

# Potentials and Obstacles for the Transnationalisation of Recent Environmental Struggles in Serbia<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** Considering the growing tendency of contemporary environmental movements from the Global North to internationalise their struggles, in this paper we try to explore the potentials and obstacles of recent environmental initiatives in Serbia - the protests against small hydropower plants and struggles against the exploitation of lithium - to scale-up from the local to national and transnational level. Focusing on the discursive framing of these initiatives based on the analysis of the digital content created and shared by environmental organisations and activists on social media, we investigate to what extent eco-nationalism represents an incentive or a barrier for the creation of transnational alliances. We also explore the willingness of this movement's advocates to participate in organised collective actions addressing their grievances to international institutions, and especially to the European Union. We interpret the emergence of eco-nationalism as related to the environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed, which arises as a reaction to the commodification of natural resources, advancing neoliberal policies and neoextractivism on the (semi-)periphery of the world capitalist system.

*Key words:* environmental struggles, transnationalisation, eco-nationalism, environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed, Serbia.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to compare two recent grassroots environmental initiatives in Serbia - the movement against the construction of small hydro power plants (SHPP) and the initiatives against lithium exploitation in the Jadar River basin, and their potentials to advance collective action at the transnational level. In both cases, environmental discontents started as local initiatives while later developed into environmental movement of a broader, national importance. However, these initiatives differed in several aspects significant for the transnationalisation of the problems they addressed. Firstly, the construction of SHPPs represented a regional problem that also affected other countries of the Western Balkans (WB) besides Serbia, while lithium exploitation was an environmental issue localised to Serbia. Consequently, the opportunities for regional cooperation and creation of strategic alliances between environmental organisations and initiatives were greater for protestors against SHPPs, which were supported by international civic organisations (specialised in the protection of mountain rivers) operating in the WB region and other areas. In contrast to that, protestors against lithium exploitation mainly had to rest on the experiences of similar movements from the (mostly peripheral) countries dealing with multinational mining companies and to make new transnational ties and alliances rather than to rely solely on the transnational networks already established in the struggles for the protection of rivers. Besides that, these initiatives differed in the perception of possible allies in the transnationalisation of the protest, in particular of the EU institutions and environmental organisations operating in or supported by developed/EU countries. Finally, although both initiatives exemplified grassroots movements of the dispossessed against foreign or foreign-supported investments in “green washed” projects, they differed regarding the discursive prevalence of eco-nationalism.

The paper is organised in the following manner. In the first part we define theoretical concepts relevant for the analysis of potentials and obstacles to the transnationalisation of environmental initiatives in Serbia, mainly focusing on literature and concepts coming from political sciences and sociology. In the following section, we reflect upon the context in which the environmental movement evolved in Serbia, while in the central segment the analysis of two major environmental initiatives, protests against the construction of SHPPs and lithium mining, and their potentials for transnationalisation, is developed. A significant part of the insights in this section relies on the discursive analyses carried out within the project *Transnational Political Contention in Europe*, based on exploration of digital contents of several environmental organisations engaged in the two initiatives (Pešić and Vukelić, 2022; Vukelić and Pešić, 2022). In the concluding part, we summarise the main obstacles to the transnationalisation of examined environmental movements in Serbia.

## **2. Theoretical background: transnational activism from the (semi-) peripheral perspective**

From the late 1960s and early 1970s social movements started to build cross-border alliances and coordinate their actions at the international level, targeting not only national but also international institutions due to the gradual changing of geopolitical and economic structuring. The expanding capital accumulation at the global level, neoliberal policies advancement and reduced capacities of individual states to control multinational capital, caused the shifting of political and economic power from individual nation states to different global entities. This has resulted in the “complex internationalism” – a cooperation of national with supra-national authorities and civil society actors (della Porta and Tarrow, 2005; della Porta, 2020). Although the locus of control has been transferred from the state to international bodies, the local level retained its significance as a key arena of continuous intersection between all forms of regulation: markets, corporate hierarchies, networks, business associations, state institutions and local communities (Jessop, 2011). The social movements thus faced the necessity to develop a competence of “jumping the scales” (Smith, 2003), which implies openness, communication, networking and negotiation skills necessary for acting at different levels. In that sense, transnational activism is defined 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 (Tarrow, 2005).

Having in mind a complex interplay between local, national and international contexts in which contemporary social movements operate, transnational activism aims at the connecting of different local initiatives around the world by addressing similar problems and their (global) causes. The local/national context might stimulate or impede the transnationalisation of social movements because the success of contentious politics still depends on local opportunity structures, available resources, cultures of specific movements, etc. (della Porta, 2020). In return, through transnational alliances activists may exert pressure on their national governments, which is a phenomenon known as the “boomerang effect” (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

In the case of environmental movements, the local-global nexus and connections across issues and actors indicate a number of specificities related to unequal distribution of environmental risks that additionally influence the whole set of possibilities of local movements to scale up on a national, regional and global level (Torgerson, 2006). In that sense, the distinction between the environmentalism of the rich and the poor (Athanasidou, 1996) is relevant for understanding the peculiarities of transnationalisation of the environmental initiatives coming from the centre and the (semi-)periphery of the capitalist system. Environmental challenges faced by the Global North and South are not the same. While the developed world increasingly disposes dirty technologies and strives to make a transition towards renewable energy sources, the environmental costs of such transition are mainly borne by poor countries or com-

