



Recasting the Civil Society Landscape: Civic Mobilization against Mining Projects in the Western Balkans

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CHAPTER 4

RECASTING THE CIVIL SOCIETY LANDSCAPE: CIVIC MOBILIZATION AGAINST MINING PROJECTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



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INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENTAL MOBILIZATION IN CONTEXT

Environmental and anti-mining mobilizations have emerged as one of the most dynamic civic forces in the Western Balkans over the past decade. Although environmental issues were long peripheral to political debates in the region, the rapid expansion of extractive projects – often shaped by opaque decision-making, weak institutional safeguards, and competing geopolitical interests – has triggered an unprecedented wave of citizen engagement. From small, locally grounded initiatives to mass national protests, these mobilizations have begun to reshape the civic landscape, challenging entrenched power structures while revealing new possibilities for democratic participation.

Understanding civil society mobilization against mining in the region is important for several reasons. First, it provides valuable insights into citizens' concerns regarding planned mining projects – how they perceive potential threats, the anticipated impact on their way of life, and their prospects for the future in the affected areas. Although this resistance is predominantly local, emerging in specific locations targeted by mining initiatives, these struggles have expanded to the national level, shaping broader societal debates and forming networks with researchers, academics, and activists across the country. In this way, they articulate concerns that extend beyond narrowly defined local grievances: activism against mining has become a platform for expressing broader social and political positions on these issues, particularly in a context of institutional capture and controlled media, where conventional channels for expressing dissent are constrained.

Second, environmental mobilization has emerged as a significant political factor, particularly in Serbia, where its implications for future processes of democratization should not be overlooked. Mobilization against mining has become an integral component of the year-long protest cycle in Serbia, with the flags of *Ne damo Jadar* – an emblematic movement opposing the mining project in the Jadar Valley – frequently visible in protest marches. It is therefore essential to situate this mobilization within a broader discussion of ongoing struggles over Serbia's political and social future and, by extension, that of the wider region.

A brief historical background is necessary to understand how environmental concerns have transformed civil society in the region and influenced the political landscape through the rise of green political parties, some of which have become parliamentary actors. Until the mid-2010s, environmental issues were not particularly prominent in civil society, and environmental NGOs (eNGOs) rarely challenged official politics. For instance, Fagan and Ejdus wrote¹ about the conspicuous absence of eNGOs from the protests against the notorious Belgrade Waterfront project (BW), despite its well-documented risks related to surface water contami-

¹ Fagan, A., & Ejdus, F. 2022. "Lost at the waterfront? Explaining the absence of green organizations in the Don't let Belgrade D (r) own movement." *Environmental Politics* 31(7): 1289-1308.

nation, flooding, and air pollution. Their conclusion is twofold, pointing to the emerging divide between the “old” and the newly forming civil society – or the divisions “between established NGOs on the one side and grassroots activists on the other”. On the one hand, the eNGOs of the time became increasingly “locked into policy reform processes” and remained cautious toward any “street actions” that could compromise their credibility or eligibility to participate in such reform efforts. On the other hand, the political and ideological framing of the protests against BW made it difficult for established, donor-driven NGOs to join, as the movement embraced a broader ideological critique of neoliberal politics and practices, reflecting growing disenchantment with how NGOs operate and (fail to) address citizens’ grievances.

Opposition to new large-scale investment plans, which threatened to radically transform and commodify public spaces and natural habitats, marked a new phase in civil society struggles across the region. These movements also echoed the global resurgence of interest in protecting the commons and the environment. Right-to-the-city movements in Zagreb and Belgrade, for example, rallied a new generation of green activists opposing “urban megaprojects,”² who later established new green political parties – *Možemo!* (“We Can”) in Croatia and the *Zeleno-levi* front (Green-Left Front) in Serbia. Smaller cities and rural areas have likewise seen a rise in environmental activism with notable mobilization potential, such as protests against waste landfills in rural Montenegro or against air pollution in Tetovo, North Macedonia.

