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EUROPEANISATION FROM BELOW AT THE SEMI-PERIPHERY: THE MOVEMENT AGAINST SMALL HYDROPOWER PLANTS IN SERBIA

Evropeizacija odozdo na polu-periferiji: pokret protiv izgradnje mini hidroelektrana u Srbiji

ABSTRACT: *This paper focuses on Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina, a local environmental initiative that has managed to scale up and transnationalise (Europeanise) from below and to generate sufficient pressure on national power-holders to amend existing legislation and halt further construction of small hydropower plants in protected natural areas. Linking the concepts of environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed and the transnationalisation (Europeanisation) of environmental protests through the example of Serbian protests against small hydropower plants, we explore how a local movement grew out of a tradition of non-politicised everyday environmentalism, transformed into a rebellion of the dispossessed and then tried to organise at both national and transnational level, using assistance from EU institutions and international environmental organisations to leverage national authorities and developers, while at the same time remaining critical of certain EU environmental policies and practices. This study is based on discursive analysis of the content posted to the official Facebook group and website of Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina.*

KEYWORDS: *transnationalisation, Europeanisation, environmental activism, Serbia, small hydropower plants*

APSTRAKT: *U fokusu rada je primer transnacionalizacije (evropeizacije) odozdo lokalne ekološke inicijative „Odbranimo reke Stare planine“, koja je, zajedno sa drugim akterima, izvršila pritisak na donosiocce odluka u zemlji u cilju izmene postojećih zakona i zabrane dalje izgradnje malih hidroelektrana u zaštićenim parkovima prirode u Srbiji. Povezivanjem koncepata ekološkog aktivizma siromašnih/razvlašćenih i transnacionalizacije (evropeizacije) ekoloških protesta,*

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na primeru inicijative protiv izgradnje mini hidroelektrana u Srbiji, istraživale smo situaciju u kojoj se jedan lokalni pokret, nastao na tradiciji nepolitizovanog svakodnevnog ekološkog aktivizma, transformisao u pobunu obespravljenih (siromašnih) građana, a potom pokušao da se organizuje i na nacionalnom i na transnacionalnom nivou, obraćajući se institucijama Evropske unije i povezujući se sa međunarodnim ekološkim organizacijama kako bi zajedno izvršili pritisak na nacionalne i lokalne vlasti i investitore. Istovremeno, u fokusu analize je kritički odnos pripadnika lokalnog pokreta prema pojedinim ekološkim politikama i inicijativama koje su potekle od institucija Evropske unije. Istraživanje se zasniva na diskurzivnoj analizi digitalnih sadržaja (objava i komentara) na Fejsbuk grupi i zvaničnoj internet stranici inicijative „Odbranimo reke Stare planine“.

KLJUČNE REČI: transnacionalizacija, evropeizacija, ekološki aktivizam, Srbija, mini hidroelektrane

Introduction

Environmental issues rarely remain local as they tend to transcend national borders, demanding international collaboration and management. This means that environmental organisations and movements often need to seek out or develop transnational alliances. A growing body of research on 21st century social movements has identified various forms of the transnationalisation of contentious action (Della Porta and Rucht, 2002; Tarrow, 2005; Smith, 2005, 2008; Bostrom et al., 2015; Della Porta, 2020). As Della Porta (2020: 117) notes, progressive social movements (of which environmental movements are a subset) have always been linked to transnational initiatives. Transnational linkages and channels of diffusion of ideas across borders have, however, been prone to changes over time. In a globalizing world, the cross-national and even global spread of ideas has expanded. On the other hand, the success of contentious politics still depends on local opportunity structures, available resources, the cultures of specific movements and also on how well they are able to time their participation in global waves of contention (Della Porta, 2020). Extant research reveals that social movements in developed countries are increasingly expanding their transnational ties, identities and repertoires of action (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Hudson, 2001; Smith, 2008; Bostrom et al., 2015). Opportunities to do the same are less available for social movements operating outside the Global North (Rohrschneider and Dalton, 2002; Bostrom et al., 2015). Additionally, social movements in postsocialist countries show some specificities of their own (Gagyí, 2015a; Gagyí, 2015b), some of which are the subject of this paper. More precisely, we aim to contribute to the debate around transnationalisation (Europeanisation) from below by focusing on the case of a grassroots initiative opposing small hydropower plants in the Stara Planina region of Serbia. Our research is based on discursive analysis of the content (posts and comments) of the Facebook group and official website of Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina (LDRSP).

Theoretical Background

In the late 20th century, researchers noticed a growing transnationalisation of economic, cultural and political flows combined with plummeting national control over these processes. These changes are understood in terms of the emergence of “complex internationalism” (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005), in which national states have lost part of their monopoly and have to cooperate with supra-national authorities and civil society actors. Changes to political opportunity structures had a profound impact on social movements as entities such as “transnational advocacy networks” (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) and “transnational social movement organisations” (Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco, 1997) emerged. Sidney Tarrow (2005) defines transnational activism as a form of contentious politics that reaches beyond the boundaries of the nation state to address supranational bodies while remaining rooted in local contexts. Activists acquired the opportunity to create transnational alliances that could exert pressure on their own governments – a phenomenon also known as the “boomerang effect” (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Moreover, the development of fast and affordable means of communication and transport encouraged new forms of transnational networking (Earl and Kimport, 2008; Earl, 2010; Carthy, 2010; Castells, 2015). Studies show that digital technologies have become increasingly important for processes of the diffusion of ideas, symbols, imaginaries and frames at both the national and international level (Della Porta and Mattoni, 2014; Castells, 2015; Mattoni, 2018).