munities to which obsolete technologies are transferred. Consequently, in the Global North, the transnationalisation of environmental justice movement grew from the struggles against unequal distribution of environmental risks within different national contexts, while in the Global South, it emerged as a struggle against unequal distribution of environmental risks across the globe (Martinez-Alier, 2002; 2016). With the increasing demands for energy, industrial minerals and metals, agri-food products and other natural resources on the world scale, the 'neoextractivism' as a recent phase of capitalist development has emerged (Veltmeyer and Petras, 2014). Therefore, many governments of less developed countries have turned towards development strategies based on massive inflows of 'resource-seeking' capital in the form of FDI aimed towards the extraction of natural resources and their transfer to the centre of the capitalist system. This led to the escalating practices of land grabbing, granting concessions to explorations and extracting of sub-soil resources (oil and gas, minerals and metals), privatisation/enclosure of the means of production and access to natural resources such as water, and other mechanisms of 'accumulation by dispossession'<sup>2</sup> (Spronk and Webber, 2007; Harvey, 2003). The concepts of environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier, 2002; 2016) and environmentalism of the dispossessed (Temper, 2014) were developed to indicate a specific kind of environmentalism that arises from local resistance to such intrusions of FDIs and multinational corporations, and to the neo-liberal policy agenda of national governments. In a broader sense, these movements indicate a form of discontent with the way in which the world capitalist system and global division of labour are structured and how environmental risks are distributed between the centre and periphery, North and South.

The environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed has the potential to become transnationalised by connecting different local initiatives around the world with similar environmental problems (and their causes) or by creating global networks and alliances that operate not only locally, but also globally in order to raise the conflict issues to a global level (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016). In this sense, building alliances and networks with organisations operating in the Global North might be of particular importance for providing resources and legitimisation of environmental activism in less developed countries (Haynes, 1999). However, the merging of pleas for environmental justice with anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism among environmental organisations from less developed countries might cause less optimism regarding the transnationalisation or even refusal of cooperation with organisations from the Global North, particularly with those highly professionalised in fundraising and adherent to ecological mod-

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<sup>2</sup> According to Veltmeyer (2018), indebted governments might be extremely vulnerable when they face bankruptcy and demands of international financial institutions to accept political economy of dispossession.

ernisation<sup>3</sup>. Besides that, transnational alliances and networks often cause financial dependence that leads to the structuring of environmental civic sector according to expectations of funders coming from developed countries, which generates additional tensions between organisations operating in the Global North and in less developed countries (Doherty and Doyle, 2006; Fagan, 2006; Borzel and Buzogany, 2010).

The resistance against the extractive capitalism may take the form of ecological or green nationalism. By linking group (national) identity and environmental issues, eco-nationalism aims to accentuate specific social, economic, or political injustice imposed to a certain local/national community through projects with destructive ecological impacts (Dawson, 2000), which often relates to potential threats to political sovereignty, territorial and human rights. Over the past decades, the rise of eco-nationalism coincided with a boost of fierce ecological imperialism with the galloping ecological crisis and decreasing supplies of fossil fuels, metals, minerals, land or fresh water (Frame, 2021; Marguiles, 2021). However, nationalist framing of such initiatives may sometimes represent an obstacle for coordinated actions in the international arena (Marguiles, 2021).

The concept of environmentalism of the poor, initially related to the societies of Latin America, Africa and South-East Asia (Martinez-Alier, 2002), could be applied to contemporary environmental movements around the world that emerge as a reaction to ecological imperialism, including environmental campaigns in Eastern Europe or those initiated by peripheral communities in Western Europe (Dawson, 2000). In recent decades, most of the countries that once belonged to the socialist bloc in Europe, usually taken as “semi-peripheries” (Domazet and Marinović Jerolimov, 2014; Gagyí, 2015; Ančić, et al., 2019), have been developing within the world capitalist system in relation to the processes of Europeanisation, i.e. through diffusion and adoption of the European Union (the EU) principles and rules. In the domain of civil sector development, the EU provided a political opportunity structure that changed the legal settings (law), financial resources (funds) and cognitive capacities (expertise) available to civil society organisations (CSOs). However, the process of domestication is not necessarily harmonious or complete, usually being hampered by administrative traditions and a political culture antagonistic to the inclusion of non-state actors in the creation of public policies. In such circumstances, direct participation in transnational networks and submission of complaints to the European Commission or other EU institutions have become important mechanisms of empowering the non-state actors (Borzel, 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> Both on discursive and practical level, ecological modernisation suggests that economic and environmental interests can go hand in hand, while offering alternative (technological) solutions in a rather socially neutral manner (Dryzek, 2005).

Della Porta (2005, 2020) and Tarrow (2005) analytically distinguished the processes through which transnationalisation of social movements occurs. These are: international circulation of ideas, tactics and repertoires of civic actions (diffusion); domestication of international goals, ideas and practices at the national level; addressing of international actors with the intention of influencing national governments (externalisation); and transnational coordination of protests and other activities against international organisations and transnational corporations (transnationalisation in the narrow sense). It is evident that, in the case of post-socialist countries, these processes are strongly associated with the broader processes of Europeanisation (Borzal, 2009; Fagan and Sircar, 2015; Fagan and Wunsch, 2019). Indeed, environmental protests across post-socialist countries have become 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 EU (della Porta and Caiani, 2009; Bostrom et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, certain peculiarities have been noticed regarding the development of environmental activism and its subsequent transnationalisation in these countries. Firstly, the new professional environmental organisations are significantly shaped by the domestication of European environmental policies, and directed by donor agendas and project-related requirements. Therefore, the repertoire of their action is narrowed to activities based on expert knowledge, such as lobbying and advocacy, while their interests are primarily directed to the projects for which the donors are willing to allocate financial resources, not necessarily linked to local environmental initiatives (Vukelić et al., 2021). Consequently, the lack of cooperation between the professional and grassroots organisations impedes the possibilities of transnationalisation of environmental initiatives. On one hand, although grassroots initiatives have a mobilisation potential since they are organised around real problems, they rest deficient in coalition potential and resources to create alliances either nationally or internationally. On the other hand, while professional CSOs have resources and capacities that facilitate transnationalisation (access to funds, access to transnational advocacy networks, cultural capital, etc.), they are not always able to recognise local problems that grassroots initiatives deal with (Cisar, 2010; Buzogany, 2013; Fagan and Sircar, 2015).

