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**"LET'S DEFEND THE BALKAN RIVERS":
REGIONAL NETWORKING, FRAMES,
AND POLICIES FOR RIVER PROTECTION
IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE**

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"Let's Defend the Balkan Rivers": Regional Networking, Frames, and Policies for River Protection in Southeastern Europe

1. Introduction

"We are close, our nature is interconnected, our rivers have no borders. We have the same problems as our neighbors. Our strength lies in unity." (Interview with Montenegrin activist for the documentary film *The Wave of Unity* ["Zajedništvo"], Panić & Stanimirović, 2023)

Over the past decade, inhabitants of remote villages in the Western Balkans have repeatedly obstructed machinery arriving for construction projects on their rivers. With the green transition emerging as a political priority, the Western Balkan countries, heavily impacted by the climate crisis (Kovačević, 2021) and motivated by aspirations for EU accession (Berishaj, 2021), have aimed to align with the EU's Green Agenda. A commitment to decarbonization unlocked investments in renewables, prioritizing the expansion of energy production over the improvement

of outdated infrastructure (Gallop, 2021). A subsequent boom in hydropower projects revealed the inconsistencies in pursuing “green” energy at the expense of some of Europe’s last remaining wild rivers. Opposition from peripheral rural communities, previously excluded from environmental and civil society activism, exposed the interconnected social and environmental consequences of a top-down approach to the green transition. This paper examines regional grassroots networking for river protection exemplified through the case of the regional environmental movement “Let’s Defend the Balkan Rivers.” By delving into the movement’s actions, framing, and claims, it explores how trans-local coordination can facilitate just grassroots alternatives to the green transition. First, it examines the shift in regional environmental scholarship from NGO-led to grassroots activism. It then explores the river protection network and concludes with recommendations for strengthening socially and environmentally sustainable bottom-up responses to hydropower development.

2. From NGOization to grassroots environmentalism in the Western Balkans

The post-socialist transition model promoted the rapid proliferation of NGOs as key vehicles for the development of civil society. This process fostered the development of “transactional activism” (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007) that prioritized engagement with institutions through advocacy and lobbying activities, project-based initiatives, and strategic networking among organizations aimed at exchanging information, resources, and implementing projects. This type of activism led to what has been defined as the NGOization of civil society, characterized by the development of professional, donor-driven, and depoliticized activism that is detached from the problems and needs of citizens, therefore lacking the capacity to bring about substantial changes. The integration processes of the European Union significantly pushed the NGO sector in this direction, promoting the emergence of professionals acting as government consultants for policy implementation. In the field of environmental protection, alignment with EU regulations, coupled with financial support,

created opportunities for environmental NGOs to build capacity and promote environmental issues on local political agendas (Pešić & Vukelić, 2022). However, it also encouraged professional advocacy that often aligned strategically with the Europeanization agenda, rather than addressing the grassroots objections of its local impacts (Fagan & Ejodus, 2022), thus fostering suspicion and cynicism towards civic activists perceived as a “technocratic niche” (Bilić & Stubbs, 2015).

Local grassroots environmental activism(s) in post-socialist Eastern Europe have increasingly drawn scholarly attention, revealing their potential and connections to broader global dynamics and academic debates (Fagan & Buzogány, 2022; Jehlička & Jacobsson, 2021; Müller, 2020). Exploring socialist legacies of environmentalist practices and organizations (Kurtović & Hromadžić, 2020), grassroots opposition to urban development projects (Milan & Dolenec, 2023), or local conflicts related to resources and environmental justice (Rajković, 2020), this scholarship facilitates a shift in the understanding of civil society from one that is normative to one that enables situated and critical analysis of its actual manifestations (Baća, 2022). Aligning with these perspectives, this paper aims to challenge dominant understandings of environmental activism in the region by bringing attention to regional grassroots river protection networks. It perceives the claims of water and environmental justice movements as injustice that is locally experienced yet trans-locally interconnected, encompassing environmental, social, political, and cultural dimensions (Shah et al., 2021). By challenging the commodification of water as a basic source of life, these struggles raise broader questions about democracy, legality, and sovereignty. River protection movements, in particular, enable us to understand rivers in relational terms, as arenas where both human and non-human beings co-produce their material, social, and symbolic worlds. The concept of “riverhood” (Boelens et al., 2023) emphasizes the mutually constitutive relationship between rivers and societies, where different cultures shape, interact with, and coexist alongside rivers. River protection struggles thus defend locally rooted lifestyles, experiences, and meanings that are simultaneously trans-locally connected.

