

A Shapeshifting Movement

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What began as a civic initiative against a massive redevelopment project in Belgrade evolved into a social movement and is now in the process of becoming a fully-fledged political entity. This trajectory mirrors that of the environmental struggles in neighbouring Croatia that developed into a significant political contender at both the local and national level. Jelena Vasiljević explains how this transformation has taken place, and how “movement parties” are working to foster closer connections both between countries in the western Balkans, as well as among the communities within them.

Jelena Vasiljević will be on our first panel discussion commemorating 10 years of publishing and political change in Europe. Register [here](#) to join.

Green European Journal: To what extent were there environmental movements in the late years of Yugoslavia? In countries such as Poland and elsewhere in eastern Europe, the 1980s saw widespread environmental protests.

Jelena Vasiljević: We can't really. The last years of Yugoslavia were marked by political and economic crises and rising national tensions. One of the major crises of the 1980s was the miners' strikes. The strike wave was about pay, job losses, and socioeconomic issues and also a major mining disaster in the Serbian city of Aleksinac, so these protests were not about how mines were destroying nature.

However, just as today, citizens were concerned about air pollution in the 1980s. For instance, Sarajevo, due to its geographic position, has always been a polluted city. Air pollution was a subject of public debate, but it was never politicised in such a way as to mobilise citizens around a larger political cause.

In the past decade, since around 2014, a series of environmental struggles have emerged in Serbia. Is this new for the region?

It is a recent thing, also for the other western Balkan countries that are not yet in the EU. Probably the first and most important protest in the region was in Bosnia. All the western Balkan countries have been targeted for the development of small hydroelectric plants, so we have seen different movements organising to protect the rivers in the last few years. If we look back to the early 2000s, however, there were no environmental movements to speak of.

In 2014-15, a citizen's movement emerged to oppose a major redevelopment project in Belgrade: Ne davimo Beograd (Don't Let Belgrade Drown). Can you tell me about the movement? What are its objectives?

The movement emerged as a single-issue citizens' initiative against this urban regeneration project for the Belgrade Waterfront. The plans involved over a million square metres of new buildings, over a large area of the city. The proposals violated all the regulations, the general city development plans, and the law. As a result, the government resorted to a "special law" to make it happen. There was also a notorious incident in the Savamala district in 2016: masked men entered the site with bulldozers and illegally demolished structures to make room for the redevelopment, but nobody was ever prosecuted. Ne davimo Beograd was a group of enthusiasts, people who were already active in raising public awareness about the importance of unused and ignored public space in Belgrade. Some of them were architects; others were part of other citizens' initiatives dealing with urban culture and infrastructure. They were mostly young people active in the field of culture.

Over time, the movement grew and its agenda expanded to address other damaging projects. In 2018, the movement decided to participate in the city elections. It was our entrance into the political arena. We didn't pass the threshold but, from that point, we transformed into a proper political movement, organised and with internal decision-making bodies. This year, Ne davimo Beograd's members decided to begin the process of becoming a formal political party. So, since 2014, there has been a process of transformation of this civic initiative organised by a group of enthusiasts to become a social movement, now becoming a political party also targeting national issues beyond Belgrade. In political science literature, we'd be called a "movement party".

This year in April, Ne davimo Beograd participated in national and local elections. They passed the threshold and are now in the national and city parliament. So we are a true political force and we're profiling ourselves as a green-left organisation, addressing environmental issues of course but also, just as importantly, socioeconomic issues, solidarity, women's rights, and LGBTQ rights.

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It seems to be a parallel path to Zagreb's urban movement in Croatia that went on to form Možemo!

What happened globally with the city movements inspired us both. Zagreb was the first city in this region to articulate its Right to the City movement and Belgrade was next. Now both cities have produced social movements that have transformed into political actors.

It's not an accident because ties exist and relations exist. Over the past 10 years, a generation of activists has been organising together. People from Zagreb would come to Belgrade and people from Belgrade would go to Zagreb. They would inspire each other and are very well informed about what is going on in both movements. What happened in Zagreb was an inspiration for Ne davimo Beograd but the contexts are different. Similar but different.

