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STATE OF ENVIRONMENTALISM IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIA AND THE ROLE OF THE EU

Urban and Environmental Movements in Serbia: similarities and differences

Urban struggles and movements gained importance during the period of accelerated post-socialist transformation, i.e. the consolidation of capitalism in Serbia on neoliberal grounds. A special impetus to the development of these movements was given by the privatization of former state-owned companies, where often the primary motive was to profit on favorable locations and construction land, and not the revitalization of collapsed companies. The second momentum came with investor urbanism, i.e. the usurpation of public urban spaces and their commercialization. Urban initiatives, at first spontaneous, over

time have developed a stronger organizational structure, operating in the form of professional NGOs, movements, and even political parties.

On the other hand, struggles over natural resources are a newer phenomenon. They emerge as a reaction to the exploitation of natural resources or the destruction of the natural environment, as part of investments coming after the World Economic Crisis, i.e. in Serbia's attempt to join the international division of labor, which now takes place in considerably more unfavorable conditions than in other post-socialist countries. As part of the policy of attracting foreign investment and raising employment levels, the benefits offered to these investors are significantly more favorable. In addition to the exploitation of labor, they increasingly include the exploitation of natural resources. Unlike urban initiatives initiated mostly by highly educated residents of large cities, who had the resources and political experience to organize collective action, the population directly affected by the exploitation of natural resources is mostly rural, lacking adequate resources (material, cultural, social, economic) and without experience in political struggles. These are mostly grassroots initiatives of the marginalized people forced to defend their bare existence.

The fight against mini-hydropower plants and the exploitation of lithium by Rio Tinto are initiatives that have mobilized not only the local population, but have received the support of the general public. It is an emerging movement, the dynamics of which is unfolding before our eyes. This is what prompted us to make these two cases the subjects of our study.

Theoretical concept: *environmentalism of the poor*

The *environmentalism of the poor* as a concept originates from the studies conducted in the developing countries (mostly India and Latin America) and indicates the activism of the population on the periphery of the world capitalist system against the destruction of the natural environment (their habitat and existence) by multinational capital. It is a movement that is part of a broader global environmental justice movement. The concept itself presupposes the existence of

unequal ecological exchange between the countries of the capitalist core and the periphery, as well as the ecological debt that the countries of the developed North make towards the poorer countries, exploiting their natural resources or using their territories to export dirty industries or store polluting materials. The concept itself relies on broader dependency and the theory of the world capitalist system, which were developed to explain the relations of unequal exchange and development of countries that are part of the global capitalist order, where the core countries develop at the expense of peripheral countries.

With this in mind, the case of potential exploitation of jadarite ore from the western Serbia basin by the multinational company Rio Tinto is a typical example of unequal ecological exchange, accompanied by devastation of the natural environment and human habitat, in a situation where environmental regulations are unclear and multinational capital in conjunction with the governing structures, was given the opportunity to exploit natural resources without hindrance. The revolt of the inhabitants of endangered areas is therefore a classic example of efforts to protect the natural habitat, invoking economic compensation, but also the concepts of human rights or habitat rights (the difference from similar movements in Latin America is that the concept of protection of the indigenous population, their habitat, specific culture and way of life, is not used in this context).

Another example are the mini hydro-power plants and the struggles that the local population is waging with investors. Here, too, the revolt comes from below, by people directly threatened by investment. The difference is that the investors are not multinational companies but local entrepreneurs seeking to capitalize on the benefits the EU offers for expanding renewable energy sources. This, paradoxically, does not significantly increase energy capacity, but causes great damage to the natural environment and the local people's livelihoods.

The European Union and local environmental movements

The role of the EU in environmental struggles in Serbia is contradictory. On the one hand, the adoption of European regulations related to ecology and environmental protection are part of the process of negotiations on Serbia's accession to the EU. In particular, Chapter 27 (Environment and Climate Change) refers to the harmonization of national regulations with European acquis, in terms of environmental protection, as well as to the implementation of these regulations. Regarding the implementation of these standards, Serbia has made limited progress over the previous year (www.pregovarackagrupa27.gov.rs/?wpfb_dl=163).

On the other hand, the European Green Deal and the resulting demand for clean and renewable energy sources to reduce global warming are producing contradictory effects - the exploitation of lithium needed for batteries for electric cars or the construction of mini hydropower plants as a renewable energy source inflict devastation on the natural environment and local ecosystems.

One of the aims of our research is to explore the extent to which local actors perceive the EU institutions as a place to address their demands and complaints in the event that national authorities are deaf to their problems.

Transnationalization of environmental struggles. “Save the blue heart of Europe” campaign

„Save the blue hart of Europe,, represents one of the first initiatives in regional networking and cooperation that aimed to gather activists, NGOs, local populations, and so on, opposing to damming the pristine rivers on Balkan peninsula by building hydropower plants. The campaign had the goal to contribute to saving biodiversity, nature, human habitat and cultural and symbolic significance rivers have for local communities. Active campaign against hydropower plant also aimed at sustainable social and economic development of different communities by preserving their natural resources through cautions utilization and conservation. The initiative was set by two NGOs - EuroNatur and RiverWatch, and together with local partners, they

concentrated at four areas: the Vjosa River in Albania, the Mavrovo National Park in Macedonia, the Sava River in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, as well as the rivers of Bosnia & Herzegovina. Their goal was to raise public awareness about Balkan Rivers, their ecological values and vulnerability, to stop dam projects in the 4 key areas, to coordinate the development of a masterplan with no-go areas for dam construction for all Balkan rivers and to improve knowledge about the biodiversity of those rivers playing a crucial role in terms of biological connectivity and endemism in the region.