The transnationalisation of social movements may involve several processes: 1. *diffusion* – meaning the international circulation of ideas, tactics and repertoires of action; 2. *domestication* which refers to the internalisation of international goals, ideas and practices at the national level; 3. *externalisation* – addressing international actors with the intention of influencing national governments; 4. *transnationalisation* in a narrow sense – meaning the transnational coordination of protests and other activities against international organisations and transnational corporations (‘the perceived common global enemy’) (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Tarrow, 2005; Della Porta, 2020). In this paper, we will mostly focus on the processes of domestication and externalisation, but also tackle two other aspects – diffusion and transnationalisation in its narrow sense. The rationale for this particular choice stems from the fact that the struggle to protect the rivers of the Stara Planina region is an example of local activism that managed to scale up to the national level by relying on mechanisms of externalisation and opposing certain aspects of domestication, but is not (part of) a transnational movement. We understand domestication to denote circumstances in which national governments implement policies agreed with or imposed by international organisations, sometimes generating discontent among various groups at the national or local levels. Externalisation, on the other hand, is a process in which the discontentment of various groups or organisations with national policies is transferred to the international arena in order to attract allies and exert pressure on national decision-makers (Della Porta, 2020: 120).

When analysing the transnationalisation of (environmental) movements in a post-socialist context, some of the resulting theoretical limitations merit attention. Particularly the fact that theories of transnationalisation, initially developed on the basis of the Western European and North American experience, have been re-examined in recent literature, pointing to a multidimensionality of transnational spaces and characteristics of transnational movements (Torgerson, 2006; Fagan, 2006; Doherty and Doyle, 2006; Gagyi, 2015a; Jehlička and Jacobsson, 2021). Gagyi (2015a) warns that the forms and patterns of the transnationalisation of movements in Eastern Europe do not necessarily follow the trajectory of social movements from the core countries.

The development of social movements in postsocialist countries and their subsequent transnationalisation is strongly associated with processes of Europeanisation (Fagan and Sircar, 2015; Borzel, 2009; Fagan, 2010; Fagan and Wunsch, 2018; Wunsch, 2018). These processes have made environmental protests across Europe more transnational, both in terms of the domestication of the European environmental *acquis* and the externalisation of environmental concern from the local and national contexts to the level of the Union as a whole (Della Porta and Caiani, 2009; Bostrom et al., 2015: 766). Compared to their Western and Northern counterparts, environmental organisations from postsocialist countries are much less optimistic about their potential to influence decision-making and benefit from transnational collaboration (Bostrom et al., 2015: 773). As noted by Natasha Wunsch (2018), the Brussels arena has only recently become open to professional civic actors from the Balkans. The position of local environmental initiatives is even more complex since they have minimal coalition potential and resources to create alliances either nationally or internationally (Petrović, 2020).

On the other hand, the domestication of the environmental *acquis* (Fagan, 2010; Fagan and Sircar, 2015; Petrović, 2020) has a strong foothold in Serbia and other postsocialist countries. For example, as stated in the National Environmental Approximation Strategy for the Republic of Serbia: “The *acquis communautaire* should be exactly reflected in the regulations of the Republic – any additional requirements or stricter standards will be used only when they are justified in environment and economic terms and when they are not in conflict with EU regulations” (National Environmental Approximation Strategy for the Republic of Serbia, 2011: 9, cf. Petrović, 2020: 126). The *acquis communautaire* consists of an extensive body of legal acts covering a whole range of environmental issues, from water and air quality, to waste management, nature protection, industrial pollution and climate change (Baker, 2015). EU engagement in the region is particularly pronounced around so-called ‘soft security’ issues which, among other things, include matters pertaining to the environment and energy. However, with the domination of ecological modernisation approach, which postulates economic growth as a precondition for environmental and social progress, environmental considerations are subordinated to economic development. Consequently, the EU gives mixed messages about the type of economic development it supports in transition countries (Baker, 2015: 381). Moreover, EU driven economic restructuring and modernisation processes have

contributed to a rise of consumer culture and new sources of pollution (Pavlinek and Pickles, 2004; Baker, 2015: 390–391). Despite these adverse consequences of EU influence on environmental transformation in postsocialist countries, uncritical adoption of the EU environmental standards was supported by both national authorities and professional environmental organisations – and financed mainly from EU funds (Petrović, 2020).

Transnationalisation can also be initiated from below, by local actors trying to develop cross-border collaboration and increase their chances of successfully dealing with urgent environmental issues (Della Porta and Caiani, 2009; Bostrom et al., 2015: 685). Local environmental activism at the semi-periphery or periphery of the world capitalist system can be understood through the optics of environmental justice (Martinez-Alier, 2002; Martinez-Alier, Temper, Del Bene and Scheidel, 2016). As environmental justice scholars have indicated, the distribution of environmental hazards is unequal across the globe, with environmental burdens unfairly borne by the world's poorest countries. While the developed world increasingly disposes of dirty technologies and transitions to renewable energy sources, environmental costs are borne by poor countries or communities to which obsolete technologies are transferred. Athanasiou (1996) warns, therefore, of the need to make a distinction between the environmentalism of the rich and the poor. The global expansion of capital accumulation is accompanied by particular forms of environmental activism initially referred to as environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier, Temper, Del Bene and Scheidel, 2016), but later renamed to environmentalism of the dispossessed (Temper, 2014). The concept of environmentalism of the dispossessed refers to the politicisation of environmentalism that arises when the needs of capitalist accumulation at the global level meet local resistance – opposing not only to material destruction of the environment and economy but also the loss of political sovereignty (Martinez-Alier, Temper, Del Bene and Scheidel, 2016). This type of environmentalism is no longer pertinent only to the poor communities, but to all those who suffer the consequences of various forms of dispossession. In that sense, Torgerson (2006) points to the plurality of the transnationalisation of environmental activism including different forms of activism that share critical views of the green policies emanating from core capitalist countries and blame them for reproducing global inequalities.

