

HERE, AT LAST

PATHWAYS OF GREEN POLITICS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



VEDRAN HORVAT

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Edited by the Heinrich Böll Foundation

First edition Berlin 2024

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Proofreading: Robert Furlong

Design: Grafkladen, Berlin

Printing: Kern GmbH, Bexbach

ISBN 978-3-86928-264-0

www.boell.de

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Foreword

Greens – all of a sudden relevant

Until a few years ago, “Greens in the Western Balkans” could hardly be found as a political formation, but was more of a civil society movement. For a long time, as a green political foundation, our partners were human rights activists, environmentalists, and political analysts without a political mandate. What we shared with them was the vision of an ecologically sustainable, just, and democratic society. Although there were various Greens in the region, they lacked roots in the civil society structure and had experienced little political success. As Vedran Horvat explains, the societies of the Western Balkans were long considered too poor for environmental issues to be of importance. This was even truer for green political approaches in the broader sense, which focus on feminist, socially just, and economic alternatives and values.

Dismissed as luxury problems, green ideas did not resonate politically. The situation has changed fundamentally over the past five years, and it is these developments that Vedran deals with in his book.

What has changed?

In recent years, our colleagues on the ground have noticed a new rise in environmental awareness: Even in the politically weary societies of the Western Balkans, broader protest movements are now forming to address issues such as air pollution, water protection, resource exploitation, and urban development. Building on these movements, some green initiatives have succeeded in taking on political responsibility to varying degrees. For the first time, green political ideas and issues are being brought into parliaments and governments – under what are still extremely adverse conditions. The political realm in the Western Balkans is still characterized by authoritarian, often corrupt structures in politics, media, and business, a situation that is often summarized with the term “state capture.” A recent example of this is the manipulated elections at the national and local levels in Serbia. An ethno-nationalist understanding of politics dominates, war criminals are worshipped as heroes, and corrupt elites

use the media that they control to spread disinformation. Many people want a different life, as shown by large protest movements and, above all, the massive levels of emigration. In this situation, can green political actors become “changemakers” who can be approached by their citizens as their political representatives and serve as mayors, city councilors, and members of local and national parliaments while working toward improving living conditions?

Why does the Foundation do it?

The Heinrich Böll Foundation has been working in the region for 30 years. It now has three offices on the ground: in Sarajevo for Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia; in Belgrade for Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo; and in Tirana for Albania. Geographically surrounded by the European Union, the Western Balkans 6 are still candidate countries, however neither the European Union nor the six countries have fulfilled the necessary conditions for their accession as announced in 2003.

Vedran Horvat was the previous head of the Heinrich Böll Foundation’s former office in Zagreb until 2015, when he helped to establish the Institute for Political Ecology, which has since become a green think tank for alternative development models and innovative democratic solutions for political and economic change in society. He has been a board member of the Green European Foundation since 2019. In 2010, he founded the “Green Academy,” a biennial conference that is still regarded as a supra-regional agenda-setter in the fields of social movements, political ecology, and a just transition. This book describes the emergence of different shades of green in the countries of the Western Balkans. Vedran’s account is a personal testimony of his journey over the last two decades that examines the requirements, occurrences, and potentials of green politics in the region. We are delighted with the result, which offers a critical analysis of the situation in these uncertain times.

Berlin, March 2024

Katja Giebel

*Senior Programme Officer, East and South-East Europe Division
Heinrich Böll Foundation*

Preface

This book is the result of both my personal and professional work in supporting green politics in the past two decades. The intention of this book is not to write an all-inclusive, full history of the green movement in the region of the Western Balkans. To the contrary, it is to focus on particular episodes, highlights, and actors of this development trajectory with the aim of explaining under which conditions green politics can not only emerge, but also remain an unavoidable social and political player in the future.

The first few pages of this book were written at the edge of the world, in the heart of the Mediterranean, namely a small place called Komiža on Vis island in the Adriatic Sea. Watching and listening to the waves that touch the shores of Komiža under the lemon trees was a learning experience, as it brought me to the essence of a natural pendulum, whereby waves withdraw after they hit the shore and then disperse into thousands of small salty particles that evaporate in front of the strong sun rays. Like a natural pendulum, these waves tell the story of the ancient wisdom that reflects in the sea to any benevolent observer. Today, when we observe the increase in far-right tendencies and the inclination toward autocracy across Europe, we see big threats both to the health of democracies and to environmental and social justice. In the Balkans, where our societies are burdened by the legacy of war caused by nationalism and where wounds from the wars in the 1990s are not healed, we understand the weight of this threat. That is why we see the appearance of progressive social forces as being the essential and most vital parts of our societies.