Secondly, a kind of an ambiguity of the EU aims and messages regarding the environment might be observed in transition countries due to a domination of the ecological modernisation approach, which postulates economic growth as a precondition for environmental and social progress (Baker, 2015). Consequently, the EU-supported projects related to transition towards renewable energy sources might stimulate eco- or green nationalism, particularly among the grassroots initiatives against FDIs in projects based on overexploitation of natural resources. That might limit the incentives for transnationalisation either through cooperation with organisations coming from the EU and other Western countries or by submission of complaints to the EU institutions. Accordingly, environmental organisations from post-socialist countries are

much less optimistic about benefits from transnational collaborations, in comparison to the organisations from developed countries (Bostrom et al., 2015). However, as long as activists face the closed opportunity structure at the national level it certainly stimulates them to use transnational alliances and institutions to exert pressure on their national governments.

Taking Serbia as post-socialist and semi-peripheral country included into the process of Europeanisation, in the following section we explore two grassroots environmental movements that managed to scale-up at the national level and to some extent transnationalise their demands and exert pressure on national authorities. We analyse a complex interplay between the local, national and international context of the chosen movements with the aim to compare both the potentials and obstacles to their transnationalisation, as well as forms of the transnationalisation they employed.

### **3. Transnationalisation of environmental activism in Serbia**

#### ***3.1. The rise of environmental activism in Serbia after 2000***

Bearing in mind that the transnationalisation of social movements in Serbia is associated with the processes of Europeanisation, our analytical focus is put on the development of environmental initiatives after the year 2000.<sup>4</sup> After the blocked post-socialist transformation during the 1990s, economic recovery has been accompanied by the influx of FDIs, consolidation of democratic political institutions, introduction of the new forms of governance and, finally, by entering the processes of the EU accession (Börzel, 2009; Fagan, 2010). Each of these factors paved the road to the advent of environmental movement.

At first, environmental movement developed mainly through the incentives coming from the EU development agencies towards building professional CSOs, while grassroots initiatives have been largely overlooked. Due to the selective support of foreign donors, professional CSOs were perceived as “donor captured” and “uprooted” from the real problems (Petrović, 2020; Vukelić et al., 2021; Vuković, 2022). On the other hand, despite the domestication of the European perspective through the harmonisation of environmental legislation with the *acquis* and implementation of European green policies (Baker, 2015; Börzel and Buzogany, 2019; Buzogany, 2022), the lack of political will and the ossified bureaucratic structures within the state administration resisted the institutionalisation of the participatory role of CSOs in creating environmental policies (Wunsch, 2018; Fagan and Wunsch, 2019).

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<sup>4</sup> The evolution of environmental activism in Yugoslavia and Serbia during the socialist period and the first decade of the post-socialist transformation is well covered by the literature (Oštrić, 1992; Nadić, 2007; Lay and Puđak, 2014; Petrović, 2020; Vukelić et al., 2021).

The turning point in the evolution of environmental movement and scaling-up of grassroots initiatives at national level happened, to a large part, precisely as a result of unfavourable political opportunity structures. In particular, due to the growing authoritarian tendencies over the past decade, coupled with unresponsiveness of different institutions to citizen's demands (Pešić et al., 2021) and democratic backsliding (Pavlović, 2020; Fiket and Pudar, 2021). In addition to chiefly middle-class urban initiatives against investor-led urbanism (Petrović and Backović, 2019) and occasional protests of workers, students and various groups affected by austerity measures after the Great Recession, a considerable boost to grassroots activism came as a result of putting claims over environmental issues.

Despite the fact that some of those protests managed to scale-up at the national level, often supported by different political parties and movements, they were mostly initiated by the local population affected by the threats from ecological degradation of their habitats. Concerning that, recent environmental grassroots activism in Serbia, at least a part of it<sup>5</sup>, evolved as environmentalism of the resource-poor, marginalised communities whose immediate environment, daily livelihoods and human dignity were threatened by the commercial projects of land/water grabbing and neoliberalisation of nature (Pešić and Vukelić, 2022).

Finally, some of the projects that appeared as the immediate cause for organised action of dissatisfied local residents paradoxically stemmed from the very efforts to implement the European green policies. The European context therefore appears in a dual form, as an incentive towards the development of ecological civil society and green public sphere, but also as an indirect or direct cause of environmental conflicts that come along the EU conditionality in adopting green policies and the tightening of the neoliberalisation of natural resources (Piletić, 2023). Furthermore, environmental struggles in Serbia reveal the contradictory nature of the European green transition, where projected climate neutrality potentially leaves irreparable consequences on the environment and communities at the European periphery (Antonowicz-Cyglicka, 2021), but also adverse social effects within the EU itself (Galgóczy, 2022).

In the following paragraphs, we analyse the protests against the construction of SHPPs and initiatives against lithium mining in the Jadar River basin. We are focused on the differences between these local initiatives in a readiness to externalise demands towards the EU institutions and to cooperate with professional environmental organisations that operate at the international or national level as a precondition for successful transnationalisation of their activities.

