being paid enough to sustain a normal living situation, housing, and so on. From our point of view, the best way to deal with this situation is to start broadly implementing the circular economy model. Not only does a circular economy model protect our earth's natural resources and reduce the amount of greenhouse gas in the environment, but it has also been shown to boost economies and profit margins of businesses that adopt the practice.'

Other key messages suggested were:

- Stressing individual responsibility to future generations as being as great as society's collective responsibility:

'We inherited nature from our grandparents and our task is to leave it to our grandchildren.'

- Identifying immediate impacts of environmental challenges on people's everyday lives and futures.
- Clarifying the concrete political and practical successes that can be achieved through civic initiatives.

4. Regional dimensions of environmental activism movements

19



Across the region, air, water and soil pollution levels are disturbingly high. Public health is continuously jeopardized by air pollution arising from local heating sources and energy production plants.^[48]

In the WB, effective environmental leadership and action has been undermined by patronage politics and the failure to fulfil empty electoral promises.^[49] Despite this, the region's environmental activists and NGOs, have shown not only that there is room for improvement, but also that collaboration as well as proper awareness raising is key and can lead to positive change. The Vjosa river case is one example of many in the region.^[50] This environmental movement inspired many activists throughout the region to raise their voices to help protect nature.

In 2021 activists from more than 20 WB environmental organizations joined forces in Sarajevo to campaign against HPPs.^[51] Representatives from environmental groups in BiH, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia formed an association with the motto 'Let's Defend the Balkan Rivers' to pressure their respective lawmakers to ban the construction of HPPs.^[52]

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

^[48] P. Hofhuis, et al, 'The Green Agenda: Providing breathing space for Western Balkans citizens?', 2021, Clingendael, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/PB_The_Green_Agenda_3thproof.pdf, (accessed 23 December 2021).

^[49] S. Stojadinovic, 'Intruders of Institutional Politics: Why Do Activists Sometimes Run for Office?', 2021, ICNC, https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/intruders-of-institutional-politics-why-do-activists-sometimes-run-for-office-interview/, (accessed 27 November 2021).

^[50] A. Rama, 'In the Battle for the Environment, Activism Is Not the Enemy. The environmentalist movement in the Balkans continues to grow and adapt', 2021, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/45054/in-the-battle-for-the-environment-activism-is-not-the-enemy?chHash=01571a2fce7b1062fe6de7876cb80b60>, (accessed 24 November 2021).

^[51] V. Maksimov, 'Activists win battle, not war, against hydropower in the Western Balkans', 2020, Euractiv, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/activists-win-battle-not-war-against-hydropower-in-the-western-balkans/>, (accessed 24 November 2021).

^[52] D. Sito-Sucic, 'Balkan green activists join forces in fight to save rivers', 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/balkan-green-activists-join-forces-fight-save-rivers-2021-07-03/>, (accessed 27 November 2021).



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Similar initiatives have been launched to demand action on air pollution in the region,^[53] and activists are confident that their work is beginning to force their governments to respond.^[54] Hazardous air quality throughout the region, with particularly egregious rates of air pollution in Sarajevo, Belgrade, Skopje and Prishtina making regular international headlines, are prompting ever-louder environmental protests. Moreover, the floods which affected BiH and Serbia – the worst in more than a century – and the absence of capacities to deal with the growing realities of climate change have likewise galvanised environmental movements if not yet the region's governments.^[55]

Trends are similar on other climate or environmental issues. Wildfires are becoming more frequent and more destructive every year along the Dalmatian and Montenegrin coasts, and are increasingly spreading to the interior of the region, especially Herzegovina's dry badlands.^[56] The underlying systemic problem is crying out for a major shift towards a new green politics of pro-active environmental decision-making and cooperation.^[57]

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

^[53] J. Bateman, 'The young people fighting the worst smog in Europe', 2020, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200701-skopje-north-macedonia-the-most-polluted-city-in-europe>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

^[54] See: S. J. Marusic, 'Macedonia's Greens See Red Over Deadly Smog', 2016, Balkan Insight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/02/03/macedonians-mull-more-protests-amid-deadly-smog-02-02-2016/>, (accessed 27 November 2021); ETNAR, 'Activist performance calls on citizens of Montenegro to support protest against air pollution in Pljevlja', 2015, ETNAR, <https://etnar.net/activist-performance-calls-on-citizens-of-montenegro-to-support-protest-against-air-pollution-in-pljevlja/>, (accessed 27 November 2021); North Macedonia social briefing, 'Macedonian Society in 2019', 2020, <https://china-cee.eu/2020/05/13/north-macedonia-social-briefing-macedonian-society-in-2019/>, Institute of European Studies/Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, (accessed 27 November 2021).