As you can see, this book is not about the comfort of the sea and an abundant multitude of waves. To the contrary, it is a book about bold and courageous people who are fighting against a legacy of nationalism, against the plunder of the warlords, and against social injustice and environmental degradation in the brutal political realities of the Balkans. Fighting against it was a first and essential step as we realized that democracy had to be fought for again and again, and that this is not irreversible, as we see today. It is about a green wave that eventually reached the Balkans and places where I live – and have been living and traveling extensively for the last two decades. By no accident, I also wrote a couple of pages

on Vis island (Croatia), which was the meeting point for hundreds and hundreds of green activists, scholars, researchers, and future politicians for more than a decade – it is one of the few incubators where a different imagining of the Balkans' future has been co-created through a multitude of conversations and exchanges. It is also a result of patient and meticulous fine-tuning that has put the focus on different personal traits which later became a necessary ingredient for a new political body that could exist across the boundaries of nation-states. Vis island is a place where street rebels and fighters had a chance to rest and reflect, restore their energy, and refresh their imaginations before returning back to their battles and struggles, reinvigorated for future political battles.

I write this book in a moment when the green development trajectory in the region has hitherto reached the stage of first victories and successes, where struggles have translated into institutional politics in the assemblies, councils, and governments. But there have also been the first failures, disappointments, and lessons learned. The green wave has spilled over to the Balkans region, to Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and beyond – removing obstacles for another type of politics. That path is by no means irreversible: There is continuous learning through failures and victories, but it is the proper moment to share some views and experiences on how green politics was made possible in the Balkans. I am writing this with the motivation to document, reflect, think, and strategize further – and together. This is a book about giving birth to a different type of politics that is managing to find its way in a hostile environment, in which state institutions are captured and trust has been systematically destroyed.

The last few years were everything but easy. A region that was heavily devastated by war in the 1990s is able to quickly recognize signs of forthcoming conflicts and wars elsewhere in the world, be it Eastern Europe or the Middle East. Balkan migrant routes are again active, and thousands of refugees and migrants walk through the Balkans to reach Western Europe. Heavy rains, storms, and floods hit our cities and countries during the summer, showing that climate change is our everyday reality and not a distant threat. Energy and food security are not abstract topics for the experts, but instead a daily concern of the people. It is time for green politics.

Since my own path is intertwined with these developments, both through my work and friendships, I focus in this book also on the personal

stories and experiences of the main actors. Some of them I met for the first time, but most of them were already around for quite some time. In my previous work as the Croatian director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation office in Zagreb, and later in my other capacities at the Institute for Political Ecology and the Green European Foundation, I have witnessed more as well as less successful episodes of the green political trajectory across Europe, while at the same time building bridges to share and exchange lessons learned in this corner of Europe. Those we have been waiting for eventually arrived, having been shaped and carved by the path itself.

The last pages of this book were written in a chaotic time of new wars and never before seen superstorms, floods, and heat waves that hit this part of Europe in the summer of 2023. The striking power of nature appeared as an ominous sign of irreversible change that our societies have to face while adapting our lives to unstoppable climate change. We still hope this response will be democratic and just, not forced from above and unevenly distributed to hurt the poor and most vulnerable. For this stormy journey, we need Greens on the frontline.

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible if I had not found a supportive environment, sufficient time, and a generally adequate constellation that would support my ideation and work.

First and foremost, my biggest thanks go to my immediate and closest companions for their love, support, and patience – to Mak, Nadja, and Klo. Second, my thanks go to the Heinrich Böll Foundation, which commissioned and supported my work on the book for the last two years, namely to Katja Giebel, Walter Kaufmann, Petra Zimmermann, and Bernd Rheinberg. Their generous support, patience, benevolence, and understanding continually followed me on this journey. I also wish to thank Nino Lejava and Jelena Vukobrat for their useful and kind comments on my text. Big thanks also go to my ex-colleagues in the Heinrich Böll Foundation offices in the Western Balkans region, but particularly to Mirela Grünther-Dečević, former director of the Sarajevo office and my companion. Warm thanks also go to Azra Džajić-Weber, Srđan Dvornik, Gudrun Fischer, Thomas Handrich, Marta Batinić Petrović, and Nisveta Šeho – former colleagues at the Heinrich Böll Foundation who were great mentors, colleagues, and supporters when I embarked on the journey of exploring green politics two decades ago.

Likewise, big thanks go to my dearest colleagues and friends in the Institute for Political Ecology – Lana Pukanić, Tina Tešija, Nikolina Rajković, and particularly Mladen Domazet, who co-founded the Institute for Political Ecology with me and other founders. They showed understanding and were generous, gentle, reliable, and comforting companions along the way, particularly during turbulent periods. Apart from work, we did not forget about the fun and became masters in party-making.