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<sup>5</sup> Another stream of grassroots environmental activism comes from the urban middle classes who protest more and more strongly against the declining quality of life due to water and air pollution or industrial hazards in their home cities.



### **3.2. Initiatives against SHPPs – A case of a relatively successful transnationalisation**

The protests against SHPPs began in 2017, following the first constructions of low-capacity hydros in southwest and southeast Serbia. The mass construction of SHPPs in Serbia came as a result of the externally imposed commitments of the EU candidate countries for reaching the targeted overall share of renewable energy (set by the Renewable Energy Directive 2009/28/EC)<sup>6</sup>. Due to reduced funds to attain targeted goals through large state-led projects, investments in the construction of small hydros were promoted all over the Western Balkans (WB) region (Piletić, 2023). The construction of SHPPs has been supported by the funds provided by the EU and its financial institutions, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the European Investment Bank (EIB) and a number of commercial banks operating in the region (Gallop and Vejnović, 2018). However, while the EU member states have relatively strict standards on permitted environmental effects of such developments, which are additionally strengthened by the prerogatives of the European Commission and the European Court of Justice to intervene when national legal system fails to uphold the EU laws, the control of the implementation of these projects in the candidate countries is not only loose, but, according to Piletić (2023), they are encouraged to meet the targeted goals on renewable energy almost at any cost.

Given that the state, through feed-in tariffs, subsidised energy production obtained from SHPPs (granting permissions without previously completed studies on the assessment of their impact on the environment; see in: Zvezdanović Lobanova et al., 2019), and commercial banks distributed generous loans, it soon became clear that these were lucrative businesses. They were attracting numerous investors, while ending up in the commodification and privatisation of water. According to official data, by the end of 2020, 160 facilities received the status of privileged electricity producers, most of them being located at southeast and southwest parts of the country (Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021), while the overall number of potential instalments counts up to 869 of such facilities (Panić et al., 2013). Most of the SHPPs were built in mountainous, rural areas, economically underdeveloped in comparison to the rest of the country, and some even in protected Nature parks (Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021). The consequences of the piping of the rivers, especially if the investors did not adhere to the standards, were devastating. They threatened both the natural environment (Ristić et al., 2018; Crnobrnja-Isailović et al., 2021; Simonović et al., 2021), and the local communities whose daily livelihoods depended on the access to fresh water, as the population is mainly engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry or agricultural

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<sup>6</sup> Serbia has signed and ratified a number of document and treaties with the EU over the past decades in order to implement the Directive (more on that see in: Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021; Piletić, 2023).

tourism. Therefore, the environmental and social costs of SHPPs exceeded the potential economic gains (Ristić et al., 2018), deepening already existing social inequalities.

Conflicts surrounding the construction of SHPPs were initially of local character, involving activists who opposed the local authorities that issued permits for the construction of SHPPs, and private investors. At the outset, these were series of more or less loosely connected or almost completely unrelated initiatives scattered throughout different locations in Serbia, which acted independently from professional CSOs (Petrović, 2019). Shortly afterwards, some of those grassroots groups began to coordinate their actions, forming local networks and associations, chiefly based on the territorial principle. Among them, the “Association of Local Communities of Stara Planina” and “Let’s Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina” initiatives received the greatest media attention and public visibility<sup>7</sup>. Horizontal collaboration between grassroots groups was followed by the establishment of vertical networks with professional CSOs, experts coming from the academia (see: Mišić and Obydenkova, 2021), similar initiatives from the neighbouring countries and with international organisations specialised in the protection of rivers (for example, “Riverwatch” and its campaign “Save the Blue Heart of Europe”, “CEE Bankwatch”, “European Water Movement”, “Earth Law Center”, “Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature”, etc.).

Finally, by taking advantage of social networks in mobilising citizens, local environmental grievances scaled-up at the national level. In 2019 and 2020 they escalated in mass protests against the construction of small hydros in Belgrade, organised jointly by a number of professional CSOs and grassroots initiatives (Piletić, 2023). Parallel to the expansion of environmental politics at national level, the process of transnationalisation of local grievances also took place, revealing twofold perception of the Europeanisation of environmentalism in Serbia. On the one hand, the EU and its agencies were perceived as allies in the process of exerting pressure on decision-makers at the national level, which ultimately resulted in the ban on the construction of SHPP in protected Nature parks in 2021. On the other hand, a significant number of actions, especially those initiated by international CSOs, were directed towards the institutions of the Union, and especially towards institutions that financed controversial projects, considering them at least partially responsible for the detrimental environmental and social consequences of the piping of torrential rivers (Đorđević, 2020; Pešić and Vukelić, 2022).

The analysis of discursive strategies that were used in the framing of discontents over SHPPs within the posts and comments posted by the activists and supporters in the

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<sup>7</sup> Organised resistances of local residents also came from the Kopaonik mountain, Golija-Studenica, Priboj-Lim, Užice-Bajina Bašta, Vlasina, Upper Podrinje and other regions

Facebook group “Let’s Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina” (LDRSP),<sup>8</sup> reveal the presence of both perspectives in relation to the perception of the EU and point to a wavering potential for transnationalisation. Firstly, the achieved benefits of addressing the EU institutions and cooperating with them were clearly highlighted. Since the mechanisms of ecological modernisation, adopted in the process of the EU accession, actually led to the construction of small hydros, the externalisation strategy towards the EU institutions was evidently recognised as a mean of putting pressure on national decision-makers. The main complains referred to the misapplication of the European regulations regarding the preservation of protected areas from the consequences of the piping of the rivers and disregard of community participation in deciding about the construction of SHPPs:

*The European Union sent a clear message that small hydropower plants should not be built in protected parks of Nature. However, the authorities in Serbia have neither reconsidered the existing plan to build as many as 871 across Serbia, nor have they respected the opinions of experts, [...] and practices in Europe.*

*In its Resolution, the European Parliament called on the Serbian Government to adopt all necessary measures for the preservation of protected areas [...].*

The second perspective is related to the discourse of environmental justice and to the expression of somewhat critical views over the EU. At the same time, by raising concerns over unequal distribution of environmental risks, it is typical for environmental initiatives at the periphery (environmentalism of the poor):

*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.*

*At one time, there was a European incentive for producers of renewable energy but Europe is slowly giving up and finding some other models. [...].*

More radical posts and comments, in line with the environmentalism of the poor perspective, were predominantly created by occasional digital activists through their perception of European financial institutions (EBRD or EIB) and other commercial banks that have financed the construction of small hydros in Serbia. Namely, the role of these actors was perceived through the lenses of *anti-neoliberal and anti-globalisation* narratives, which emphasise neo-colonial strategies aimed to extract natural resources and profit from the peripheral countries in cooperation with their corrupt

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1925328764350247> (accessed 11/01/2022).

elites. These contents also accentuated diminishing political sovereignty in deciding on potential environmental harms and were framed in terms of discrimination against local population:

*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.*

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

Besides the addressing to the EU institutions, the externalisation of local grievances took place through several directions. On one hand, local activist groups, with assistance provided by academics or professional CSOs as mediators, internationalised the issue of piping of the rivers through transnational advocacy networks and by engaging in joint actions with similar initiatives from the WB region. On the other hand, transnational CSOs also undertook a whole series of actions (writing petitions and protest letters) towards different EU agencies, in addition to mobilising public opinion in member countries (by calling for boycott of the banks that financed SHPPs). They thus provided public support to local protests and launched international campaigns (“Save the Blue Heart of Europe” being one of the most visible). At the same time, the diffusion of ideas between international and local activists took place. Of particular importance were publications and expert analyses, commissioned by transnational CSOs, on the harmful effects of piping of the rivers on nature and communities. These analyses also pointed to the corrupt practices of local authorities granting permits to investors, and on the lack of control over compliance with standards during the construction of SHPPs (Pešić and Vukelić, 2022; see also: Mišić and Obydenkova 2021). In this way, apart from pointing to the negative environmental and social consequences of SHPPs, the transnationalisation signalled the lack of accountability and transparency in environmental governance, as well as authoritarian practices of neoliberalisation of natural resources (Piletić, 2023), which certainly contributed to the reaction of the EU agencies in exerting pressure on national authorities.

Diffusion and domestication of international goals, tactics and repertoires of actions were also quite visibly in digital contents from the LDRSP Facebook group and related to the strategy of establishing relations with similar grassroots initiatives from the region and international organisations working on the protection of rivers and natural habitats. Significant proportion of the posts on the group thus represent calls for action issued by transnational CSOs or shared links towards publications on SHPPs produced by these organisations and their experts. While the transnational actors were perceived as knowledgeable source in voicing problems through various forms of civic activism and advocacy, networking with local grassroots organisations and initiatives from neighbouring countries was seen as a source of valuable experiences. Besides

that, the importance of horizontal networking among the initiatives from the Balkan region was particularly emphasised:

*[...] and the destruction brought by a small hydro to Bulgarian rivers is funded by European money. I guess some lessons need to be learned.*

*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!*

Despite occasional eruptions of dissatisfaction and radicalisation of criticism of international actors, it might be concluded that the discussion on SHPPs was driven by the narratives propagated by transnational environmental organisations as epistemological actors important in diffusion of ideas, repertoires of action and tactics developed in the international arena. In that sense, different forms of transnationalisation were mostly initiated by local actors close to international organisations, which helped them to overcome possible obstacles stemming from eco-nationalism, to which occasional activists were more or less inclined.

### **3.3. The initiatives against lithium exploitation – A case of limited transnationalisation**

The protests against the announced exploitation of lithium carbonate in the Jadar River valley in Western Serbia began timidly in 2019, and escalated in 2021 and early 2022. The geological explorations of lithium in Western Serbia began already in the late 1990s. Since 2004, when the company Rio Sava Exploration, a subsidiary of the multinational company Rio Tinto, officially announced that it had found a relatively rich deposit of this ore in the basin of the Jadar River,<sup>9</sup> the Law on Minerals and Geological Research has been amended several times. This indicated the willingness of various Serbian governments to provide assistance to the lithium mining.<sup>10</sup> The increased demands for lithium due to its usage for electric batteries has recently accelerated the process of approving the beginning of ore exploitation by Rio Tinto. The Government of Serbia (led by the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić) declared this project to be of strategic importance for the development of Serbia. Through a series of agreements with the company and the amendments to other laws and local regulations (related to conversion of agricultural land and expropriation of the plots from the local residents), the ground for the beginning of the project was prepared (Dragojlo, 2021).

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<sup>9</sup> <https://riotintoserbia.com/projekat-jadar/> (accessed 06/12/2022).

<sup>10</sup> The chronology of the project “Jadar” in Serbia is available here: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rio-tinto-jadarit-litijum/31665241.html> (accessed 02/03/2023).

The company Rio Tinto advocated the “Jadar” project as potentially the largest FDI in Serbia, pointing out its significance to Europe’s energy transition as Jadar Valley represented one of the largest lithium deposits in Europe (Bojić, 2019; Jovanović, 2021).