These efforts present an opportunity to experiment with the practices of “river commoning” and “river enlivening” (ibid.) as viable alternatives to ecologically harmful projects, thereby helping challenge the dominant binary that pits development against environmental protection.

3. Building and Framing the Regional Network **“Let’s Defend the Balkan Rivers”**

In a region rich with water, investments in the hydropower sector emerged as the most suitable strategy to align with the EU Green Agenda, while tackling economic, energy, and environmental challenges (Dogmus & Nielsen, 2020). Between 2012 and 2024, more than 3,000 hydropower plants were planned, with small hydropower plants (SHPs) – which generate less than 10 megawatts – accounting for over 90% of the projects (Schwarz, 2025). To attract investments, they were subsidized by the state through a feed-in tariff system, while contributing only marginally to overall energy production (Gallop, 2021). Small hydropower plants, classified as water abstraction or run-of-river systems, divert water through pipes directly from the riverbed, often over long distances, which severely affects even the smallest rivers and creeks (Schwarz, 2022). Local communities in peripheral rural areas, which rely on rivers for their water supply, were among the most severely affected, witnessing dry riverbeds, the logging of forests for access roads, and the appearance of construction machines without prior notice. Local resistance emerged across the region, garnering the support of environmental organizations and experts, and scaling up to national and regional levels.

In July 2021, 28 organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia, and Montenegro gathered in Sarajevo to launch the regional alliance “Let’s Defend the Balkan Rivers,” aimed at strengthening coordination, mutual support, and knowledge exchange in response to the widespread threats posed by hydropower development. Two years later, in September 2023, another gathering took place in the municipality of Plužine, Montenegro, close to the Komarnica River Canyon. New organizations joined the alliance, resulting in over 40 initiatives

cooperating to address problems related to hydropower development and the expansion of critical mineral mining, while advocating for environmental protection legislation and the protection of activists from lawsuits initiated by investors (SLAPPs).

Current regional coordination efforts are focused on protecting the Neretva River. Its upper course in southern Bosnia and Herzegovina, governed by the Republika Srpska entity, is threatened by numerous projects, including the Ulog hydropower plant, which is in its final construction phase and resulted in historically low water levels during the summer of 2024. Another threat is the “Upper Horizons” project, which encompasses over 30 hydropower projects that would divert water from the Neretva River into artificial lakes for power generation. This diversion could drastically reduce the river’s flow and increase the risk of saltwater intrusion into the fertile plains of eastern Herzegovina. Activists are calling on the Republika Srpska authorities to declare the upper Neretva a protected area. Support from the regional alliance is instrumental in strengthening and amplifying their efforts. In Serbia, the local movement has secured a ban on small hydropower projects in the spatial plans of a dozen municipalities; however, a national ban has not yet been obtained. Transnational cooperation and support were shown on many occasions. In December 2022, while the inhabitants of Dadince, in the municipality of Vlasotince, were engaged in a blockade to obstruct the construction of an SHP on the Rupska River, they received support from the “Brave Women of Kruščica,” from Central Bosnia, who had previously fought and guarded their rivers for over a year. Their gesture highlighted the strong transnational solidarity being cultivated by river protection struggles throughout the region.

Current local river protection efforts include the prevention of a seventh small hydropower project on the Studenica River, a key ecological component of the Golija Nature Park, Serbia’s first UNESCO MAB Biosphere Reserve. The project poses a threat to the integrity of the river ecosystem and is being pursued contrary to the wishes of the local population, which has presented a petition to local authorities three times, only to have it remain

ignored. Another local struggle is currently underway in the municipality of Prijepolje, concerning the Ratajska River, which serves as the primary water source for the residents of the villages of Ratajska and Ravne. The regional network is focusing its efforts on protecting the Komarnica River and its canyon in Montenegro from the construction of a hydroelectric dam that would flood the canyon to create a reservoir. Local organizations and experts have demonstrated the immense value of the Komarnica Canyon in terms of biodiversity and nature conservation, as it hosts a quarter of Europe's most important habitats for plant and animal species. The Komarnica River is protected as a Natural Monument and Nature Park, and it has been proposed to increase its level of protection through EU and international legislation, as well as the establishment of a National Park. "Komarnica is much more than a landscape – it is a reservoir of life" (Popović et al., 2024), as stated in a report by local organizations.