A true turning point in this respect, however, was the pan-regional mobilization against small hydropower plants (SHPs). Again, state-sponsored investment plans provided the backdrop for resistance. As the region committed itself to producing more clean energy, governments began incentivizing hydropower investments. Due to the abundance of fast-flowing mountain rivers ideal for small facilities, investors enthusiastically took advantage of feed-in tariffs. Approximately 3,000 SHPs were planned across the Balkans, including 856 in Serbia. Despite generating clean energy, SHPs have faced criticism for inflicting severe ecological damage by diverting water flows, degrading riverbeds, and disrupting fish migration.³ This prompted activists and local residents to organize some of the most dynamic protests in the region.⁴ Formal and informal organizations – such as the “Brave Women of Kruščica” or “Let’s Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina” – gained international visibility.⁵ Struggles like the one in Štrpce in Kosovo resonated beyond the region as well, especially because of their success in bridging the ethnic divide and uniting Albanians and Serbs in joint opposition.⁶ Over time, these initiatives fostered interregional cooperation and sustained collaboration among civil society organizations across the Western Balkans. In 2021, a regional alliance called “Let’s Defend the Rivers of the Balkans” was formed, uniting environmental activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina,

² Zeković, S., & Maričić, T. 2022. “Contemporary governance of urban mega-projects: a case study of the Belgrade waterfront.” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 10(4): 527-548.

³ <https://riverwatch.eu/en/balkanrivers/news/bankwatch-study-broken-rivers>

⁴ Vasiljević, J. 2020. “Environmental activism in the Balkans: from direct action to political subjectivity.” BiEPAG blog: <https://biepag.eu/environmental-activism-in-the-balkans-from-direct-action-to-political-subjectivity/>.

⁵ <https://www.ern.org/en/goldman-environmental-prize-for-the-brave-women-of-kruscica/>; <https://balkanrivers.net/en/news/award-for-stara-planina-activists>

⁶ <https://prishtinainsight.com/without-water-life-cannot-continue-say-hydropower-protestors/>

Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, and Kosovo. In late October 2025, the alliance changed its name to “Let’s Defend the Nature of the Balkans,” welcomed new organizations, and expanded to include North Macedonia.

Many of these organizations, along with this same alliance, now form the foundation for mobilization against lithium mining. Connections are particularly strong between activist groups from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, especially in regions targeted for mining projects. *Ne damo Jadar* from the Jadar valley has become a symbol of resistance to lithium mining, but numerous other organizations interact and cooperate. Their past experiences, established ties, and ongoing collaboration largely shape the dynamics and landscape of civil society mobilization against mining projects in the Western Balkans today.

NATIONAL CONTEXTS AND THE CONTOURS OF ANTI-MINING ACTIVISM

Resistance to mining in Western Balkan countries follows similar patterns but is also shaped by local and, more importantly, national contexts. Dissenting voices are raised primarily over environmental concerns and fears that water, air, and soil will be irreparably contaminated. Motives for mobilization also include the lack of transparency in projects and the exclusion of citizens from consultations and decision-making processes. For these reasons, the local and national political climate matters, as the (non)existence of platforms for dialogue and the exchange of opinions affects the development of citizen organizing.

Montenegro illustrates a case in which local concerns and arguments were recognized and ultimately prevailed over legally questionable procedures. Brskovo, in the municipality of Mojkovac in northeastern Montenegro, holds substantial deposits of zinc, lead, copper, and silver. The Swiss company Tara Resources was granted an exploration and mining concession in 2010, and drilling commenced shortly thereafter. According to the company’s website, the aim was to establish Brskovo as one of Europe’s largest zinc mines. However, the local population expressed serious concerns, not through street protests but via well-attended public debates. Organized citizens argued that the project documentation was riddled with inaccuracies and omissions; they pointed to the Public Health Institute’s findings of high concentrations of heavy metals in the air, water, and soil, which were falsified in the project’s plan. In 2023, the Minister of Energy and Mining formed an interdepartmental commission, which concluded that, due to numerous irregularities and the company’s failure to fulfil its obligations, the contract should be rescinded. Consequently, the concession agreement was terminated – although, in the latest development, Tara Resources has initiated arbitration proceedings against Montenegro.⁷