It is, however, necessary to consider another specificity here. Countries that once belonged to the socialist bloc are – geopolitically, economically or even in epistemological terms – neither postcolonial countries (the Global South) nor part of the club of developed countries (the Global North). Instead, they belong to the so-called Global East (Muller, 2020) or “semi-peripheries” (Gagyi, 2015a; Gagyi, 2015b; Ančić, Domazet and Župarljčić-Iljić, 2019). Jehlička and Jacobsson (2021) suggest, therefore, that a number of specific characteristics should be kept in mind when analysing environmental activism in postsocialist countries³. The

3 Environmental activism in postsocialist countries is frequently portrayed in the literature as underdeveloped and suboptimal in comparison to Western environmentalism (Chaisty & Whitefield, 2015; Marquart-Pyatt, 2012), ignoring its specificities and unique developmental trajectory.

first of these is the discontinuity between patterns of environmental activism that were present during the socialist period and participatory policy models, imported and promoted from the West and aiming to build up civil society after the fall of socialism. The second is that environmental activism in socialist and postsocialist countries is not necessarily linked to issues of social justice, nor have social and environmental issues been perceived as part of a single corpus of problems. Thirdly, the forms of environmental activism present in postsocialist countries are not necessarily politicised and often rely on everyday practices and lifestyles that include living in harmony with nature, without excessive consumption of resources, etc. If the Western model of environmental activism is based on civic engagement and protest policies, Jehlička and Jacobsson emphasise that the specificity of Eastern European environmentalism is a tradition of non-politicised everyday environmentalism.

Linking the concepts of environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed and the transnationalisation (Europeanisation) of environmental protests through the example of Serbian protests against small hydropower plants, we explore how a local movement grew out of a tradition of non-politicised everyday environmentalism, transformed into a rebellion of the dispossessed and managed to organise at both the national and transnational level, using EU institutions and actors to leverage national authorities and developers, while at the same time remaining critical of certain EU environmental policies and practices.

Contextual Framework

The transition to renewable sources of energy is one of the priorities of the European Commission, formulated within the Green Deal, a strategic document that involves the transformation of EU economies towards climate neutrality⁴. As a candidate country, Serbia is obliged to harmonise its legislation and practices with the EU environmental and climate *acquis*. Among other things, this means greater reliance on renewable energy and reduced dependence on Russian gas (Petrović, 2019). In addition, Serbia has signed several international agreements that commit it to increasing the share of energy it produces from renewable sources (Neubarth, 2018).

One important remark should be made here, however, given Serbia's ambiguous relations with the EU (Kmezic and Bieber, 2017). That is that the process of Serbia's accession to the European Union (which has stagnated for some time without coming to a full halt) is taking place simultaneously with democratic backsliding and the adoption of authoritarian policies. The emergence of hybrid regimes and stabilitocracy has been a hallmark for the entirety of the Western Balkan region (Kmezic and Bieber, 2017). Therefore, although being formally on a path towards EU membership, Serbia is increasingly becoming a non-democratic (hybrid) regime, characterised by widespread media censorship, non-responsiveness to citizen demands (including environmental demands),

4 https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/delivering-european-green-deal_en (accessed on 14 November 2021).

and a generally unfavourable opportunity structure for political participation (Pešić, Birešev and Petrović Trifunović, 2021). One consequence of the restricted opportunities for citizen participation in institutional politics is that street protests are becoming more frequent (Matković and Ivković, 2018; Pešić and Petrović, 2020).

Returning to the environmental aspect of the EU integration process, it should be noted that the strategic documents adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in 2015, small hydropower plants are suggested as a potential source of clean energy⁵ (Popović and Rajić, 2019; Petrović, 2019). Small hydro is often regarded as a desirable form of renewable energy because it does not emit carbon dioxide and has a relatively small environmental footprint (Dutta et al., 2014; Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021). There is, however, growing concern regarding the adverse environmental and social consequences of small hydro. In addition to its detrimental impact on flora and fauna (Crnobrnja-Isailović et al., 2021; Simonović et al., 2021), small hydro has significant social consequences as the local population is stripped of traditional sources of income (Ristić et al., 2018; Zvezdanović Lobanova et al., 2019; Simonović et al., 2021; Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021). In other words, the ecological and social costs of small hydro surpass its potential economic and environmental benefits (Ristić et al., 2018; Zvezdanović Lobanova et al., 2019; Galup, Vejnović and Pehčevski, 2019).

Large-scale construction of small hydro is a relatively new phenomenon in Serbia, although similar plans have existed for several decades (Petrović, 2019). The actual construction of such plants comes as a result of the implementation of European directives on the production of renewable energy (Zvezdanović Lobanova et al., 2019; Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021). Serbia ratified the Energy Community Treaty in 2006, which was accompanied by changes to national legislation and supplemented by financial incentives for the construction of small hydro (Panić et al., 2013). Additionally, in 2013 the Ministry of Energy organised a public tender for the construction of small hydro plants at 317 locations in Serbia (Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021). The construction of small hydro was supported by funds provided by the European Union – i.e. by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (Gallop and Vejnović, 2018). The Energy Community itself financially supported several small hydro construction projects in the region (Sikorova and Gallop, 2015; Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021). Meanwhile, in 2011 Serbia also concluded a bilateral agreement with Italy on cooperation in the field of energy, which included joint exploitation of Serbia's hydropower potential and the export of "green" electricity to Italy (Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021).