This book would not exist if I had not been able to spend hundreds of hours in friendly and inspiring conversations with my interlocutors across the region and Europe (listed in annex 1). Regardless of whether they were active players, supporters, or observers, the reflections and testimonials about the development of green politics in the region would not have been possible without them – it is also their story. Each has brought a puzzle piece of the bigger picture that I want to share in this book.

For the rich and intellectually inspiring conversations and political

debates that preceded the ideas in this book, I am grateful to the following colleagues, friends, and companions with whom I shared this path in the last years on various occasions: Srećko Horvat, Nikola Devčić Mišo, Iva Marčetić, Ivana Dragičević, Tomislav Tomašević, Manuel Sarrazin, Marija Bartl, Karin Doolan, Jelena Miloš, Paul Stubbs, Teodor Celakoski, Giovanni Allegretti, Milan Horaček, Vjeran Piršić, Fran Brdar, Marko Gregović, Anne de Boer, Marc Berthold, Giuseppe Mastruzzo, Tin Gazivoda, Robert Pašičko, Jerko Bakotin, Reinhard Buetikofer, Ajda Pistotnik, Ranko Bon, Katarina (Kaća) Pavlović, Rebeka Szabo, Paul Hockenos, Kristof Szombati, Leonore Gewessler, Laurent Standaert, Blair Taylor, Javor Benedek, Marina Barbalata, Balsa Lubarda, Eva van der Rakt, Petar Milat, Đuro Capor, Ska Keller, Aleksandar Kovačević, Gerhard Jordan, Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield, Jovica Lončar, Jamie Kendrick, Igor Miškulin, Tomislav Medak, Danijela Dolenc, Jagoda Munić, Ugo Mattei, Dražen Šimleša, Soeren Altstaedt, Edouard Gaudot, Sandra Benčić, Fiona Dove, Aurelie Marechal, Andreas Novy, Josip Jagić, Daniel Chavez, Dirk Holemans, Danijela Dugandžić, Ivan Barbalić, Branko Ančić, Robert Kozma, and Ivica Vitaljić.

This list would not be complete without huge thanks for the awesome support and timely help whenever it was needed from my mother, brother, and Tatjana Vlašić, Kumjana Novakova, Emiliano Perčević, Mima Simić, Sergio Pains, Josip Gamberožić, Barbara Matejčić, Marija Tudor, Maja Prebeg, Antonija Horvat, Igor Milat, Renata Mihalac, Sara Topić, Ines Perković, Boris Hermešćec, and Slaviša Raković.

Last but not least, I am thankful for the patient, excellent, and meticulous proofreading and editing work of Robert Furlong, who provided tremendous support to help me share my thoughts in a more concise, accurate, and clear way. I wish to thank the legendary Dejan Dragosavac Ruta for doing mastery work on the cover illustration of the book.

Introduction

This is a story about the emerging green movement in the Balkans as well as the patient and meticulous political work of the many people behind it. We say it is one movement, but we believe it is a plurality, diversity, and multitude of movements that form this one single movement spreading across this region¹ and reaching across the geographical and political boundaries of young nation-states. Yet, this movement sees the same goals for future of the region – a place for a good life for all, without environmental degradation, without exploitation of people and nature, with high-quality public services and common goods, and equality and justice for everyone. This is the common vision of this political movement, which wants to make a difference and transform the Balkans into a livable and just place in this corner of Europe.

Why now? Well, until just recently, when someone abroad would ask you “Do you not have a green party in your country?,” for most people from the Balkans, the answer would be in the negative. It was only in the last few years that a green surge passed through this region and led to the first green councilors, majors, Members of Parliament (MPs), and even prime ministers. Here we will not evaluate their failures or successes, but instead share the story about political empowerment and transformative agency that can endure and permanently change the political landscape in the region. Although this green wave has manifested in various ways – in some places leaving just a glimpse of hope or only traces of green politics, in other places more sustainable and durable structures – in this book we focus on experiences, stories, and trajectories that offer a long-term perspective on real green politics in the region.