⁷ <https://montenegrobusiness.eu/montenegro-faces-300-million-arbitration-over-terminated-brskovo-mine-deal/>

In North Macedonia, the triangle comprising civil society, the state, and mining companies' interests has resulted in more ambiguous outcomes. The Strumica valley – a region known for its fertile soil but also for rich deposits of gold and copper – has become a site of contestation. The corporation Euromax Resources was granted a concession in 2012, with a four-year period to meet the conditions necessary for exploitation. The company failed to meet these conditions, but the state revoked the concession only in 2019. In January 2016, however, the company received another concession under the same terms. By 2020, the conditions still had not been fulfilled. Although the deadlines have expired, the Ministry of Economy and the government have not revoked this second concession. In addition to clear breaches of the law – and allegations that the company has ownership ties to local politicians⁸ – civil society has consistently warned that mining operations would seriously damage the environment and compromise the agricultural base of the area. Anti-mining campaigns have highlighted environmental risks associated with cyanidation or leaching with sodium cyanide, the most common gold-processing method. If leaked into soil or groundwater, this substance can cause permanent harm to ecosystems and human health.

Since 2012, at least 80 mining concessions have been granted in North Macedonia, following new legislation introduced by the Gruevski government to boost mining investment. During the autumn 2017 local elections, then-Prime Minister Zoran Zaev assured residents that no mining operations would be established in the region. However, these promises were broken in 2023 when the government approved the merger of two concessions for copper and gold extraction, as requested by Euromax Resources. Massive protests by organizations such as *Zdrava Kotlina* from Strumica and *Eco Dolina* from Novo Selo followed. The government reversed its decision, and Euromax Resources subsequently initiated legal proceedings to challenge this reversal. The company still needs to secure additional permits, including approval of an environmental protection study and a final exploitation permit. The government has indicated that these will not be granted without genuine local consultation and meaningful inclusion of public opinion. Currently, mining in the Strumica area is stalled, local opposition remains strong, and the company has threatened further legal action against the state.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, the relationship between the state and anti-mining civil society appears even more complex and contentious. Both countries are involved in strategic lithium-mining projects, which has placed anti-lithium mobilization at the center of civic resistance, although opposition to other mining initiatives also persists. The following paragraphs outline the broader context and provide an overview, while the subsequent section offers a more in-depth analysis based on fieldwork and focus groups conducted with activists.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the case of Lopare illustrates the dynamics of early-stage anti-mining mobilization and the role of information asymmetries in shaping public response. In 2023, local residents became aware of plans to mine lithium in the Majeveca region not through official communication but via activist networks, notably *Karton revolucija* (Cardboard Revolution), a prominent environmental organization based in Tuzla. The fact that exploratory

⁸ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/rudnik-ilovica---shtuka-so-vladin-amin-preku-nokj-/32493479.html>

research and drilling had already been underway prior to public disclosure contributed to a strong initial reaction marked by alarm and distrust. In response, local actors established *Čuvari Majevice*, one among a growing number of grassroots environmental initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina focused on monitoring lithium-mining developments. Although typically small in scale, these groups benefit from substantial public support and form dense networks of cooperation, which enhance their capacity for mobilization and information-sharing. Their influence is evident in the ability of local opposition to reshape political positioning at the municipal level: in September 2024, the mayors of eight towns and cities, from Lopare to Tuzla, publicly opposed lithium extraction, citing the risk of irreversible environmental and health consequences. The statement by the mayor of Bijeljina, indicating a willingness to resort to civil disobedience, further reflects the politicization of environmental concerns. However, the impact of such local political alignment should be interpreted with caution. Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex, multi-layered administrative system constrains the effective authority of municipal governments, as higher levels of governance retain the capacity to override local decisions. This institutional configuration highlights a key tension between locally grounded resistance and centralized decision-making structures, limiting the extent to which grassroots mobilization can translate into binding policy outcomes.

