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**BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SOCIO-HISTORICAL
DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL
MOVEMENT IN SERBIA – FROM STATE SOCIALISM
TO CAPITALIST PERIPHERY**

Abstract

The paper explores the development of environmental activism in Serbia from the end of the Second World War till the present day. We start our account of the development of environmental movement in Serbia by describing the environmental initiatives in the socialist Yugoslavia which were undertaken mostly within the auspices of the state. Then we follow the development of the

environmental civic sector in Serbia after the 1989 collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. In the 1990s environmental initiatives were not prominent because of the civil wars and economic sanctions that put other themes (such as the state sovereignty and the economic hardships) on the top of the political agenda.

First two decades of 21st century environmentalism in Serbia were characterized by the dominance of the professional (donor-driven) environmental NGOs. However, quite a few mass environmental protests that occurred in the last three years suggest that the environmental civil sector has entered a new phase of development with the growing importance given to the environmental protection as a topic of popular discontent, as well as the emergence of the genuine environmental movement comprised of professional NGOs and grassroots initiatives, at certain occasions successfully working together.

Keywords: Environmental Activism, Environmental Movement, Serbia, Post-socialism

Environmental Activism in Socialist Yugoslavia

The first attempts to protect the environment from excessive exploitation emerged in Serbia in the first half of the 19th century, when several laws were passed that brought under control deforestation, hunting and fishing, and at the end of the 19th century a basic legal framework for the protection of natural resources was established. At the beginning of the 20th century, laws were introduced that regulate the use of water resources and

further limit the use of the forest fund. At that time, the first civic conservations societies and associations for nature protection and recreation were established, such as the Serbian Mountaineering Association (1901) and the White Eagle Scout Detachment (1911). After the First World War, the Ministry of Forests and Mining was formed, while in the period between the two wars, a number of laws were passed which regulated the area of protection of natural resources (Amidžić, 2011: 15–16).

In the years after the Second World War, socialist modernization made intensive industrialization and urbanization a priority, which left significant consequences on the environment (Oštrić, 1992; Pavlinek & Pickles, 2000; Berend, 2001). However, representatives of the Yugoslav authorities quickly realized the need to protect the environment. Thus, the development plan of the SFRY from 1971 suggested that solving environmental problems was an important aspect of achieving a higher standard of living and overall economic prosperity. Therefore, certain economic measures and regulations were encouraged together with the introduction of more environmentally-friendly technologies (Oštrić, 1992). Environmental legislation in socialist Yugoslavia was relatively developed. For example, in the mid-1980s, there were as many as 400 laws and over 1,000 bylaws. However, advanced legal solutions have not been sufficiently applied in practice (Lilić, 2010).

Similar to other former socialist countries, environmental organizations were established within the state framework in Yugoslavia - the Federal Hydrometeorological Institute of Yugoslavia (founded in 1947), the Republic Institute for Nature Protection (1948), the Goran Movement (1960) and others. At the beginning of 1973, the Yugoslav Council for the Protection and Improvement of the Human Environment was established in Belgrade. At the proposal of the Council, a provision on the right to a healthy environment was included in the Constitution of the SFRY.

However, although it was initially supported by the regime, the Council (the "environmental movement", as it was called in the program documents) soon became another bureaucratized organization of relatively small importance (Oštrić, 1992).

On the other hand, although environmental initiatives found their institutional foothold, citizen environmental actions, which was flourishing in the West at the time, were not possible here. By prohibiting any form of extra-institutional action, the socialist system hindered the development of civil society (Lazić, 2005; Milivojević, 2006; Paunović, 1997), and thus the emergence of environmental movement in Western terms. However, that does not mean that there were no occasional protest activities. The most significant is, of course, the Student Protest '68. Spontaneous environmental protests also broke out from time to time, but only sporadically - for example, in Kakanj in 1975 against the construction of a cement factory and in Zaječar in 1980, with a request to install filters on factory chimneys. However, due to the regime's repressive reactions, there were no longer-lasting grassroots environmental organizations and groups. It was only with the crisis that gripped the socialist countries in the 1980s and weakening of the repressive elements of the system, that enabled the creation of somewhat more favourable conditions for the development of the environmental movement (Branilović & Šimleša, 2007). At that time, the first environmental organizations were formed throughout the country: Una emeralds, Environmental public and Svarun (1986) in Croatia; Society for the Protection of the Human Environment, Green Star and Green PEGA (1987) in Serbia; Ecological Society Biserka in Montenegro and Survival in Macedonia (1989).

In the same period, antinuclear initiatives appeared, which were especially strong in Croatia, but also present in Serbia and Slovenia

(Dajmak, 1987; Miklja & Jeremić, 1987). Information about construction plans and locations of nuclear power plants were kept secret, causing great dissatisfaction and concern among citizens. In the midst of the controversy over the construction of nuclear power plants, the Chernobyl accident occurred, which was probably crucial to abandon further plans for construction (Dajmak, 1987; Miklja & Jeremić, 1987). Despite much more ambitious plans, as a result of anti-nuclear initiatives, only one nuclear power plant was built near the town of Krško in Slovenia (Branilović & Šimleša, 2007; Oštrić, 1992). However, although anti-nuclear and pro-environmental views were represented in intellectual circles, they were not sufficient to form an environmental movement in Yugoslavia.