The extraction of lithium, boron and sodium from jadarite ore is a technologically challenging process that can potentially lead to enormous environmental pollution (including soil, air, underground and running water), tremendously affecting biodiversity of the area and the normal life of people from the neighbouring communities (Kalamar, 2021). In the case of floods, the toxic waste could potentially jeopardize the whole Sava and Drina basins, endangering, in this way, the fresh water supply of about 2.5 million inhabitants of Serbia, including the residents of Belgrade. In addition, in this way, the agricultural land on which a significant number of inhabitants used to grow crops or breed cattle, would be destroyed, practically wiping out entire rural communities in the area (Kalamar, 2021). In general, expert estimations indicated that the economic losses from the construction of the mine would exceed the potential profit (Katić, 2022).

The first protests of the local residents were, mostly organised and mobilised around several already existing or *ad hoc* formed local professional or informal organisations (such as “We Don’t Give Jadar – Loznica Against Rio Tinto”, “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina”, “Podrinje Anti-corruption Team”, “Coalition for Sustainable Mining in Serbia”, etc.). Local activists and residents were dissatisfied with the fact that their interests were not taken into account, accusing local authorities and the Government for a lack of transparency in the implementation of the project. They were soon joined by other organisations, operating beyond the local level (“March from Drina”, “Go-Change”, EKO-Social Action”), together with broadly focused political organisations and movements (“Ecological Uprising”, “Don’t Let Belgrade Drown”, “Free Serbia Assembly”), thus mobilising citizens all around Serbia around lithium exploitation issue. A significant support came from various experts who advocated against the lithium mining in public, but also from environmental organisations from neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina, potentially affected by the “Jadar” project as well (Kalamar, 2021).

The protests gained mass support by exploiting (similarly as in the case of initiatives against SHPPs) the broad dissatisfaction with deepening authoritarian tendencies, but also with expanding processes of commodification and neoliberalisation of natural resources. Therefore, in addition to environmental organisations, support for the protests came from opposition political parties across the ideological spectrum. The protests culminated in the late 2021 and early 2022 spilling over to the streets of major cities in Serbia, being followed by the blockades of the most important roads in the country and several border crossings (Vukelić and Pešić, 2022). As a result of several weeks long protests, in February of 2022, the Government of Serbia temporarily suspended documents that would enable the start of lithium exploitation.

The transnationalisation of these protests took different forms in comparison to the initiative against SHPPs. Firstly, the EU, or at least some of its officials, was providing timid support for the initiation of the lithium exploitations project, indicating the importance of this ore for the European green transition (Dragojlo, 2023). The unequivocal support of the EU representatives for the protests against lithium exploitation was largely missing, unveiling, even more so than in the case of SHPPs, the contradictories related to the implementation of the European Green Deal on the European periphery. Europeanisation appeared here in a negative context, while discursive framing of the protests was significantly infused by the anti-EU sentiments. Furthermore, the protests were heavily influenced by the fact that a major multinational corporation had undertaken this project, with a support coming from the local political elites. This aspect strongly marked the protests as a rebellion against imperialism, colonialisation by multinational capital, and even as a struggle against global economic inequalities and unequal distribution of environmental risks.

To these assessments testify the results of the study of discursive framing of protests against lithium exploitation (Vukelić and Pešić, 2022). The analysis encompassed digital contents of both a local grassroots organisation (“Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina”) and organisations operating at the national level (“March from the Drina”, “EKO Social Action” and “Ecological Uprising”). This allowed us to search for possible differences between these organisations in framing the causes of the environmental problems and the key opponents, as well as the perception of possible allies in mobilisation and transnationalisation of their discontent.

The perceptions of both grassroots and professional activist groups strongly inclined to the environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed and even to some extent to ec-nationalist discourses intertwined with distinctively anti-imperialist and anti-colonial framing of discontent. However, while in some cases environmental degradation was perceived in terms of universal human rights not confined solely to national borders, in others the protection of the land and nature was treated in terms of the defence of the nation-state against colonialists’ extractivism through the closure of national borders. The latter case indicates potential distancing of the protests from transnational struggles:

*No single country or people should be made to bear the consequences of another one’s unjust energy transition, and so that no single individual should be exempt from exercising their universal human right to live free from environmental degradation or left undefended when faced with ecocide [...].<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> <https://drustvenaakcija.com/jadarska-deklaracija-the-jadar-declaration/> (accessed 04/09/2022).

*[...] We wouldn't starve to death if we threw out all the so-called investors, world banks, monetary funds and other exploiters and thieves. It would be a little tricky until we get the country back into our hands, but even now, it is not easy [...].*<sup>12</sup>

The prevailing anti-imperialist framing was usually accompanied by a hearty intent to oppose the colonial aspirations of multinational corporations such as Rio Tinto, but also the EU. According to the analysed posts and comments, the activists saw the EU's encouragement of Serbian authorities to act on behalf of the interests of Rio Tinto as a reflection of the EU's own interest to obtain necessary resources for the energy transition in its proximity. This perception sometimes even resulted in allegations that the EU purposefully tolerated relaxed implementation of environmental standards in non-EU countries:

*There are no nations anymore. Corporations destroyed them. States have turned into companies. Corrupt leaders push them into bankruptcy, in which the assets are sold off for nothing [...].*<sup>13</sup>

*Low-cost exploitation is possible only without meeting the standards for protecting the environment. We've got to know that Europe sees Serbia as a cheap resource base.*<sup>14</sup>

*This is how Europe has conditioned the process of European integration of Serbia intending to colonise it. The European Union wants Serbian lithium to produce batteries for electric cars on European soil.*<sup>15</sup>