In Serbia, mining has raised broader public concern since the Chinese Zijin Mining Group took over the large copper mining and smelting complex in Bor in 2018. In April 2021, Zijin was instructed to temporarily halt operations due to failure to comply with environmental standards and was required to establish a wastewater treatment plant. The company has faced protests over its environmental record and its alleged use of opaque agreements to exploit Serbia's more lenient environmental regulations. In the Homolje area, Dundee Precious Metals received a license for exploration and has been operating for nearly two decades. According to the local initiative Rendžeri istočne Srbije (RIS), the company has drilled more than 2,000 wells, resulting in substantial environmental damage, including forest degradation, watercourse pollution, and contamination of drinking and agricultural water sources.

However, the main headlines concerning mining in Serbia have focused on Rio Tinto's Jadar project. Public debate intensified when the Serbian government reinstated plans for lithium mining in the Jadar valley – after cancelling them in 2021 due to massive civic protests. This reversal occurred during German Chancellor Scholz's visit to Serbia, when the EU and Serbia signed the so-called "lithium deal" in the summer of 2024. What sets anti-mining activism in Serbia apart is the extraordinary pressure placed on activists. Those opposing mining face state repression, including blacklisting, detentions, interrogations, and media smear campaigns, in which they are labelled "eco-terrorists." Another distinctive aspect is the scale of mobilization: the fight for the Jadar valley has become a symbol of resistance to corruption and a broader call for the rule of law. A protest in December 2021, when thousands blocked

⁹ On rising mistrust in the EU concerning its transactional and "deal-oriented" approach to the region, see: V. Džihčić, Mining in the Western Balkans – The Rise of Dangerous Transactionalism, BiEPAG policy brief, March 2025, <https://www.biepag.eu/publication/mining-in-the-western-balkans-the-rise-of-dangerous-transactionalism>

major roads across Serbia to oppose the Jadar project, was among the largest in Serbia's contemporary history and marked the beginning of a broader wave of mass protests.

Beyond environmental concerns, anti-mining initiatives across the Western Balkans share grievances related to corruption and exclusion from decision-making. While these organizations advocate for clean air, unpolluted water, and biodiversity, they are also raising broader alarms about systemic corruption and demanding greater citizen participation and oversight. They consistently employ similar methods – protests, petitions, legal actions, and awareness campaigns. Their successes and failures vary and appear linked to national contexts: basic freedoms, the rule of law, and institutional independence shape whether meaningful dialogue with the state is possible and whether environmental civil society can effectively influence major national projects. In more authoritarian environments marked by institutional capture and intimidation of the third sector, efforts to contest state flagship projects tend to deepen polarization and societal conflict.

Finally, the geopolitical context surrounding the demand for rare minerals influences civil society's orientation toward internationalization and cooperation with similar movements abroad. To some extent, this also shapes their ideological positioning. Besides regional cooperation and the creation of Balkan-wide networks (as discussed earlier), activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia are increasingly forging links with international movements. For example, ZBOR – Združeni balkanski otpor i rad (United Balkan Resistance and Labor) was founded in 2023 in Berlin as a “transnational collective and platform for articulating a united position against the capitalist green transition and all forms of violent extraction.”¹⁰ A year earlier, representatives of nine organizations from Portugal, Germany, Serbia, Chile, and Spain signed the “Jadar Declaration” on international solidarity in struggles against lithium exploitation and for environmental protection.¹¹

INSIDE THE MOVEMENT: PROFILES, MOTIVATIONS, AND STRATEGIES OF ANTI-MINING INITIATIVES

This section provides a more detailed examination of civic initiatives engaged in anti-mining mobilization in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, particularly in areas targeted for lithium extraction. As these organizations constitute the core infrastructure of anti-mining activism in the Western Balkans, a closer analysis of their narratives – encompassing motivations, strategies, and the conditions under which they operate – offers deeper insight into the dynamics of civil society mobilization against extractive projects in the region.