In the late 1980s, there were initiatives to create a Yugoslav environmental movement, which would unite associations from different republics. To this end, a conference entitled "The Future of the Greens in Yugoslavia" was held in Zagreb in 1989, while a similar gathering was organized in Split the following year, at which it was agreed to establish a Coordination Board of Yugoslav environmental groups. That board met several more times, but without much success, only to cease to exist at the end of 1990. With the introduction of political pluralism, there was an attempt to establish green parties, so in 1990 the Green Party and the Environmental Movement of SR Serbia were founded in Serbia, the Green Party of Slovenia in Slovenia, the Alliance of Greens in Croatia, the Macedonian Environmental Movement in Macedonia and the Montenegrin Environmental Movement in Montenegro. Up. However, the newly initiated Yugoslav environmental movement failed to survive the country's disintegration (Oštrić, 1992).

Environmentalism in Serbia in 1990s

The civil wars of the 1990s focused the public discourse on the themes of individual and national "survival". According to economists, the recession, which hit post-socialist countries in the first half of the 1990s, is comparable only to the Great Depression of the 1930s (Milanović, 1998). However, while the economic crisis in most post-socialist countries ended in the late 1990s, it was only in 2010 that Serbia reached the approximate level of economic development it had before the break-up of Yugoslavia (Bošnjak, 2011). During the deep societal crisis of the 1990s, environmental topics were marginalized in public discourse (Nadić, 2007).

Unlike the experience of most Eastern European countries, in Serbia environmental issues were not of greater importance in the initial stages of the post-socialist transformation process, as mass mobilization on nationalist grounds took over this role (Dragovic-Soso, 2002). Only with the intensifying of the transformation processes, which have been blocked in Serbia for almost a decade (Lazić, 2005), and with the relative improvement of economic conditions, strengthening of the democratization process, and the beginning of the European integration process, does interest in the environment and its consequences revive. These events paved the road for the development of the environmental movement in Serbia (Fagan, 2010b; Borzel, 2009).

Environmentalism in Serbia at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Under the pressure of international institutions within the European integration process, in this period, somewhat greater

importance has been given to environmental issues, primarily in the form of efforts to harmonize domestic environmental legislation with the *acquis*. In the new circumstances, similarly to the countries of Central Europe (a decade earlier), there was a considerable strengthening of the environmental non-governmental sector stimulated by the inflow of foreign donations. In the same period, political structures began to gradually, albeit slowly, open up to civic initiatives. The state's attitude towards civil society, however, remained unfavorable. Unlike in the 1990s, when the relationship between a small number of civil society organizations and the state was mostly conflictual (often openly hostile), the period after 2000 was characterized by the state's disregard for civil society, with occasional cooperation in accordance with the European Union requirements and financial incentives (Paunović, 2006, 2007; Lončar, 2010).

The 2008 Global economic crisis, similarly as in other countries, led to an increase in the illiquidity of the economy in Serbia, a decline in gross domestic product, declining industrial production, exports and imports, rising unemployment, weakening purchasing power, and a parallel increase in poverty (Bosniak, 2011). Only at the end of 2014, the long-term economic stagnation stopped and the economy gradually recovered.

However, although the Serbian economy has stepped out of the crisis, no significant progress has been made in the area of environmental financing. Government allocations for this area in the period from 2001 to 2016 were constantly below 0.5% of GDP. For comparison, other post-socialist countries have, on average, allocated 2% of GDP for environmental protection (NPZŽS, 2011). Funding principles in this area indicate that environmental protection is still not a priority (Coalition 27, 2019: 8). On the other hand, it is estimated that between 10.6 and 15 billion euros (1,400-1,900 euros per capita) will be needed to comply with EU

environmental regulations, which is well above the average of 1,150 euros per capita, which was the cost of countries that have previously joined the Union (Coalition 27, 2019; NSAŽS, 2011; Kramer, 2005; Coalition 27, 2018: 10). The European Union stands out as the most important foreign donor in the area of environmental protection. However, most of the adjustment costs in this area will have to be borne by the state itself.

Supported by foreign donors, many non-governmental organizations began to engage with the environmental protection (especially after 2010), and the environmental issues became more widespread in the public discourse (Vukelić, 2012; Petrović, 2020). However, imposed from the outside and discursively shaped in accordance with the priorities of European environmental policy, missing resonance with the specific conditions in which Serbian citizens live, environmental issues for many years failed to find their place in the experiences and daily lives of ordinary citizens. Professional environmental activism led by environmental NGOs, was perceived as artificial, donor-driven, lacking constituency and capacities for significant socio-environmental change.