Another initiative represents online portal „Balkan green energy news,, established by Belgrade-based Centre for Promotion of Sustainable Development (<https://balkangreenenergynews.com/rs/o-nama/>) that covers news and stories on sustainable energy, climate action, environmental protection and urban mobility developments, by selecting news, policy actions and investment opportunities from the Balkan region countries: Serbia, Kosovo*, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Montenegro, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece, Cyprus and Turkey. This initiative is not aimed, however, primarily at providing support to local activists in preserving natural resources, but rather provide information on changes in regulatory environment concerning ecological issues to investors and other relevant stakeholders and expanding the regional green energy markets.

The role of social media in giving voice and broadening the support for the mobilizations of environmental movement

Social media are becoming an increasingly important channel of citizen mobilization in various types of contestation, especially within those related to environmental issues. Environmental issues in Serbia have not thus far received strong public visibility, nor have the environmental movement developed a mass support. However, social media significantly contributed to the visibility of environmental problems, especially when it comes to the problems with the excessive air pollution in Serbia. Social media are especially important when it

comes to local and grassroots initiatives that do not have adequate resources to promote their environmental agenda through other channels (e.g. political parties, institutional mechanisms, through official media etc.). Therefore, social media represents, if not the only, then for sure the most important channel of communication of the grassroots with the general public. In this way, a community of environmentally aware citizens is forming and drawing attention to the importance of environmental issues. Moreover, when it comes to particular environmental issues, this developing online community is becoming more and more successful in organizing offline events and protecting environmental interests. It was the protests against the mini hydropower plants that gained wider visibility and public support through social media, which resulted in significant support from citizen organizations and individuals on the ground, i.e. during the protests that took place in southern Serbia, in hard-to-reach rural areas.

Of course, one should keep in mind the numerous limitations and pitfalls that digital activism brings - from clicktivism and slacktivism (passivation of real engagement), to the possibility of rising mistrust among digital activists or targeting of activists by powerful actors (investors, authorities etc.) given that their engagement is publicly visible.

Government's response to ecological issues

The attitude of government officials towards environmental issues varies depending on the seriousness of the problem itself and whether it is caused by significant domestic or foreign investment. While small environmental problems (such as clearing a local landfill) are often solved under citizen pressure, this is not the case with environmental problems that are the result of large investment ventures. For example, the unfavorable environmental consequences of the Belgrade Waterfront project were not addressed by the authorities, although they were a topic raised by the environmental activists and experts. The situation is similar with Chinese investments (e.g. Zijin

Copper - Bor, Linglong Tire - Zrenjanin) as well as with the most recent Rio Tinto mining plans.

Generally speaking, most of the activities aimed at environmental protection undertaken by national or local authorities in Serbia are closely related to the European integration processes and the requirements imposed as a condition for accession to the European Union.

Environmental protests have made the environmental issues more important (currently) in the public discourse, but it should not be concluded that this has opened a dialogue on this topic between government representatives and civil society. Environmental issues are useful for mass mobilization and as such are often exploited in anti-regime protests (e.g. in many Eastern European countries during the 1989 revolution). Environmental agenda seems politically neutral, it often passes under the radar, it can unite people of different political orientations, but it has also very rarely been a goal in itself. Namely, it was more often used as a "green wail" to hide direct criticism of the regime, the demand for significant change, etc. It is possible that environmental concerns are currently being exploited by the opposition parties as suitable for wider mobilization, but there is a danger that they will also be dropped if they do not prove to be a successful means in launching massive protests against the ruling regime.

Drawing parallels between „Možemo,, and „Ne davimo Beograd,, (Let's Not Drown Belgrade)

The success of the eco-left, gathered around the “Možemo” platform, should certainly be understood (and many actors seem to see this) as a kind of signpost on how to build a political platform that successfully combines urban and environmental issues and social justice issues in Serbia. The people gathered around the “Možemo” have long and patiently built a network of their supporters, starting with local issues, as part of the election campaign for local assemblies of city districts.

Using changes in political structures (among other things, the death of the long-controversial mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić) in a coalition with the Workers' Front, "Možemo" entered the Parliament. The success of this platform is a combination of fighting for local, urban and environmental problems that affect all residents, the fight against corruption, demands for social justice and the fact that political parties that have been operating for many years have lost the trust of a large number of voters. Certainly, the role that favorable political opportunities played in the success of this initiative should not be forgotten. There are similar initiatives in Serbia, such as Let's Not Drown Belgrade, and their path of development is quite influenced by platforms such as "Možemo" and similar initiatives from other European countries. However, the political circumstances are different, and it is quite certain that we will have to wait for more significant successes of this or similar initiatives in Serbia.

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