¹⁰ <https://projekte.berlinergazette.de/workshops/2023/10/06/unworking-balkans/>

¹¹ <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/jadar-declaration-unites-activists-in-global-resistance-against-lithium-mining/>

The accounts presented here are based on focus groups conducted in June 2025 in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Loznica, Serbia. Discussions sought to cover the following topics: motives for organizing, organizational practices and links with the local community, modes of action, relationships with institutions, regional and wider cooperation, and reflection on successes, failures and obstacles. Organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina that participated include: *Karton revolucija* (Tuzla), *Budimo se ljudi* (Doboj), *Aarhus centar* (Sarajevo), *Čuvari Ozrena* (Doboj), *Eko forum* (Zenica), *Eko put* (Bijeljina), *Fondacija Atelje za društvene promjene* (Sarajevo). Organizations from Serbia include: *Neko brine za Levač* (Levač), *PAKT – Podrinjski antikorupcijski tim* (Loznica), *Koalicija organizacija protiv korupcije u zaštiti životne sredine* (Loznica), *Ne damo Jadar* (Gornje Nedeljice, Loznica), *Suvoborska greda* (Gornji Milanovac), *Rendžeri istočne Srbije* (Petrovac na Mlavi). Twenty activists took part in two focus groups, each lasting about three hours. Although most of the activists had already made public statements and appearances, their comments are treated anonymously here.

These civic initiatives exhibit several distinctive features in terms of their composition, motivations, and modes of action. A notable characteristic is the significant presence of older participants, who in some cases also served as the initial organizers. This pattern cannot be explained solely by the ageing demographic structure of the affected areas, as has been observed in certain environmental movements in Eastern Serbia,¹² but rather reflects a specific form of locally grounded responsibility. Activists in places such as Loznica emphasize that those who have remained are precisely the ones who feel compelled to defend their communities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, some organizations also include war veterans among their key participants. These individuals bring extensive life experience and a particular understanding of the intersection between political and economic interests. Their engagement is shaped by an awareness that, although local politics continues to rely on nationalist narratives, it is often driven more fundamentally by corruption and clientelistic practices. At the same time, younger people are also actively involved. *Karton revolucija* represents a notable example of a youth-led organization that plays a significant role in linking activists and facilitating coordination across the region.

Most of these organizations emerged spontaneously, often in response to immediate local threats. The majority of activists had no prior experience in civic or political engagement; rather, their involvement was triggered by the discovery of (frequently illegal or opaque) attempts to initiate mining projects. Initial reactions typically took the form of direct, often physical, resistance aimed at preventing the commencement of such activities. These early acts of opposition subsequently facilitated broader mobilization, eventually leading to the formation of more structured organizational forms. In several cases, prior involvement in resistance to small hydropower plant projects served as an important precursor, providing both experiential knowledge and initial mobilization networks.

¹² See: I. Rajković, Whose death, whose eco-revival? *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 96 (2023): 71–87, <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/focaal/2023/96/fcl960106.xml>.

One of the central themes discussed in relation to the prime motives for engaging in activism is the widespread lack of information among citizens. By and large, citizens were unaware of major mining plans, and activists view this lack of public knowledge as evidence of citizens' exclusion from decision-making processes. Recognizing this exclusion – and the general absence of transparency – was a key motivator for organizing. Activists also regard informing people about the environmental consequences of mining as one of their core responsibilities. One informant, for example, explained how mining could have detrimental effects on an endangered species of bats, and how the potential loss of bat populations would severely damage local ecosystems, yet few citizens understood this.

A particularly important issue they raise is the introduction of new spatial plans, which foresee many exploratory drilling sites and suggest a broader shift towards transforming these countries into mining economies. Many activists described how overwhelming the scale of the unknown is: while the general public now knows about the Jadar project, few realize how many other concessions, exploratory works, and mining plans exist. Because the media are widely perceived as captured or corrupted, these civic initiatives view themselves as the primary channels for informing the public – essentially replacing the media.

Across civic initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, activists consistently emphasize the importance of cooperation across ethnic lines. Collaboration between individuals from different entities and communities is often framed as both necessary and inevitable, given that environmental threats are perceived as shared and indiscriminate. In this sense, local environmental mobilization is frequently presented as one of the most salient instances of cross-ethnic cooperation, standing in contrast to the entrenched dominance of divisive ethno-political narratives. Such mobilization thus not only addresses environmental concerns but also implicitly challenges existing political cleavages. As one activist put it: “We have to unite... not to be Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats... we are the people who oppose the idea of Bosnia and Herzegovina turning into a mine.”