The eco-nationalist discourse, marked by strong divisions between us and them in terms of "foreign traitors vs true patriots", was particularly observable in the posts on the Facebook page of the grassroots organisation "Let's Protect Jadar and Rađevina". This discourse was not directed only against the multinational corporation, the EU or the Serbian government, but also against the pro-European professional environmental organisations, even those opposing the project "Jadar", which additionally undermined the potentials for the transnationalisation of the protest:

*That (ruling elite) is our problem, not Angela Merkel. She came to take what she needed for her people, who live in prosperity - the lithium, because of which the Serbs will remain hungry, thirsty and sick.*<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100007594007006/videos/536436001549197/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/1047562309297549/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/page/102311091881273/search/?q=EU> (accessed 03/09/2022).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/page/102311091881273/search/?q=EU> (accessed 08/09/2022).

<sup>16</sup> <https://drustvenaakcija.com/jadarska-deklaracija-the-jadar-declaration/> (accessed 04/09/2022).



*For decades, you (NGOs financed from EU funds) have been roaming around Serbia promoting Euro-Nazi-colonial-NATO “values”; you spit on everything Serbian, you have worked on Serbian identity crises at all levels [...] If this is not direct evidence of the true purpose of the existence of NGOs in Serbia, I do not know what is.<sup>17</sup>*

Although support for the protests came from several regional environmental initiatives, the issue of lithium exploitation was essentially related to Serbia, but not to the entire region, so the potential for regional cooperation and leveraging amplified voices in order to internationalise the issue was somewhat lower. Unlike the previous initiative against SHPPs, the launch of international campaigns by transnational CSOs was missing, although their support was not completely absent. Nevertheless, this means that the main agents of transnationalisation were local activists and organisations, supported by academics, who utilised already established ties with transnational networks and coalitions. However, under the new conditions, two new strategies of transnationalisation also emerged: instrumentalisation of international celebrities of local origin in gaining the attention of the international public opinion<sup>18</sup>, and expansion of international ties beyond the European context, by establishing relations with coalitions against dirty mining operating in the regions that are considered less economically developed. The latter strategy is of special importance, since some of those networks and organisations expressed an emphatically critical stance towards the EU, directing discursive framing of the protests towards anti-imperialist or even anti-capitalist narratives (Vukelić and Pešić, 2022).

To certain extent, the discourse analysis indicated divergent strategies of transnationalisation among grassroots and professional NGOs, primarily related to the acknowledgment of environmental organisations and agencies from the EU as potential allies. These divergences were more or less in accordance with the variations in criticism over the EU green policies.

For example, grassroots organisation “Let’s Protect Jadar and Rađevina” (LPJR) strictly opposed the European Green Deal and participation in EU-sponsored events and networks:

*European Green Deal is nothing more than a colourful lie in favour of a “green” transition. It only encourages further mining, consumerism and ultimately, the survival of capitalism, colonialism and unabated greed.<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/856391978414584/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

<sup>18</sup> For example, Australian-Serbian actress Bojana Novaković was at the forefront of “March from the Drina” organisation and rallied in front of Rio Tinto headquarters in London: <https://direktno.rs/magazin/zabava/poznati/386146/bojana-novakovic-pomogla-locira-zgrada-rio-tinta.html> (accessed 04/03/2023).

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/1033530470700733/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

*It is in the interest of us and the nation not to waste time, lives, and money. Because we spend our money, we don't live from funds.*<sup>20</sup>

Opposition to the EU sponsored networks and funds directed them towards seeking alternative allies, such as international solidarity networks “Yes to Life - No to Mining”, “London Mining Network” or “Earth Thrive”, specialised in the protection of marginalised and indigenous communities around the globe from the expansion of mining extractivism. By utilising these networks, LPRJ organised signing of protest letters to the company Rio Tinto<sup>21</sup> or filling an official complaint against the Government of the Republic of Serbia to the Bureau of the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats regarding the “Jadar” project.<sup>22</sup>

Contrary to that, despite critical assessments of the EU, professional organisations acknowledged some positive aspects of the Green Deal and recognised potentials for cooperation with the EU agencies and EU-supported transnational CSOs. For example, “March from the Drina” initiative organised the writing of the open letter and addressed it to both European and Serbian institutions. Framed with the narrative of environmental justice, the letter aimed to explain the protest against the lithium exploitation in Serbia as plea for just green transition that should not bring dirty mining, multinational occupation, destruction of land, air and water to any nation.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, several organisations initiated the signing of the Jadar Declaration on International Solidarity in the Struggle Against Lithium Exploitation and in Environmental Protection<sup>24</sup>, together with organisations from Portugal, Germany, Serbia, Chile, Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In general, although critical stances toward the EU Green Deal, expressed from both grassroots and professional NGOs, seemed as an obvious obstacle to the externalisation of lithium exploitation issues, that did not result in the complete absence of the actions addressing the EU and its agencies. However, a rather local character of this environmental issue, an ambivalent position of the EU and diffident international campaigns, prompted activists to go beyond transnational networks previously established in the struggles for the protection of rivers, and to seek new allies among

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/584849888902129/permalink/1030216931032087/> (accessed 03/09/2022).

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.ozonpress.net/hronika/zastitimo-jadar-i-radjevinu/> (accessed 10/03/2023).

<sup>22</sup> <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/bern-conventions-bureau-closely-monitors-possible-relaunch-of-jadar-project-in-serbia/> (accessed 05/03/2023).

<sup>23</sup> <https://marssadrine.org/en/open-letter-to-ana-brnabic-and-aleksandar-vucic/> (accessed 05/03/2023).