How has this movement's presence influenced the Serbian political scene? Has the ground of political debate shifted?

Definitely. First of all, there is this idea that it's a bottom-up movement. When Ne davimo Beograd first participated in the city election, it was a citizens' initiative without a strong formal structure. A non-hierarchical movement without a clear leader was a novelty for the Serbian political scene.

The topics that were raised – public space, the importance of managing and cultivating public spaces, citizen participation – were also important. The emphasis was on how citizens should be asked about things and introducing more participatory mechanisms in political decision-making processes. New green issues such as air pollution and then water were politicised. Air pollution remains an important environmental problem in Belgrade, especially during winter. Ne davimo Beograd was the first to bring these topics to the fore. It anticipated a green-left coalition that didn't exist before and that is now part of the national political scene. We were pioneers.

In 2020 and 2021, there were widespread environmental protests right across Serbia. Some against a massive lithium mining project planned by Australian mining conglomerate Rio Tinto in western Serbia and others against small-scale hydropower plants. Could you say more about their origins and spread?

The first important environmental protests outside of Belgrade were related to small hydropower plants such as those in the Stara Planina mountains in southeastern Serbia. Like all over the region, many small hydropower plants were planned in these mountains, and activists had heard about protests in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Montenegro. These protests in Stara Planina were largely grassroots and mobilised local villagers, often older people. Cooperation soon emerged between mostly Belgrade-based activists coming in to support the locals.

In August 2020, there was a big moment when activists and villagers came together in the village of Rakita to destroy a pipe that was already laid for a small hydropower plant. The peculiarity of the dispute was that the investor had already been ordered to stop the works by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia, due to the irregular and damaging way the pipes had been placed in the very bottom of the riverbed. However, not only did the investor ignore the decision, but it was later granted a final use permit for electric energy production. It was a sign that the justice system in Serbia is malfunctioning and that some actors are above the law. Destroying the pipe was their small victory and the works stopped. The Stara Planina mountains became a symbol of resistance against small hydropower plants. Many activists went, and continue to go, there to learn about the movement and similar mobilisations were also seen in other cities.

Then, there was the wave of protests against Rio Tinto. This issue echoed on the national scale and became everyone's central concern. The demonstrations in December 2021 were truly massive and mobilised thousands of people. The main highway in Belgrade was blocked and there were also protests in other towns, such as Loznica near where Rio Tinto wanted to mine.

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What were the effects of this environmental protest wave on the April 2022 elections?

The effects of these protests would have been much greater had the invasion on Ukraine not happened. The war changed everything. The protests against Rio Tinto were taking place during the pre-election period and you could see that the regime was losing ground. They were making concessions, which they normally never do, and put a moratorium on the mining project.

But then the Russian invasion happened. The regime cunningly understood that the war was now the only issue that mattered and overnight transformed its political message. Their slogan was “Peace, stability, Vučić”. The conversation turned to stability and whether we would have enough electricity and gas. The environmental movement suffered. The same happened elsewhere, as we see with Germany returning to coal. In Serbia, the question became whether we would have heating in the winter.

The protests around the small hydropower plants and then Rio Tinto mobilised many people, both in the streets but also in their voting intentions. These issues became political. But despite that success, the international context meant that the mobilisations didn’t produce the effects their organisers hoped for.

Could the different strands of environmental movements in Serbia still form the basis for an opposition that could threaten the regime?

It’s a complex issue. The war in Ukraine was one thing, but the deeper issue is that I don’t think that environmental struggles can win the game. They are not issues that will disturb the balance of hegemonic discourses and powers. For that, we need wider political organisations and ideas. We lack a coherent, articulated, and mutually cooperative opposition aligned with green ideas.