Regional – and increasingly international – cooperation is widely regarded as essential. Activists see themselves as part of a broader network of environmental movements, a trend especially evident among anti-lithium initiatives in Serbia. They participate in regional events and conferences, exchange knowledge, and maintain formal networks. Yet many lament the small number of dedicated activists and wish their movements had more members. Ne damo Jadar from Serbia is viewed as a key partner, particularly given their shared opposition to lithium mining. Activists also place great value on cooperation with expert communities – scientists, lawyers, researchers, and the academic community at large. This cooperation lends their work legitimacy, strengthens advocacy, and increases visibility.

When discussing their relationship with institutions, activists overwhelmingly focus on threats and pressures. In Serbia, institutions are described as “captured” or virtually non-existent. Similar issues arise in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where frequent complaints concern institutional unresponsiveness and the withholding of information. Citizens learn about plans and projects directly from these organizations. As the Rangers of Eastern Serbia's (RIS) website states:

“There is almost no institutional protection in this area, nor is there any effective oversight on the ground. This is why the Rangers exist, as a response to the vacuum left by the services that should be protecting nature but do not perform their role.”

The widely shared perception is that, due to institutional and media capture, these organizations have become substitutes for institutions. Citizens now turn to them for information and assistance; they have lost trust in institutions and fear the authorities. While the fear of protesting or questioning authorities has long been widespread, activists in Serbia now observe that “fear has changed sides,” reflecting sentiments from the country’s wider protest movements. Ultimately, activists across the organizations underline that their goal is to secure reliable and responsive institutions.

Activists consistently highlight the behavior of local politicians, whom they describe as “sheriffs,” acting as if they own everything and bear no responsibility to citizens. They also emphasize the nexus of local war profiteers (from the wars of the 1990s), tycoons, corrupt politicians, and multinational companies. In fact, corruption is often discussed as the single biggest problem (“In essence, it all comes down to corruption”). They stress that the interests of large international companies are not the main issue – corrupt local and national politicians are. They warn that their countries risk becoming new “mining colonies” due to the corruption of local actors. Emphasizing the centrality of the anti-corruption struggle and the call for independent and accountable institutions, activists from Serbia highlight how this narrative and their campaign – which mobilized wider social support – positioned them as the vanguard of a broader student and citizen protest wave (“We mobilized the whole state”).

Pressures and attacks are among the most frequently reported experiences. Activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina report being denied entry to Serbia, being denied Serbian citizenship despite proper documentation, being followed, or experiencing mobile signal outages while in Serbia. SLAPP lawsuits are common. Media targeting is widespread, as are false accusations intended to delegitimize their work or attack their personal careers – sometimes directly from state leaders (“The President himself attacks us in the media”). Activists from Serbia cite instances in which websites and media outlets label them as “eco-terrorists,” including displaying their full names and personal photographs. In Serbia, the media are recognized as a crucial part of the problem due to disinformation, inaccurate reporting, toxic narratives, and direct personal targeting (“the biggest enemy of our society is the media”).

Local governments are often openly hostile or entirely unresponsive. Many activists report feeling personally targeted, and even their families are facing repercussions – for example, one activist whose son was the only local student denied a municipal scholarship. Activists from Fojnica report that their entire community has been punished for opposing small hydropower plants, including the removal of their bus stop.

The issue of trust, consequently, pervades their accounts. Local organizations struggle to identify who genuinely supports them, and widespread institutional mistrust, especially in Serbia, fuels generally low levels of social trust. However, as these initiatives increasingly play a role in

providing accurate information and advocating for the public good, they are gradually earning citizens' trust by effectively substituting for caring institutions.

Relations with international institutions receive mixed assessments. Activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina feel there is little encouragement from the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and little overall interest. Diplomatic pressure is regarded as important, but they remain frustrated by the lack of meaningful inclusion in discussions that affect their communities. They feel strongly about being consulted in various consultations or decision-making processes, resenting the passive role often imposed on them.