For visitors, the Balkans is often perceived as a region with beautiful nature, delicious food, and warm people. But we all know that politically this region can be a mess. Under such conditions, green politics was like a delicate and unusual flower, to be cultivated in the rough political jungle of

¹ In this case, the region is equal to Western Balkans 6 (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo). Yet, due to different stages of development of green political movements, not all countries are represented with the same amount of attention. As Croatia is not part of WB 6 and due to the author's personal involvement in building the green movement in Croatia, the case of Možemo's development will be only occasionally mentioned, but not fully covered in the book.

the region. For many years, people with green values were not represented politically in the democratic institutions across the region. Burdened by the heavy legacy of war, nationalist narratives, illegal privatizations, and a captured state, to name only a few circumstances, building a different type of politics in the region was in no way easy. Still, the Balkans is also a region where one can – in spite of hostile conditions – find vibrant urban movements that govern urban spaces, groups of local women caring about the rivers, innovative approaches to housing, etc. However, creating a new political player in many cases included – and still does – fierce and constant attacks by the ruling regimes and a whole range of disconcerting experiences for anyone who dares to interfere or challenge these prevailing forces. And this new player is comprised of the nascent green political groups and movements. This often means that the path forward for these movements is far from comfortable and quite frequently marked by conflicts, tensions, assaults, and confrontations with political opponents and representatives of institutional power. Those who want to reclaim power immediately feel the consequences, so it takes courage, patience, and persistence to continue with the struggle while at the same time remaining fresh and innovative.

This book will not ignore the unfavorable conditions and constraints for green politics to emerge, but rather focus more on affirmative aspects and proposals on how we can ensure that the green political movement and values it promotes – now that they are here – become a permanent reference point and an unavoidable political and social force in this corner of Europe. It will be a book about the transformative agency that green politics play in the Balkans.

My motivation to write this book and collect these stories is multi-fold. The past two decades of my activist and political work in the region made me more cautious, but not less supportive. Besides mere reflection, which can have its own value and strategic importance, this book is also an opportunity to document developments that were formative for green politics in the region in the nascent years. Furthermore, in the moment where our ideological and political values are being strongly challenged and disrupted by turmoil from the pandemic, ongoing wars, and the climate crisis – and when Greens in Europe are increasingly coming under heavy pressure to govern and deliver – it is somewhat comforting to know that

Balkan countries have opened up and are ready for another type of politics. We in the Balkans have been waiting for such a long time for ourselves to be ready. Three decades ago, this region experienced the devastating impacts of war, and yet it offers hope that it is possible for green politics to flourish under such conditions.

Regardless of where attacks come from – right-wing political opponents, a captured state, or speculative investors – the green movement offers a breath of fresh air, and its bold protagonists show that they will not give up trying to tame the authoritarian powers they are exposed to. Indeed, it is a political novelty in the region and deserves more attention, as it has already made a difference and presents a seed of transformation for the whole region, breaking a long-established polarizing mold that was holding us down for many years.

The main intention of this book is to explore how green politics – its ideas and protagonists – evolved and developed in the region (the territory of Western Balkan), which values it was organized around, and how it managed to gain influence. Throughout the book, I combine the results of my desk research, decades of observation, and interviews I have conducted with more than 70 different interlocutors (in 2022 and 2023) who are in different ways connected to this topic. Furthermore, my goal is to examine specific features and perspectives of contemporary green politics in the Balkans. In other words: What is today's green politics in the region? What are its demands and expressions? In doing so, I will focus on a few specific dimensions of green politics in the region – namely agency, time, and direction.

Firstly, transformative agency is surely the expected and most desirable feature of green politics, both from the perspective of motivation/mobilization as well as the transformation of society/politics as a desirable outcome. It is contesting and challenging, so to say. It is disrupting, disturbing, and “shaking up” the status quo that exists within political institutions across the region. Greens are expected to do this – it is in their political DNA. Secondly, time is a sensitive issue, as accelerated development is not always the best, whereas incremental and gradual development also presents various risks: For systemic change around climate or social inequalities,

we simply cannot wait decades. Yet, some processes require time to create trust, common experiences, and collective memory – ingredients that can play vital and decisive roles later. Very often, there comes a moment of awareness when society expects to be saved or improved, not from the outside, but by ourselves, active and engaged citizens who need to enter politics – and transform it. Thirdly, the direction of development of green political projects – the decisions, coalitions, alliances, and crossroads along the way – often mark and influence its trajectory. These three factors play decisive roles in this nascent and formative period of the green political movement. I will come back many times exactly to these relationships in my conversations.

Born on the street through struggles against the privatization of public spaces, against the privatization of common goods, and the extraction of natural resources, various civic initiatives gained more and more knowledge, legitimacy, and citizen involvement, gradually evolving into movements with clear political aspirations – movements that began cooperating between cities and even across countries. During this same period, green political representation was – and in many cases still is – often misrepresented or dispersed across small and invisible self-proclaimed parties that were not able to build political movements or mobilize citizens. Though these two realities co-exist(ed), the latter turned out to often be artificial, disconnected from society, or lacking legitimacy. It was very often just a phase prior to the galvanization of authentic political projects. Still, the presence of the latter was often an obstacle, a mere outcome of ambitions or political engineering, rather than an expression of the ethics or political values of a certain community.