The majority of small hydro plants built to date are located in south-western and south-eastern Serbia (Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021), exploiting the fast mountain rivers found there (Ristić et al. 2018). These are parts of the

5 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/ostalo/2015/101/1/r> (accessed on 14 November 2021). These documents envisage the construction of about 850 small hydropower plants. The list of locations is available at: <http://mhe.mre.gov.rs/Katastar%20MHE/> (accessed on 15 November 2021).

country that are economically underdeveloped – i.e. remote rural mountainous areas, inhabited by people whose economic activities mostly depend on natural resources, such as agriculture, livestock, fishing, forestry, and ecological tourism (Mijačić and Paunović, 2011; Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021). With the construction of small hydro plants, they are often left without sufficient water supplies for their own needs and agricultural activities (Ristic et al., 2018). Although it has often been stated that the construction of small hydro plants benefits local communities through job creation⁶, increased tax revenues for local governments and access to cheaper electricity, existing research shows that these remotely controlled plants employ only a small number of people⁷, that the incentives paid by the government are much higher than tax revenues (Miljević, 2019), and that the potential benefits of cheaper electricity are distributed proportionally to the whole country, while the costs are borne by the local population.

When it comes to small hydro, Serbia is not an isolated case in the Western Balkans. As part of the EU accession negotiations, similar demands for lower CO₂ emissions and a transition to renewable sources have been made of other countries in the region. Since most of these countries are rich in mountainous, torrential rivers, the requirements for green energy are mostly met through the construction of small hydro. European institutions and national governments offer incentives for the construction of these plants; however, the problems and consequences are the same as in Serbia. Several international organisations (Save the Blue Heart of Europe, RiverWatch and Bankwatch, WWF) operate in the region, indicating that local communities face similar social and environmental problems stemming from the construction of small hydro.

Small hydro is one of the major causes of environmental conflicts in the Western Balkans (Špirić, 2017). Although environmental problems will have detrimental impacts on the wider social and territorial community in the long run, in the short-term negative impacts are mostly confined to the directly affected areas. This is one of the reasons why these environmental conflicts tend to remain local. Moreover, these are conflicts in which there is a strong imbalance of power between the conflicting parties – resource-rich developers and (corrupt) local authorities, on one side, and a resource-poor rebellious local population, on the other (Špirić, 2017). These conflicts do not always remain local, however. If political circumstances are favourable, they can be politicised at the national level, mobilising activists, civic organisations and political parties. Additionally, given that the construction of hydropower plants is largely motivated by pressures and incentives coming from the outside (domestication), from European institutions (as a part of the European Green Deal), these conflicts can take on a transnational dimension (externalisation). As we shall see, this was the case with protests in the Stara Planina region. Moreover, while

6 <https://www.bizlife.rs/54034-mihajlovic-mini-hidroelektrane-donose-1-000-radnih-mesta/> (accessed on 20 November 2021).

7 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/realna-stetnost-mini-hidroelektrana-o-kojoj-graditeljne-govore/> (accessed on 14 November 2021).

the benefits of switching to small hydro as a renewable source of energy would potentially be visible at the national level or even at the European or global levels, the environmental, economic and social costs are borne by local communities. Hence, environmental hazards are redistributed from the countries of the European (capitalist) centre to the countries of the European semi-periphery, thus intensifying existing social inequalities. The environmental conflicts that emerge as a result of the construction of small hydro can, therefore, easily be situated within the framework of environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier, 2002) or a rebellion by those who are dispossessed and/or lack equal access to environmental and other resources (Avelino and Rotmans, 2009).

Data and Methods

In the following sections of the paper we explore the public discourses formed around the topic of transnationalisation of environmental protest against small hydro on social media (primarily Facebook). The two aspects that we particularly wish to explore are domestication and externalisation, focusing on the public perceptions of the role of the European Union and European environmental organisations in the process of the transnationalisation of the struggle against small hydro in Serbia.

For our analysis we selected the Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina Facebook group, which acts as an open forum for information sharing and discussion among supporters of the initiative, voicing various perspectives that do not necessarily represent the official stance of Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina as an environmental organisation. This is further supplemented by discourse analysis of content from the official LDRSP website.

The rationale for this particular research design stems from the fact that digital activism is an important component of LDRSP's action repertoire. The national and international visibility of the protests and substantial support was gained mainly through social media (Petrović, 2019). Today, the LDRSP Facebook group gathers around 153,000 members and uses the platform to draw attention to other environmental problems, such as the proposed lithium mine in the Jadar valley and extremely high air pollution levels across Serbia.

The corpus of selected Facebook and official website posts, which represent the basic units of analysis, was tackled using critical discourse analysis. The basic assumption of critical discourse analysis is that the language used decidedly shapes the view of reality and is not a neutral means of communication. The language contains the possibility of creating policies, signs and symbols that can change the balance of power, thus influencing institutions and political decision-making. This method was chosen because it enables examination of the relationship between the text and the context in which it was created (Fairclough, 2001). This approach is particularly useful for delving deeper into the structure of the relationships behind the content of environmental messages, as well as the specific social circumstances in which they emerge (Hajer, 1996; Hajer, 2006: 66–67).