^[55] BRUSELSK. Chick, 'Reeling from the floods, Bosnians' anger surfaces', 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/reeling-from-the-floods-bosnians-anger-surfaces/a-17762280>, (accessed 27 November 2021).

^[56] T. Börzel, A. Fagan, 'Environmental governance in South East Europe/Western Balkans: reassessing the transformative power of Europe', op cit; J. Mujanovic, 'Green Politics for the Western Balkans?', 2019, Balkan Insight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/05/green-politics-for-the-western-balkans/>, (accessed 25 November 2021).

^[57] J. Vasiljević, 'Environmental activism in the Balkans: from direct action to political subjectivity', 2020, European Western Balkans, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/09/17/environmental-activism-in-the-balkans-from-direct-action-to-political-subjectivity/>, (accessed 23.11.2021); P. Hofhuis, G. Cretti, M. Popović, H. Vojvodic, & W. Zweers, 'The Green Agenda: Providing breathing space for Western Balkans citizens?', 2021, Clingendael, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/PB_The_Green_Agenda_3thproof.pdf, (accessed 27 November 2021).

5. Conclusion: looking ahead

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Despite the strong adverse effects of different forms of pollution on citizens of the WB6, and intensification of public awareness and environmental activism and civil society year by year, WB6 governments are not keeping up. The current state of play in combating environmental challenges in the region is, despite many years of investment and encouragement as part of EU accession efforts, far from promising. Environmental governance is obstructed by corruption, ineffective law enforcement mechanisms and the lack of reliable data on the state of the environment, and most fundamentally by the failure to respond to public concerns with the timely adoption and implementation of appropriate policy responses. The shift towards a green politics of pro-active environmental decision-making and cooperation thus remains some distance away.

The Berlin Process has offered a framework and a venue for building consensus and momentum for this shift. Through its facilitation of policy dialogue between WB6 and European officials, civil society and the academic community on environmental issues, in November 2020 WB6 leaders jointly signed the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.^[58] The Declaration acknowledges the European Green Deal as a new growth strategy towards a modern, climate-neutral, resource-efficient, and competitive economy for the region. In it, WB6 leaders committed to work in line with the Green Deal towards climate neutrality in 2050 and towards the depollution of air, water and soil.

The announcement of the Green Agenda was accompanied in October 2020 by EC Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.^[59] This outlined five main pillars and identified ten flagship investments^[60] to assist in the modernisation of WB infrastructure, underpinned with significant resources from the EC's Economic and Investment Plan and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III).^[61] Then, in October 2021, in the context of the EU-WB summit in Slovenia the Regional Cooperation Council published its Action Plan For The Implementation Of The Sofia Declaration On The Green Agenda For The Western Balkans 2021-2030.^[62]

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

^[58] Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), 'Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans', 2020, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/PB_The_Green_Agenda_3thproof.pdf, (accessed 23 December 2021).

^[59] EC, 'Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans', (COM(2020) 641 final), 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/green_agenda_for_the_western_balkans_en.pdf (accessed 14 March 2022).

^[60] Infrastructure projects regarding renewable energy, transition from coal, renovation wave, waste and wastewater management.

^[61] EC, 'An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans', (SWD(2020) 223 final), 2020, EC.

^[62] RCC, 'Action Plan For The Implementation Of The Sofia Declaration On The Green Agenda For The Western Balkans 2021-2030', 2021, Balkan Green Energy News, <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/GAWB-ACTION-PLAN-Final-04.10.2021.pdf> (accessed 14 March 2022).



Hands off of Vjosa!

These developments signal progress in elaborating an environmental vision for the region's further development. However, some in civil society have raised concerns that thus far, rushed and limited consultation of civil society and academia has weakened the ambition and quality of the region's Green Agenda.^[63] In response to the action plan, CSOs raised concerns over the lack of a concrete timeline which would allow for proper implementation, assessment, monitoring and evaluation,^[64] and noted that some of the commitments in the draft action plan were watered down in the final version following the negotiations.^[65]

Further significant challenges lie ahead. Firstly, the scale of change and investment required to implement an agenda with enormous implications for the WB, its economies and the daily lives of its citizens, requires greater political will and bureaucratic competence than is currently in evidence. Secondly, external powers outside Europe will likely continue to offer non-green investments with significant appeal to the region's elites. Given transparency and corruption deficits, such initiatives will likely remain hard to block.