Drawing on positive emotions, lived experiences, memories, identities, and intergenerational legacies, locals articulate the "transcendent value" (Muehlebach, 2023) of rivers, something "ultimately incalculable and immeasurable and thus incommensurable with an abstract market logic" (ibid.: 4). While these emotions are deeply rooted in local contexts, they also transcend locality, as they are shared by communities across the region confronted with the same threat of river destruction. By affirming that "rivers are life," local communities emphasize that the vital value of rivers extends far beyond the local, encompassing entire ecosystems in which human and non-human life are deeply embedded and interdependent. However, opposition to these projects also revealed broader, shared concerns. Resistance to hydropower development has challenged undemocratic decision-making processes that exclude affected communities and reveal widespread corruption in the allocation of concessions. These aspects shed light on the risks of collusion between private and public actors, who act as "growth machines" (Della Porta & Piazza, 2008), promoting a development model that prioritizes private interests over the common good. The river protection movement, therefore, underscores the necessity to discuss environmental protection, legality, and democracy as deeply inter-

related issues. Bringing together riverine communities, activists, NGOs, experts, and artists, the network combines diverse forms of knowledge and practices related to river defense. It blends horizontal grassroots mobilization and vertical policy advocacy, co-producing knowledge, demanding legal reforms, and defending activists against investors' lawsuits. While the network engages with the prevailing legal and scientific discourses, it also challenges purely technocratic frameworks, thereby paving the way for shaping alternative visions of socio-ecological justice.

4. Recommendations for Strengthening Environmental Justice

Legal and Institutional Protection

Legal bans on small hydropower projects in several Serbian municipalities and in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity represent an important step toward river protection. However, activists across the region have pointed out several limitations. First, the bans apply only to SHP projects, exempting other forms of hydropower development from any restrictions. When bans are issued at the municipal level, they are typically tied to existing spatial plans and can be overturned upon the adoption of new plans, providing only temporary protection, usually for a period of 10–15 years. Even when bans exist at higher administrative levels, such as in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, they do not apply to projects already in the procurement phase, putting many rivers under immediate threat.

Activists advocate for a more robust and durable framework:

- Expanding bans on small hydropower plants (SHPs) to national-level legislation
- Integrating river protection into biodiversity and forest conservation laws
- Promoting permanent designations, such as Wild River Parks for critical river systems
- Exploring possibilities for the designation of rights for rivers

A successful example is the Vjosa River campaign in Albania, which led to the creation of Europe's first Wild River National Park, where the conservation approach is based on the entire river system. This model can serve as a blueprint for protecting other ecologically connected river systems across the region through broad cross-sectoral and trans-local collaboration, as well as through the promotion of transboundary conservation frameworks.

Democracy and Environmental Justice

The top-down approach to the green transition in the Western Balkans has fostered exclusionary dynamics, undermined democratic decision-making processes, and created opportunities for corruption. The movement has highlighted the intersection of environmental and social injustices, showing how hydropower and other "green" projects disproportionately impact vulnerable rural communities, which are often characterized by de-development (Blagojevic-Hughson & Bobic, 2014), depopulation, and heightened exposure to the effects of climate change, such as floods and droughts. While initiatives such as rural development or "eco-tourism" have been advocated as possible alternatives, they can potentially reproduce forms of exclusion (Rajković, 2023) and encourage more gradual but persistent environmental degradation (Hromadžić, 2024). To address these challenges, it is necessary to adopt approaches that bridge the dichotomy between environmental protection and economic development, and to move from top-down energy transition policies toward participatory governance. This entails:

- Ensuring locals' participation in public hearings and environmental governance
- Regulating concession-granting processes with transparency and accountability
- Promoting legal protection for activists (e.g., against SLAPPs)
- Building alliances among experts, NGOs, communities, and policymakers
- Promoting community-driven environmental stewardship and

investing in transdisciplinary, action-oriented research on “river commoning”

Regional Cooperation

To strengthen the impact of conservation and democratization efforts, it is essential to deepen and expand regional cooperation. This can be achieved by:

- Reaching and including under-resourced and emerging local initiatives
- Sharing tools, knowledge, and strategies to reinforce trans-local solidarity
- Coordinating joint advocacy, legal action, and research for transboundary river ecosystems
- Expanding the river protection network into a platform for broader social and environmental justice agendas

River protection movements can offer bottom-up, dialogical, and transdisciplinary platforms for bringing diverse “riverhood” and river commoning practices into conversation at multiple scales. Embedding river protection within a broader regional framework of social and environmental justice could enable the Western Balkans, home to some of Europe’s last remaining wild rivers, to shift from a site of environmental degradation to a space for reimagining inclusive, democratic, and ecologically sustainable forms of transition.

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