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MARGINAL ENVIRONMENTALISM: EXAMINING LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN SERBIA

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The aim of this research is to explore the “Europeanization from below” by focusing on local environmental initiatives in Serbia with an overall question of potentials of grassroots activism to create significant environmental impact in a semi peripheral context.

Research on environmental activism in postsocialist countries in general and Serbia in particular have mostly taken into consideration the examples of professional (NGO) environmental activism (Fagan, 2010; Fagan & Sircar, 2015; Petrović, 2020). This happened mostly due to the fact that these types of organizations are registered, have official websites and thus are easily identifiable and in most cases accessible for interviews. They also tend to have

a clear organizational and leadership structure and usually exist for a longer period of time. On the other hand, grassroots initiatives emerge as a reaction to environmental problems, they are flexible, participative, most often lacking clear organizational structure and formal leadership, prone to a quick disappearance (Della Porta & Diani, 2006) and therefore quite difficult to research. However, the research on Europeanization of a narrow band of environmental civil society actors in Serbia does not tell the whole story about environmental struggles in this part of Europe.

The aim of this research is to explore the “Europeanization from below” by focusing on local environmental initiatives in Serbia with an overall question of potentials of grassroots activism to create significant environmental impact in a semi peripheral context. Focussed on professional environmental activism and urban areas, the research conducted so far on Europeanization of environmental civil society actors in Serbia does not tell the whole story about environmental struggles in this part of Europe.

Recent developments of ecourban initiatives in Serbia, mostly led by „Don't let Belgrade Drawn” initiative, are thoroughly explored and documented in the literature (Morača, 2011; Petrović, 2019a; Matković & Ivković, 2018; Petrović, 2019b, etc.). Although the engagement of this initiative is significant in many ways (environmental action is one of the important aspects of their work), especially in waking up of urban activism in the second decade of 21st century, in this phase it is important to look beyond big cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad), and consider emerging environmental initiatives in social and territorial contexts that are characterized by their peripheral, marginalized position within Serbia. To our knowledge, those initiatives are generally underexplored (Petrović, 2019; Petrović, 2020) but significant in a number of ways:

They organize environmental protests and other forms of direct action, outside the auspices of donor-driven organizations and the EU supported environmental programmes and even

question European environmental policies (e.g. mini hydropower plants as a source of clean and renewable energy).

This activism is closer to everyday struggles of the local population faced with the negative consequences of post-socialist capitalism (Bandelj, 2016; Petrović & Backović, 2019) e.g. investor urbanism, toxic industries, uncontrolled dumpsites, exploitation of natural resources etc.

This type of activism mobilises marginalised population and members of lower classes (so called “environmentalism of the poor”) in contrast to Belgrade-based urban activism dominated by the members of middle classes.

This type of activism also demonstrates the interconnectedness of environmental and social inequalities, raising the question of environmental justice.

It is a form of genuine activism, prone to the risks of activist burn-out, lack of a critical mass, and difficulties of forming coalitions with other actors (professional environmental organizations, green parties, etc.) mostly due to the lack of interpersonal trust.

This type of activism can be radical and critical of mainstream environmental narratives.

Role of social media in mobilization and information sharing is vitally important for these organizations, their visibility and recognizability.

In this research we plan to conduct 20 semi-structured interviews with the informants - leaders and prominent members of local environmental initiatives in Serbia: activist of the initiatives fighting against the destruction of small mountain rivers by building hydroelectric power plants in South and South-Eastern rural Serbia - „Say No to Mini Hydropower Plants,, [“Odbranimo reke Stare

Planine”]; and activists fighting against the forthcoming exploitation of jadarite ore by the company „Rio Tinto,, in Western Serbia - „Let's Protect Jadar and Radjevina,, [„Zaštitimo Jadar i Rađevinu,,] and „We Don't Give Jadar,, [„Ne damo Jadar,,]. These interviews will be complemented with an analysis of secondary data: newspaper articles, website and social media content.

The goal of the research is to explore in detail local environmental issues; development paths of different local initiatives; initiatives' and activists' goals and obstacles they encounter in their activism; relationships formed among activists; their social background; means and methods they use in order to mobilize local population to join protests and support initiatives; resources they have on their disposal (economic, organizational, social, cultural, technological, etc.); their attitudes towards cooperation with other actors (scaling-up and networking of local initiatives; their regional and transnational ties); relationships they form beyond environmental engagement (e.g. with left-wing organisations and initiatives or mainstream political parties).

Specific attention in this research project will be given to the question whether local grassroots environmental movements are building ties with similar movements within the European Union, within coordinated transnational campaigns and actions against transnational companies. What are the opportunities and constraints for these movements and initiatives to scale-up and externalize local environmental issues? If making transnational linkages occurs, what are the elements of activism within which they connect; do local movements seek and receive support from similar initiatives or from the EU institutions? If such support exists, is it merely financial, or organizational, infrastructural, etc.?

We are particularly interested in whether local movements, in their narratives, call for European legislation and the requirements that Serbia should meet in the process of joining the European Union (especially in the context of the uncertainty of the process of EU accession and the declining trust in its institutions, which has been observed in Serbia in recent years)? Do they plan to

address European institutions if the local and national authorities refuse to respond to their demands? It should be noted that the “Brussels arena” has only recently opened for the civil society actors from the Western Balkans (Wunsch, 2018), and that only a few prominent professional environmental organizations in Serbia have the experience of transnational cooperation (Petrović, 2020).

On the other hand, if there are no significant linkages between these initiatives and the EU or other international actors, the aim is to investigate why this is so and how this could be changed. Moreover, given that similar problems occur in the surrounding countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo), our goal is to examine whether these local initiatives are connecting at the regional level.

Another research question is whether local initiatives invoke transnational contexts in building their narratives (for example, by pointing to the consequences of Chinese investment in other parts of the world or to the consequences of Rio Tinto's lithium exploitation). Moreover, do these initiatives address the issues of entrepreneurship of green ideology and "environmentally friendly technologies" (such as mini hydro power plants or the exploitation of lithium necessary for electric cars)? Finally, do they address the issues related to international contradictions in the environmental field („Green New Deal“)?

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