The original dataset was created using the search option and a list of keywords (the full list of which is given in the footnote⁸) for posts from July 2017, when the Facebook group was formed, to April 2021, when the Serbian Government adopted the law prohibiting further construction of small hydro in protected natural areas. This keyword search yielded a sample of 190 posts. Duplicative and irrelevant posts were manually removed, resulting in a final sample of 158 unique posts. In order to capture the nuances of discourse formed around the transnationalisation of the struggle against small hydro, we used a qualitative methodology. The coding scheme was developed and applied to the data gathered in a database. The aim of the analysis was to determine which discursive strategies were used to transnationalise or contextualise the controversial construction of small hydro outside a narrowly local or national framework.

On the LDRSP Facebook group, we analysed the posts and comments related to:

- a) The European Union and its institutions, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, European legislation and the EU accession process. The aim here was to identify elements of domestication (and possibly externalisation).
- b) International organizations involved in river protection, such as Save the Blue Heart of Europe (Euronatur), RiverWatch, the Bankwatch Network, the European Water Movement and the WWF. The aim was to identify elements of externalisation.

In addition to analysis of discourses on externalization and domestication, the analysis of related environmental discourses given in the following section is partially based on the classification of environmental discourses made by John Dryzek (Dryzek 2005: 15–16) and John Hannigan (Hannigan, 2014: 75–86). Although in a slightly different manner, both authors make a distinction between Arcadian/pastoral discourses (valuing pristine nature), ecological modernisation and sustainability discourses (suggesting that economic and environmental interests can go hand in hand) and environmental justice approaches stressing social inequalities related to environmental degradation.

Research Findings

Research Background

Before presenting the context of recent struggles by the inhabitants of the Stara Planina region seeking to protect mountain rivers from being piped in the process of building small hydro, it is necessary first to turn our attention to two specifics of the region. The first points to a relatively long tradition of local environmental struggles, while the second to specific circumstances that

8 European Union, European institutions, European policies, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Save the Blue Heart of Europe, Bankwatch, RiverWatch, Euronatur, European Water Movement, and WWF.

may contribute to the transnationalisation of these struggles. Struggles by locals fighting for the preservation of mountain waters are not new in this area, since the villagers have been active for at least thirty years in protecting the Toplodolska river from being channelled into pipes.⁹ Indeed, if we go even further into the past, the first protests by locals took place in the 1970s, calling for the Visočica river to be protected after the creation of Zavojsko, an artificial lake.¹⁰ Another specificity of this region, which points to the prospects of environmental struggles by the local population to undergo transnationalisation, is the proximity of the border with EU member state, Bulgaria. The fact that residents of this area on both sides of the border face the same problems,¹¹ and that their subsistence and everyday life often revolve around cross-border activities, makes them more predisposed to organising joint initiatives and regional activist networks.

Recent protests by local Stara Planina residents began with the construction of the first small hydro plants in an area protected as a Nature Park – i.e. a natural asset of the first category. More specifically, the new Spatial Plan from 2011 envisages the construction of 58 small hydropower plants in the municipal administration of the city of Pirot. Of these, 43 are located in zones of the first degree of protection (Georgievski, 2018; Petrović, 2019). Although this spatial plan was initially accepted, with construction of the first plants underway, protests by the residents of the village of Temska began when they realised that the Toplodolska river would be redirected into concrete pipes (Petrović, 2019). Despite assurance by the local authorities that the construction works would not continue without the residents' consent, small hydro construction also began on the Rakitska and Crnovrška rivers (in municipalities of Babušnica and Knjaževac, respectively). Residents of the municipality of Pirot also organised themselves to defend of the Visočica and Pakleštica rivers (Georgievski, 2018). With the construction of small hydro plants at various locations in Stara Planina underway in 2017, locals began holding joint protests and subsequently formed Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina¹² (Georgievski, 2018).

The protests were at their most intense in the village of Rakita, with almost daily legal and physical struggles by locals seeking to halt the construction works. Conflicts occasionally escalated into physical confrontations with private security personnel employed by the developers, but also with the police. Meanwhile the locals also destroyed infrastructure related to the small hydro plants on several occasions. While in most cases the construction works were themselves unlawful (lacking appropriate building permits) and corrupt (local authorities and other institutions were probably involved), developers have often filed misdemeanour and criminal charges against the protestors, some of whom are still awaiting final verdicts.

9 <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Mestani-Temske-i-drugih-pirotskih-sela-zabrinuti-zbog-moguceg-isusivanja-reka.sr.html> (accessed on 26 February 2022).

10 <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Temstani-otvaranjem-Muzeja-obelezili-visegodisnjuborbu-za-svoje-reke.sr.html> (accessed on 26 February 2022).

11 Stara Planina is a mountainous region in south-eastern Serbia that stretches across the border into Bulgaria.

12 <https://novastaraplanina.com> (accessed on 19 January 2022).

At first, the protests were more or less spontaneous initiatives by a local population whose immediate livelihoods were endangered. However, with the organisation of the Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina initiative and the Association of Local Communities of Stara Planina, these local struggles were unified, gaining public visibility and recognition, as well as much needed support from professional environmental organisations and experts. With mounting support, they were able to put pressure on decision-makers at the local and national levels, but also to connect with international organisations (Petrović, 2019). As a direct consequence of this networking, the first large-scale protest took place in the city of Pirot in 2018, with the participation of representatives from the international environmental organisation WWF (World Wildlife Fund)¹³. Furthermore, the issue of small hydro came to be recognised as a problem of national importance, resulting in a large-scale protest being held in Belgrade in 2019¹⁴.