In Serbia, disappointment with the West is pronounced, particularly regarding its perceived support for President Vučić and the lithium-related project. Activists often feel compelled to clarify that criticizing Western actors does not make them Russophiles or right-wing, as they are frequently labelled. They also explain that complaints about Chinese mines (e.g., in Bor) are met with understanding in the West, whereas complaints about illegal actions by Western companies conducting exploratory drilling often lead to accusations of anti-Western sentiment. As one activist put it, “Both those from the West and the East see us as prey.”

Their activities are funded through donations and self-funding, with some organizations occasionally taking on project-based work, though their level of professionalization varies. Many prefer to remain cautious about expanding their membership, as they do not trust everyone, even though they value mass participation at events. Some sell merchandise, recognising that citizens want to support and identify with their struggle. Many groups are informal and lack bank accounts, relying on ad hoc donations. Several have turned to advocacy, moving from self-organized protection to more formal CSO work. Yet they also highlight the negative effects of “NGOisation”: while sometimes necessary to secure funds, project work demands administrative time they would rather spend on activism. Consistent with broader findings on local civic initiatives,¹³ they value genuine community support more than donor-dependent financing. Even the largest organizations avoid project-heavy funding structures to preserve their autonomy; *Ne damo Jadar*, for example, relies primarily on citizen donations.

Reflecting on their successes and strengths, activists highlight tangible results, including the ability to mobilize the local community. They take pride – especially younger activists – in “combating the state” online (“This is where we are ahead of them”). They are also proud of their legal strategies, having filed several lawsuits, and express faith in the eventual rule of law despite institutional pressures and current experiences. Above all, they are satisfied with having brought local communities together for the shared benefit. They believe mobilization must begin locally: “If there’s no resistance of the local community, there is nothing.” Yet they also recognize that meaningful success requires national or even regional action.

¹³ See B. Radovanović and J. Vasiljević (2022), *Community foundations in Serbia: Bottom-Up Empowerment. The role, challenges, and prospects for the development*. Belgrade: Trag Foundation: <https://tragfondacija.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Community-foundations-in-Serbia.pdf>.

Examples of successful mobilization include halting planned logging on Mount Konjuh and, in Serbia, Ne damo Jadar highlights uniting citizens, academia, and the opposition, ultimately preventing the adoption of the spatial plan for Loznica. They take pride in placing environmental protection at the center of public debate and in highlighting corruption as the country's primary issue.

Recent developments suggest that Rio Tinto may be abandoning the Jadar project.¹⁴ Some activists view this as a victory, while others remain cautious, arguing that the risks remain high and the threat persists. They stress that lithium is only part of the problem: broader mining plans across the region – reflected in new laws and spatial strategies – pose a much greater danger. Activists warn of thousands of exploratory boreholes and call for a comprehensive public debate on the future of mining, emphasizing that citizens know almost nothing about these plans.

When asked about the main obstacles, responses focus on politicians, the lack of free media, and the absence of opportunities to publicly debate proponents of mining projects – convinced that they would win public support if such debates were possible. Another obstacle is the sheer number of environmental threats, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to address them all. Many of these are also linked to corrupt local officials and businessmen, for example, the massive illegal gravel extraction (in the same parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina threatened with lithium mines). However, activists are unable to alert the public to so many different threats and problems occurring simultaneously.

Activists from Serbia identify their president and the current regime as the biggest obstacles. Across both countries, disappointment with the EU is widespread. Many feel that the EU supports criminal political elites and backs environmentally harmful projects. After voicing such criticism, activists are quick to add that they are not anti-Western – a reflection of the stigma they face for opposing EU-backed policies. A wide range of ideological perspectives is present in these movements; nationalism cannot be said to dominate. Their critique is directed at the behavior of international actors rather than rooted in ideological opposition.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Over the past decade, the Western Balkans have witnessed the emergence of powerful environmental and anti-mining mobilizations that are reshaping the civic landscape. Initially rooted in local grievances over land, water, and community integrity, these movements have evolved into broad coalitions that challenge opaque governance, weak regulatory standards, and the dominance of external investors in the region's development agenda. Their trajectory offers a critical lens for understanding democratic participation, institutional accountability, and the future of civic space.