Nonetheless, the combination of concerted activism, coalition building, growing public consciousness, local success stories in environmental protection and an emerging agenda for better environmental policies and their implementation offer a promising foundation to build on.

Environmental Activism in the Western Balkans May 2022

^[63] P. Gallop, 'The Western Balkans Green Agenda Action Plan: Quantity over quality', 2021, CEE Bankwatch, <https://bankwatch.org/blog/the-western-balkans-green-agenda-action-plan-quantity-over-quality> (accessed 14 March 2022).

^[64] Association Biom et al, (2021) 'For attention of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the European Commission on the Draft Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration', (BankWatch), <https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NGO-letter-on-the-draft-action-plan-for-the-implementation-of-the-Sofia-Declaration-.pdf> (accessed 14 November 2021).

^[65] P. Gallop, 'The Western Balkans Green Agenda Action Plan: Quantity over quality', op cit.

In the face of limited resources and a challenging political environment, civil society and activists in the WB have shown their vital potential to generate public awareness and demand, translate this into behaviour change, engage communities in problem-solving initiatives and conservation efforts, and push for sound environmental policies. Civil society will have a vital role in maintaining pressure for green policies to be implemented, drive accountability, and support learning and adaptation – while acting as a watchdog for new initiatives that have potential to harm the environment. To enable and support civil society and activists to play this role to the full, **governments and donors** should:

1

Recognise the limits placed on effective civil society environmental activism and engagement by lack of capacity and resources, and in response **provide long term resources to civil society actors engaged on these issues to raise public awareness, share information on how the public can call for and take effective environmental action, press for policy and practice change, as well as learn from, exchange and collaborate with each other** from local to national, regional and international levels.

2

Ensure civil society and activists can play a full and active role within environmental policy processes, including higher level discussions, and have the earliest possible access to information, issues being discussed and draft documents, sufficient time and resources to consult with the public and across civil society, and guarantees that civil society perspectives will be offered space and actively considered within policy processes.

3

Support further research in support of environmental change processes at national and regional levels, including:

- To improve understanding of the state of public knowledge on environmental issues and thoughts and perspectives regarding environmental activism and environmentally friendly decision-making. Better understanding these issues can help identify the reasons why still the region faces low public engagement on environmental issues, how that can change in the near future and shed light on the most effective awareness-raising strategies and messaging to adopt. This could explore, for example, how to overcome the barriers to moving from public concern over environmental issues directly impacting their lives towards broader support for action on global environmental challenges, and how to cultivate a sense of connectedness and socio-environmentally responsible behaviour.^[66]
- To explore obstacles and challenges stymieing environmentally friendly policies and their effective implementation among government officials and representatives, and identify paths to overcoming them.

[66] M. Clark, 'Does social connectedness increase pro-environmental behaviour?'; 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353665472_Does_social_connectedness_increase_pro-environmental_behaviour, (accessed 27 December 2021).

For their part, drawing on the experiences and suggestions shared by research participants, **civil society activists and NGOs** should:

4

Continue to exchange and learn from one another about effective strategies, approaches and messages for achieving change – and foster deeper collaboration between socio-economic rights and environmental movements.

According to participants, successful strategies to continue to replicate and adapt may involve: the use of scientific research evidence, translating locally-felt environmental problems into wider support for change, clarity on positive action the public and policy-makers can take, involvement of young people, working in coalition with partners at multiple levels (local-national-regional-international), raising the profile of environmental issues in electoral debates and stepping up peaceful protests.

5

Intensify public awareness raising, while further exploring incentives for participation in civic initiatives and effective ways to overcome barriers to government-CSO cooperation.

6

Keep consolidating and mobilising resources for coalitions to take action on key regional issues and within relevant policy processes including the Berlin Process and EU Accession discussions.

About The Balkan Forum

The Balkan Forum aims to advance cross-border dialogue and create a shared regional vision and agenda for cooperative action in the Balkan region based on economic integration, prosperity, and sustainable peace.

Our work focuses on building human capital, strengthening a circular economy, and reducing unemployment and out-migration in the Balkan region.



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