Along with the movement's growth in terms of visibility and importance, their demands also evolved: from relatively modest ones (to stop the construction of small hydro in protected areas) to a moratorium on small hydro¹⁵ construction across Serbia. The outcome of these protests was a decision by the government to ban construction of small hydro plants in protected areas¹⁶. Even more importantly, the LDRSP initiative became the organisational and ideational backbone of a broader environmental mobilisation in Serbia (initiating protests against air pollution and lithium exploitation in the Jadar Valley), thus providing the impetus for the creation of an environmental movement in Serbia (Petrović, 2020).

Discourse Analysis

The prime focus of the analysis was on the use of (discursive) strategies that followed two paths of transnationalisation (Europeanisation) – domestication and externalisation. Evidence of the existence of two other paths – diffusion and transnationalisation in its narrow sense – were also present, however.

Within the discourses formed around the processes of domestication and externalisation, European institutions are perceived in two opposing ways. Digital activists recognise the EU's institutions, legislation and adopted policies (the European Green Deal) both as “creators” of the problem and also as part of the solution. Furthermore, within the discursive strategies of domestication, in addition to European institutions, foreign banks active in Serbia that offered favourable loans for small hydro construction (primarily the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, but also commercial banks that operate internationally), were also held responsible for the destruction of the local environment.

13 <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/U-nedelju-u-Pirotu-protest-protiv-gradnje-mini-hidroelektrana.sr.html> (accessed on 19 January 2022).

14 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-49748920> (accessed on 19 January 2022).

15 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/na-protestu-u-toplom-dolu-postavljena-tabla-sa-natpisom-trg-slobodnih-reka/> (accessed on 19 January 2022).

16 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/nacelnica-zabrana-izgradnje-mhe-u-zasticenim-podrucjima> (accessed on 19 January 2022).

Discourses formed around the process of domestication thematised the role of European institutions as negative. Discourses on externalisation, however, reveal quite different perceptions. Here EU institutions are recognised as partners that can put pressure on and oversee the work of national authorities. What is more, the externalisation discourses include another set of actors perceived as potential allies in local environmental struggles: international environmental organisations focused on the conservation of mountain rivers and biodiversity (Save the Blue Heart of Europe, RiverWatch, Bankwatch, the European Water Movement, the WWF, etc.), and local activist groups from the region (Bulgaria, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Montenegro, Croatia and Slovenia) engaged in similar initiatives.

Analysis of the Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina Facebook group reveals that transnationalisation features in the posts of both occasional digital activists and the core members of the initiative. Similarly, aspects of transnationalisation (e.g. the benefits of collaboration with the EU) are visible on the initiative's official website¹⁷. Criticism of EU institutions and policies is, however, absent. For instance, it is stated that:

Through their actions, the members of the movement try to influence not only domestic decision-makers, but also relevant international institutions. The response to the letter of appeal sent to the addresses of several international institutions was obtained from the European Commission, which condemns the way the small hydro plants were built. By connecting with the European Commission and the European Energy Community [...] amendments were made to the construction of small hydro plants in the European Parliament. The Government of Serbia is called upon to adopt the necessary measures for the preservation of protected areas. The Energy Community issues a statement emphasising the lack of public participation in decision-making on small hydro and calls into question the issued permits¹⁸.

Discourses on Domestication

The analysis of the content posted in the LDRSP Facebook group, reveals several discourses formed around the topic of domestication of the environmental acquis:

1. *The ecological modernization discourse* – a relatively neutral discourse that refers to examples of good practices from the developed world (i.e. better environmental solutions), where the need for renewable energy is met by alternative sources (solar or wind energy) to reduce water usage. Although within this discursive strategy, European institutions are recognized as generators of the problem (since they do not offer the best

17 <https://novastaraplanina.com> (accessed on 27 January 2022).

18 <https://novastaraplanina.com/evropska-komisija-i-evropska-energetska-zajednica-kontakti-or-sp-sa-medjunarodnim-institucijama/> (accessed on 27 January 2022).

practices in the field to candidate countries), the attitude towards them is relatively neutral. For example:

No one (except common sense) is forcing California to meet renewable electricity quotas. The European Union is forcing Serbia to reach 27% by 2020 (...). In California, small and large hydropower plants are being slowly but surely dismantled and rivers are being restored to their state from 100 years ago. In Serbia, new hydropower plants and dams are being built en masse. (28 February 2019)

2. *The anti-colonial discourse*, in which European environmental policies are perceived as a mechanism of neo-colonial domination used by international centres of power and European institutions in agreement with corrupt local elites in order to extract resources and profits. This discourse often contains elements of anti-globalisation and anti-neoliberal narratives:

Our power-holders, neoliberal servants, from the break-up of Yugoslavia until now, implement their bosses' every order, to the detriment of their own people. (29 November 2017)

Our country is occupied [...] once the lingo was more precise, now the rhetoric has changed – instead of occupier now its “investor”. (8 December 2020)

[...] Reduction of that emission (CO₂) can occur only in the 23rd or 24th century, which indicates a different, more hidden agenda by the globalists, and that is to prevent the use of cheap energy in Third World countries, to prevent their industrialisation, and thus their emancipation from misery and colonialism. (22 December 2018)

3. *The environmental justice discourse*, in which European institutions (albeit indirectly) are recognized as one of the actors contributing to the unequal distribution of environmental risks: *Serbia must not be the last asylum of dirty technologies.* (13 April 2021)
4. *The traditionalist-pastoral discourse* that glorifies traditional life in rural areas in harmony with nature, and contrasts it with the misdeeds of (foreign) investors that result in the destruction of natural habitat:

To deliver our destroyed factories to foreign investors is one thing. To give over our mines to them is another. But to give up our mountain rivers, forests and national parks [...] it should not be allowed [...]. Our grandfathers and fathers bled to defend this beauty from the greedy hands of imperialists, because they knew that money is just stupid paper that is printed overnight, while this beauty has been formed for billions of years. (8 December 2020)

A special set of discourses on domestication refers to European and international banking institutions (the EBRD but also commercial banks that have financed the construction of small hydro in Serbia). Here we note the clear dominance of *anti-neoliberal, anti-globalist and anti-capitalist* narratives, within which banks are perceived either as profit-seeking actors whose activities are

independent of European institutions (or at least not explicitly linked) or as part of a wider network of global actors to which the institutions of the EU belong. For example, *money changes hands while the rivers are dry up* (4 September 2018). While the role of European institutions in the construction of small hydro is perceived mostly as indirect and distant (and not necessarily only negative), the role of the EBRD and commercial banks is seen as direct, immediate and almost exclusively negative, resulting in much more caustic rhetoric. This is evidenced by the strong presence of a *criminalisation discourse*, presenting the banks as partners in criminal networks typical of corrupt structures at the capitalist semi-periphery or periphery. For example, a post from 10 June 2019: *Banks in Serbia, and I believe in the region as well, are stronger than the state. Although I think they work together in a combination of robbery and organised crime*. Furthermore, posts discussing the banks often contain public calls for boycotting banks, signing petitions against them or other forms of actions reminiscent of similar activities carried out by international environmental organisations or movements:

In France when they learned that those banks were financing diamond mining in Africa, so-called blood diamonds, people went to branches with buckets of red paint and dipped their hands and made prints on the walls and withdrew their savings from them. (4 September 2018)

Discourses on Externalisation

As previously mentioned, European institutions, policies and control mechanisms appear not only within the domestication path to transnationalisation but also as an instrument of externalisation. Although European institutions are identified as being among the causes of problems induced by small hydro, they are also seen as part of the solution. The same mechanisms of ecological modernisation that were imposed in the process of EU accession – and which ultimately led to the construction of small hydro – are recognised to be a means that can be used to put pressure on national decision-makers. The discursive strategies circulating within this form of transnationalisation mostly reflect a positive (optimistic) or neutral attitude towards the EU. Unlike discourses in which the EU and its institutions are recognised as part of the problem, which were predominantly represented in the posts and comments of “marginal” activists, discourses in which the EU is presented as part of the solution dominate posts made by the movement’s core activists, professional environmental organisations or NGO activists who collaborate with international initiatives (such as Bankwatch, RiverWatch or Save the Blue Heart of Europe). Here too several discursive strategies have been identified:

1. Discourses that refer to the European (also negative) experience with small hydro:

The European Union has already faced the negative environmental consequences of their construction. First of all, the regime of natural nutrition from the riverbed is disturbed and biodiversity is endangered, as well as the water supply of many settlements in mountainous areas in

Switzerland, France, Italy, Germany, Austria. Simply put, the capacity of spring waters is decreasing, and people do not have enough drinking water. (27 December 2018)

2. Discourses of the misapplication of European directives, in which the burden of responsibility is fully transferred to national decision-makers:

Serbia [...] very uncritically adopted some things from them [EU directives], creating a complete paradox [...]. The problem was created by the adoption of laws in 2008 and 2009 and later changes to regulations, which enabled the construction of small hydro in protected areas. (14 March 2019)

3. Discourses on EU institutions as allies and partners in pressuring and controlling national and local elites and decision-makers through mechanisms available in the EU accession process:

Although the European recommendation is that small hydropower plants should not be built in protected zones due to destruction of the environment, they sprout like mushrooms in Serbia without any economic justification and benefit for citizens [...]. The European Union sent a clear message that small hydropower plants should not be built in protected natural areas. However, the authorities in Serbia have neither reconsidered the existing plan to build as many as 871 across Serbia, nor have they respected the words of experts, protests and practices in Europe. (21 September 2018)

4. Discourses on damage control that emphasise that the European institutions have to some extent participated in the creation of the problem, but also recognise the change in European policy:

At one time, there was a European incentive for producers of renewable energy but Europe is slowly giving up and finding some other models. [...] Last year, the European Commission recommended to our country to abolish feed-in tariffs. (19 January 2020)

The EU's position now is that small hydropower plants do more harm than good. In its Resolution, the European Parliament called on the Serbian Government to adopt all necessary measures for the preservation of protected areas [...]. (20 June 2019)

In addition to European institutions, regional and European organisations working on the protection of mountain rivers and natural habitats (RiverWatch, Bankwatch, Save the Blue Heart of Europe, EuroNatur, the WWF, Greenpeace and the European Water Movement) are recognised as key partners. This also extends to local initiatives from neighbouring countries that have faced the same or similar problems. While international and regional organisations are perceived as transnational actors voicing problems through various forms of civic activism and advocacy, local grassroots organisations and neighbouring initiatives are seen as actors whose experiences can provide important lessons and with whom networking is possible. Due to the geographic proximity of EU member state, Bulgaria, a number of those initiatives focus on networking with local Bulgarian

organisations. In other words, the analysed digital content contained direct diffusion of ideas and possible networking with similar initiatives, which were identified as further paths for transnationalisation. The following arguments were mentioned in the analysed digital contents as being in favour of horizontal networking:

1. References to the common past: *Let's begin by preserving what unites us! Let's preserve the nature of the Balkans. Croats and Albanians, Slovenes, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Bosnians, Serbs ...* (29 October 2021);
2. Understanding common problems: [...] *and the destruction brought by small hydro to Bulgarian rivers is funded by European money. I guess some lessons need to be learned* (4 September 2018);
3. Pointing out the potential of joint action: *This Saturday in Sarajevo we will gather with the message: We won't give them a drop of water! We expect over 20 movements, organisations and prominent activists from across the region (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Kosovo and Serbia) to agree on a joint plan of action to protect rivers – only in solidarity and unity!* (1 July 2021).