¹⁴ <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/rio-tinto-halts-lithium-mining-project-jadar-in-serbia/>

These dynamics underscore why environmental and anti-mining movements offer a particularly revealing lens for examining the evolution of civil society in the Western Balkans. They illuminate how citizens mobilize in contexts marked by institutional fragility, how new actors enter the public arena, and how alliances are forged across local, national, and transnational scales. At the same time, they expose the limits of existing participatory mechanisms and the deepening tensions around resource governance, development models, and political accountability. Environmental struggles are simultaneously becoming struggles over democratic practice, rights, and the very contours of civic space in the region.

The insights from the focus groups and direct discussions with activists further reveal a civic landscape shaped by distrust in institutions, lack of political transparency, and endemic corruption. Civic initiatives under scrutiny share a strong sense of local responsibility, a determination to protect their communities, and an understanding that environmental mobilization requires both local rootedness and broader regional alliances. Their experiences show that, in the absence of institutional protection, citizens are stepping into roles that state institutions have failed to fulfil: informing the public, monitoring developments, and mobilizing collective resistance. Despite pressures, smear campaigns, and legal harassment, these groups have achieved notable successes, from stopping harmful local interventions to influencing the wider public debate on corruption and environmental protection. Their activism emerges both as a defensive fight against immediate threats and as a broader call for accountable institutions, transparent governance, and a meaningful rethinking of the region's development path.

Key findings:

- 1.** Environmental mobilization has become a major driver of civic engagement. Local struggles against lithium mining, in Serbia, have expanded into national movements capable of influencing political debates, shaping public opinion, and mobilizing tens of thousands of citizens.
- 2.** These movements articulate concerns that transcend environmental protection. They respond to deeper governance deficiencies: lack of transparency in decision-making, elite capture, state–investor collusion, and the erosion of public trust. Environmental questions have therefore become a proxy for broader democratic and socio-economic grievances.
- 3.** A new generation of civil society actors is transforming traditional NGO landscapes. Grassroots initiatives, informal networks, and place-based movements increasingly set the agenda, often outpacing established NGOs. Their legitimacy stems from local embeddedness and transparent decision-making – qualities often lacking in older donor-dependent organizations.
- 4.** Regional cooperation is strengthening civic capacity. The pan-Balkan alliance, formed around river protection and now expanded to “Let’s Defend the Nature of the Balkans,” demonstrates growing cross-border solidarity. Activists from WB countries increasingly share strategies, expertise, and monitoring capacities.

5. Lithium and other mining projects are likely to remain flashpoints.

Given high global demand for critical minerals, intensified investor interest, and inadequate environmental governance in the region, mining conflicts will continue to shape civic mobilization and political contestation.

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ABOUT US

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a group of policy analysts, scholars, and researchers established as a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans and the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz. It works to advance the European integration of the Western Balkans and to support the development of democratic, open, and resilient societies across the region. BiEPAG brings together leading experts from the Western Balkans and across Europe, recognised for their expertise and in-depth understanding of the region and the political, economic, and social processes shaping its future.

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The European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) is a joint initiative of the Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Foundation, and King Baudouin Foundation, dedicated to strengthening democracy,

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EFB works to strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, while promoting cooperation among civil society actors through solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides platforms and opportunities for informed and empowered citizens to advocate for accountable institutions and democratic governance, with a strong emphasis on supporting continuous reforms in policies and practices as countries progress toward EU accession.

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The Centre for Southeast European Studies was established in November 2008, following the designation of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. It is an interdisciplinary, cross-faculty institution dedicated to research and education, providing a platform for the university's diverse teaching and research activities on Southeast Europe, while fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.

The Centre also serves as a hub for information and documentation, and as a point of contact for the media and the wider public interested in political, legal, economic, and cultural developments in Southeast Europe. Its interdisciplinary team, comprising legal scholars, historians, and political scientists, contributes to the field through articles, monographs, and other publications. The Centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to advance cutting-edge research on Southeast Europe.

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