<sup>24</sup> <https://drustvenaakcija.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/The-Jadar-Declaration.pdf> (accessed 05/03/2023).

organisations operating at the (semi-)periphery or outside the EU gravitating advocacy networks. The effectiveness of transnationalisation that relies on these alternative networks, whose resources and scope of influence are rather limited, represents a pending issue. The resolution of this issue may come in the future given the indices that Rio Tinto is undertaking further activities despite official claims that the project has been suspended.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In the concluding remarks, we concentrate on the question of whether and to what extent the examined discourses, and particularly eco-nationalism, have been acting as factors in settling the paths of transnationalisation employed by the analysed environmental initiatives. Although eco-nationalist framing of the protests might be related to the generally strong presence of nationalism in Serbia in the last decades, it could also be attributed to Europeanisation as a predominantly top-down process particularly in the environmental field, where the main instruments of EU policy are rather directive. This is particularly so in the case of post-socialist countries, where governmental structures lack capacities for gradual and negotiative processes of compliance with the EU goals, as is the case in Serbia. Indeed, both protest initiatives were directly fueled by an unfavourable opportunity structure at the national level, which stimulated reliance on transnational alliances and institutions to exert pressure on the national government. At the same time, the very same issue of a closed opportunity structure encouraged the grouping of organisations across the ideological spectrum. In the long run, this could burden the environmental movement with different discourses that emerged as a response to the crisis of globalised neoliberal capitalism. In this sense, the difference between demands opposed to neoliberal extractivism set on universalist grounds and those that have clear eco-nationalist framing is certainly significant for environmental activism at all levels, and especially considering its potential for transnationalisation.

The analysis of discursive framing of initiatives against SHPPs and lithium exploitation revealed differences in both the presence of eco-nationalism and its influence on the paths of their transnationalisation. In the case of protests against SHPPs, the analysis of the local grassroots organisation's LDRSP Facebook posts pointed to the predominance of the ecological modernisation discourse. In line with that, the activists accept general principles of the EU environmental policies and transition towards renewable energy sources as defined in European Green Deal, while their criticism is primarily directed to the inconsistencies in the implementation of these principles. Therefore, the perceived problems in the domestication process of environmental policies regarding the construction of SHPPs stimulated the process of externalising the protest demands. To this end, relying on the experience of other environmental organisations, both professional transnational organisations and grassroot initiatives from the region, which dealt with the same problem, was more than notable. The

rhetoric characteristic for the environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed occasionally emerged within the discourse of environmental justice related to the modest critics towards the EU institutions. However, these critical voices did not set up barriers towards cooperation with international organisations operating in Europe or other developed countries, allowing externalisation of these issues directed towards the EU institutions.

Contrary to the prevailing discourse of ecological modernisation in the case of SHPPs, the narratives linked to the environmentalism of the poor/dispossessed and eco-nationalism prevailed in Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of several environmental organisations, both grassroots and professional, that have been actively engaged in the protests against Rio Tinto. Narratives of anti-globalisation, anti-imperialism and anti-colonialisation indicated scepticism towards the EU promoted development models. The perception of the EU as one of the actors with eco-imperialist and extractive pretences towards Serbian natural resources indicates a radicalisation of criticism towards the EU's environmental policies, tying the discourse of environmental justice more firmly to the narrative of eco-nationalism in comparison to the initiatives against SHPPs. Thus, although eco-nationalist discursive framing of discontent potentially subordinated transnational actions to "national" interests, the need for transnationalisation of the movement was evident but mainly directed to networking with environmental organisations and initiatives facing the similar problems of dirty mining. The fact that these problems were absent from the EU countries and from the WB region, made it even more difficult for local organisations to find allies at the regional and the European level.

The observed differences between grassroots and professional organisations pointed to significantly higher readiness for cooperation with the CSOs from the EU among professional organisations. In addition, grassroots organisations showed a more radical criticism of the EU green policies, and consequently less willingness to externalise problems by addressing the EU institutions. However, in spite of the mentioned obstacles, both types of organisations reported having undertaken such activities, indicating the importance of this type of externalisation in the European context.

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## **Potencijali i prepreke za transnacionalizaciju suvremenih ekoloških borbi u Srbiji**

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### **Sažetak**

S obzirom na sve izraženiju tendenciju suvremenih ekoloških pokreta da internacionaliziraju svoje borbe, u ovom radu pokušavamo istražiti potencijale i prepreke nedavnih ekoloških inicijativa u Srbiji - prosvjeda protiv malih hidroelektrana i borbi protiv eksploatacije litija - da se prošire s lokalne do nacionalne i transnacionalne razine. Fokusirajući se na diskurzivno uokvirivanje ovih inicijativa temeljeno na analizi digitalnog sadržaja koji su ekološke organizacije i aktivisti kreirali i dijelili na društvenim mrežama, istražujemo u kojoj mjeri ekonacionalizam predstavlja poticaj ili prepreku za stvaranje transnacionalnih saveza te njihovu spremnost na sudjelovanje u organiziranim kolektivnim akcijama upravljenima prema međunarodnim institucijama, a posebno prema Europskoj uniji. Pojavu eko-nacionalizma tumačimo povezanom s ekologizmom siromašnih/razvlaštenih, koji se javlja kao reakcija na komodifikaciju prirodnih resursa, širenje neoliberalnih politika i neoeekstraktivizam na (polu)periferiji svjetskog kapitalističkog sustava.

*Ključne riječi:* ekološke borbe, transnacionalizacija, ekonacionalizam, ekologizam siromašnih/razvlaštenih, Srbija.