Serbia is a very polarised country so for some of the protestors, the movement needed to be perceived to be apolitical. “It’s not about politics, it’s about preserving the land, the water.” They argued that, since politics has become a dirty word, as politicians are corrupt, it’s better to say that this is not about politics but “only” about water, land and, future generations, as if these issues are not political as well. Other political actors mobilising around environmental concerns wrapped them in a right-wing logic: “It’s *our* land, *our* water.” These issues can easily be contaminated by conservative ideology and at some point, it happened. For some people who took part in the protests, it was very connected to an idea of national identity.

So, we have not come to a place where we can say that environmental issues are political issues and a green agenda also means that ideologically we stand for certain values. This is

what Ne davimo Beograd is trying to do. It's trying to make environmental politics a real politics and trying to connect it with other values. Because we cannot disassociate environmental issues from human rights, minority rights, protection of nature, and environmental rights. They are part of the same package.

To what extent was the scale of the protests linked to the nature of the issues themselves, be it hydropower or the planned lithium mine? Climate change isn't abstract when it's 43 degrees Celsius outside but, still, it is more abstract than pollution in the water that you use to grow crops.

What happened in Stara Planina, and in other protests against small hydropower plants, was very concrete for the local villagers. They understood perfectly that they would lose their river and what that would mean for them. And they were so powerful because it was mostly the local population protesting.

There was an interesting case in Kosovo, in the southern Štrpce region, where small hydropower plants were also planned. It's an enclave of mostly Serbian-dominated villages in a region where there are also many Albanian villages. The local population depends on these rivers for drinking water and irrigation. For the past three or four years, Albanians and Serbs have been protesting together. Many have been arrested and spent time in prison together too. They knew that it was a very tangible issue and it connected them, so much so that they stay up on night watches against the bulldozers together.

Same with Rio Tinto, people understood that it was going to be devastating. The problem is also that many villagers in these places started selling their houses to Rio Tinto because these are poor villages. It's very difficult to have this kind of struggle in a poor society where problems are complex. In poor societies, if you think of environmental problems in abstract terms, they cannot mobilise people because people are just trying to live and make some money. But when they see how problems will affect them concretely, then they will organise and mobilise.

Moving from communication across countries to using that cooperation to impact local and national governments is a big step.

Did the attention around these plans also force conversations about Serbian democracy and the rule of law? Or did it remain a purely environmental issue?

Some layers of the citizenry clearly understand that the issues of corruption, a malfunctioning judiciary, state capture, and environmental issues are all connected. The issue with small hydropower plants was that Serbia was encouraging investments in clean energy with lower taxes. Hydropower produces clean energy but is devastating to ecosystems. It turned out that the main investors were connected to people in positions of power. It is a case of the green transition being used to make money and institute corruption.

It was the same with the Belgrade Waterfront project. The incident that I mentioned at

Savamala proved the link between mafia and power. It proved that there is no legal system because it turned out that the local police were ordered to transfer all calls from citizens to communal police that night. It was orchestrated. Activists were trying to say it's not just that we are against some urban regeneration project but that this project stands for all the malign diseases and networks of corruption that this country suffers from.

But I don't know if it's like that for everyone. Some people just don't want to see their river being damaged and they want a say. We can call this idea "citizens' participation" but they are protesting against exclusion and articulating the struggle in their own words.

You mentioned environmental movements in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Croatia. Some are grassroots, others are more political. Do you think that there can be a more sustained connection between ecology and the movement for stronger and healthier democracy in Balkan countries?

I certainly hope so. These protests are against similar problems. Some activists communicate with each other and make connections and some established civil society organisations are devising projects to connect them. For instance, the European Fund for the Balkans was working on a joint platform for environmental activists in all western Balkan countries. So there are connections and visits between Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, and Macedonia too.

Everybody's talking about a sustainable connection, something lasting and capable of producing effects, but I don't see it happening. Moving from communication across countries to using that cooperation to impact local and national governments is a big step, because all these countries are similar but still different.

But hopefully they will produce some societal effects. Learning from each other, finding out how to mobilise people, and so on. Maybe this is how the effect will happen, not on a political level but on a societal level. It is important to understand the perspectives of others. It can help you and show you some shortcuts. That's why these connections are so valuable.



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