Potentials for Diffusion and Transnationalisation in its Narrow Sense?

Within the analysed content a substantial number of the posts were originally created by international environmental organisations and shared through the Facebook group by local activists. The content produced by these organisations is mostly critical of the construction of small hydro. It usually takes the form of expert analysis, presented in an accessible way or in the form of a direct call to action (addressed either to European institutions and business entities or to national and local decision-makers or developers). This content was mostly shared by local or foreign NGO activists who are directly or indirectly connected with international organisations and, to a lesser extent, by the movement's core activists or other marginal activists. Comments responding to these posts also represent a pool from within which the whole range of previously mentioned discourses of transnationalisation are generated. The content of the comments is mostly determined by the tone of the original posts. Although in some instances, these posts, especially those critical of European institutions, offer a platform in which (mostly marginal) activists post extremely harsh comments and direct negative discourses toward the EU that are not necessarily part of the content of the original posts. Despite these occasional outbursts of extreme dissatisfaction, accompanied by a vocabulary reflecting a sharpening and radicalisation of discourse, it seems that a significant part of the in-group discussion on transnationalisation was driven by the narratives propagated by international environmental organisations (whether this was critical, neutral or slightly positive in tone depended on which actions by European institutions were being discussed). Moreover, striking quantity of the digital content produced by international organisations and shared in the Facebook group

indicates the presence of processes of diffusion (of ideas, repertoires of action and tactics developed by activists in the international arena), on the one hand, and transnationalisation in its narrow sense, on the other – where international organisations act as coordinators of joint initiatives (mostly directed towards European institutions and business entities and primarily mainly in the form of petitions or letters of protest). While the paths of externalisation and domestication are mostly initiated by local actors, it seems that diffusion and transnationalisation in its narrower sense are instituted by actors close to international organisations.

Conclusions

In this paper, we focused on Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina, a local environmental initiative that managed to scale-up and transnationalise (Europeanise) from below and, in so doing, to generate sufficient pressure on national power-holders to change existing legislation and ban further construction of small hydropower plants in protected natural areas. We deem this case to be important as it teaches us several things about Europeanisation (transnationalisation) processes in the postsocialist context.

First, the analysis of the discourses used by LPRSP activists and supporters points to the existence of transnationalisation (Europeanisation) that has developed along all four channels: domestication, externalisation, diffusion and transnationalisation in the narrow sense. While the process of domestication can be mainly attributed to the external pressure to comply with the environmental *acquis*, externalisation (Europeanisation from below) occurs as a consequence of the exteriorisation of local discontent and seeking allies in the international arena to leverage national authorities. In addition, the establishment of linkages with international environmental organisations and similar regional initiatives (including those operating in neighbouring EU member states such as Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovenia) has led to a diffusion and exchange of ideas and repertoires of actions. This ultimately resulted in joint actions at the local and national level but also at the transnational (primarily European) level.

Second, this study shows that European environmental policies are no longer taken for granted by environmental activists, as was the case in the first stages of Europeanisation when the environmental *acquis* was unselectively adopted (domesticated) and supported both by governments and professional environmental organisations financed from European funds (Petrović, 2020). We also noted a variety of environmental discourses employed by activists, which suggests a shift from the ecological modernisation discourse that has been dominant since 2000. Such changes indicate the emergence of an indigenous environmental movement that transcends both the limitations of donor-dependent professional activism (characteristic of the first phase of postsocialist transformation) and the apolitical environmentalism inherited from the socialist period, to now include the perspective of environmental justice.

Third, Serbia's semi-peripheral geopolitical position and the geographical proximity to the EU create a specific context for the development of environmental

movements. The tacit assumption of EU policy stemming from its “soft security” approach is that the environment should be protected in neighbouring countries only to the extent that negative environmental consequences do not harm EU citizens. Environmental activism is characterised, therefore, by the idea that Serbia should resist becoming an “eco-colony” of the EU, which is supposed to regulate its emissions of pollutants only so that they do not hurt the inhabitants of the European Union, regardless of the danger for the local population and ecosystems. Furthermore, voices calling for Serbia to avoid becoming either a source of natural resources for the EU’s green transition (using its hydropower potentials, lithium mining, etc.) or a place where polluting industries and waste would be transferred from the EU, are steadily becoming louder.

Finally, this study has shown that in order to protect national and/or local environmental interests, activists must skilfully combine criticism of European practices and policies with boomerang strategies that put pressure on national decision-makers with the assistance of EU institutions. In this context, the EU can be thought of as Serbia’s “frenemy”, possessing the qualities both of a friend and an enemy. Ultimately this is a good reflection of the broader political and economic relations between Serbia and the EU. We have thus identified the potential for further transnationalisation from below but mainly in the form of building stronger relationships with initiatives from the Western Balkans that also face similar difficulties, as well as creating bonds with the environmental justice movements worldwide. One should remain aware that while local actors successfully employ some transnationalisation strategies, the main incentives for transnationalisation still primarily come from outside – that is, from European institutions and international environmental organisations.

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