Although professional environmental organizations have made some progress in the field of environmental protection by influencing changes in environmental legislation and its stricter implementation (Cisar, 2010, 2013; Petrova & Tarrow, 2007), they are often criticized as inauthentic, dependent on foreign donors, interested in project funds but not in the needs of citizens and depoliticized in their activities (Fagan, 2004; Fagan & Carmin, 2011). However, through the process of international socialization and the spread of environmental discourses, knowledge transfer and other mechanisms of action, they are seen as a hotbed of new forms of struggle, on the basis of which grow spontaneous initiatives that authentically manage to contextualize international issues and conflicts. In addition, external patronage in semi-

democratic systems is a significant source of political autonomy for NGOs and supports initiatives that address less popular topics such as environmental protection (Checkel, 2005; Cisar, 2010; Cisar & Navratil, 2015; Cisar, 2018; Soare & Tufi, 2020). Over the last decade, with the rise of urban movements, various forms of civic self-organization and activism of everyday life, and a series of protests against austerity measures and the crisis of democracy in Eastern Europe, the image of passive civil society is gradually changing, with indications of participatory activism (Piotrowski, 2013, Piotrowski, 2015; Ekiert & Kubik, 2014; Cisar, 2018).

Most Recent Developments in the Environmental Sector in Serbia

As noted in the previous section, up until recently, the region has been qualified in the literature as lacking genuine environmental mobilization with civil society dominated by transactional relations and donor-driven professional organizations (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007; Cisar, 2010; Fagan, 2010; Fagan & Sircar, 2015; Vukelić, 2015). This type of activism has been criticized as artificial, lacking constituency and capacities for significant socio-environmental change. However, recent upsurge of civic protests against investor urbanism, air pollution and mini hydropower plants in Serbia, suggests that participatory type of environmental activism might be emerging in the country (Petrović, 2019a; Petrović, 2019b; Ejodus & Fagan, 2020). Moreover, preparations for opening of Chapter 27 on environment with EU, create a space for more meaningful participation of civic organizations in environmental decision making (Wunsh, 2018; Fagan & Wunsh, 2018). Another factor influencing development of participatory type of environmental activism in Serbia is the emergence of activist citizenship (Isin,

2009) in the region (Fagan & Sircar, 2017; Milan, 2017; Goldstein, 2017).

Recent upsurge of environmental protests in Serbia, suggests that the situation is changing and that the participatory type of environmental activism might be emerging in the country (Petrović, 2019a; Petrović, 2019b; Ejodus & Fagan, 2020). For instance, in summer 2019 residents of Belgrade's neighborhood Banovo Brdo, started a large protest against the construction of a sports hall in the Košutnjak park area. In the summer 2020, several hundred activists and concerned citizens gathered together in a small village of Rakita in southwest Serbia. They came from different parts of the country joined together with the aim of dismantling the metal pipes from the local riverbed, put there previously in an attempt to construct a small hydropower plant. This was part of the larger protests against mini hydropower plants that started around 2 years ago (Petrović, 2019). During the winter 2019, citizens of Belgrade and some other cities in Serbia protested against the extreme air pollution (Belgrade is at the very top of the list of the world's most polluted cities). Moreover, discontent with the destruction of environment has been regularly voiced at anti-government marches, which have been taking place in Serbia's capital since 2016 (Pešić, 2017).

A number of protests and initiatives bloomed over the past few years against investments by foreign companies after the Great Recession, which are mostly based on dirty technologies: protests against air pollution produced by Chinese company Zijin in the city of Bor and Hestil in the city of Smederevo. These protests were mostly directed against investments made by Chinese companies in Serbia, which do not adhere to environmental standards. Similarly, citizens of the city of Zrenjanin and environmental activists protested in 2021 against the construction of a Chinese tire factory (Linglong) in this city, due to the assessment that this dirty technology will drastically increase the level of air pollution.

Another large protest initiative is directed against the exploitation of jadarite ore in the vicinities of Loznica and Pozega, which is planned as an investment of the British-American company Rio Tinto.

All the mentioned protest initiatives got their expression in the „Ecological protest,, that was held on April 10, 2021 in Belgrade, with the request to stop all projects and investments that are harmful to health and the natural environment. Thousands of people gathered at the protest, pointing out that the issue of environmental protection is increasingly becoming one of the burning problems of Serbian citizens. At the same time, the protest pointed to the mobilization potential of environmental issues, which has accelerated a significant number of opposition parties to develop their environmental programs and incorporate them into their core political action programs. If at the beginning of the 21st century environmental activism was underdeveloped and marginalized in Serbia, due to increased foreign investments based on the export of dirty technologies and unequal ecological exchange, environmental issues have become one of the most important political issues in recent years, prompting the development of environmental movements and initiatives. To this should be added the increase of the already mentioned civic participation in Serbia, especially through non-institutional forms of engagement, as well as the accelerated profiling of political parties and movements operating in the mainstream political arena, as environmental, giving further impetus to development of environmental initiatives. Finally, as environmental consequences often transcend a country's borders, the development of regional initiatives against investments and projects that destroy the environment of wider communities represents the basis for the internationalization of environmental issues and for the development of transregional ecological networks.

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