Green political parties and platforms in the region are now in their nascent and formative years. They are in the process of the unfinished transformation from a movement into a party, or sometimes locked in a stagnant position of a small and invisible party, in spite of some “golden periods” in the past. They are facing various risks and exploring further avenues of development in a period when ecological topics have entered mainstream political debates and other (often much stronger) political parties are aiming to occupy this space. The position of green political subjects (or as green as possible) is not fixed. Even without coherent green programs, in some cases these people are able to be in positions

of power (such as with the URA – the United Reform Action party in Montenegro). In other cases, they appear a few months before the elections² (Bosnia and Herzegovina), using the “green” label as a shortcut to become distinct players and attract some votes, often making trades later with bigger coalition partners.

For many years, ecologists in the region were in a political sense “underdogs,” yet their status is radically changing. External factors that include both global concerns over resources and imperatives for their fair distribution in times of a climate and energy crisis, but also various extractivist investments in the region and a degradation in the quality of life, are helping green politics to establish a better position and find a place in the political debate to connect these issues with economic and social topics.

Furthermore, civic disobedience, courage, and a will to cope with the ghosts of a deep and captured state – while often being exposed to various pressures – are obviously appreciated by citizens,³ who understand the ability to intervene, meddle, and be present when some sort of injustice is taking place. The traits of this ability can be defined as consistency, integrity, a continual presence, and continuity, which are – as the main features of green politics in the region – recognized and increasingly being rewarded by citizens and voters. Now is a good moment to exit the political labyrinth in which green political ideas have been locked for a long time. In a time of an unprecedented scale of assault on natural resources and public goods – and even coupled with increasing authoritarian rule, as in Serbia – there is a strong push to leave the labyrinth and transcend limitations in order to become a new political force that is able to face and cope with these challenges.

2 U. Trendu (2022, May 4), OTKRIVAMO Na izborima će biti puno “zelenih”, a povratak najavljuje i Zlatko Lagumdžija, <https://www.mreza-mira.net/vijesti/clanci/otkrivamo-na-izborima-ce-biti-puno-zelenih-a-povratak-najavljuje-i-zlatko-lagumdzija/?fbclid=IwAR1b36qcaOi5z-xf63GAuU6ePFW2PEOspI9GVSDMfCk2E9kTBsUxZA6c-S2Q>

3 Zal (2022, August 3), Ne davimo Beograd enters office in the National Assembly, <https://nedavimobeograd.rs/ne-davimo-beograd-enters-office-in-the-national-assembly/>

Traces of green politics

When we search for green political actors in the region, we are faced with a question – What is green in the Balkans? To what extent is it framed beyond a purely ecological and environmental field, which is becoming more and more attractive to right-wing forces. Are green parties here different from other green parties in Europe? Is it more difficult to find them here? If yes, why? Can this be different? In this chapter, I focus on beginnings and the departure points from which green politics emerged – or could emerge – in the future. Where are the seeds or the traces of green politics, which has not yet begun its institutional life?

At the European level, there is the European Green Party (EGP), which quite concretely outlines its main values and vision.⁴ Any new member is expected to adhere to these values, which are expected to be an integral part of that movement and its trajectory. Our expectations surely follow the same direction. Talking about Greens, we most likely expect a party with strong grassroots support: non-conformist and disobedient; more horizontal, inclusive, and participative with a strong feminist dimension; rooted in local movements; anti-nationalist; interested in social justice and fairness; pro-European and internationalist. And of course – rooted in ecological struggles! Not all Greens in the region have the same capacity or even trajectory, yet there is an expectation that they do share the same values and most political positions. It is there where we can more easily find traces of green politics in the region.

Today in the Balkans, we already have visible and successful national green political platforms, such as the Zeleno-levi front in Serbia (Green-Left Front), which was established in 2023, following the legacy of the Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade movement (Don't let Belgrade D(r)own)⁵ and their partner organizations. The Zeleno-levi front has few outstanding councilors in the City Assembly of Belgrade and few MPs in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. Until recently, Montenegro had a green prime minister, Dritan Abazović from the United Reform Action (URA) party,

⁴ European Greens (s.a.), Homepage, <https://www.europeangreens.eu>

⁵ In 2023 the Zeleno-levi front was established as the political party and successor of the Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade movement. Accordingly, the same protagonists will appear under both names. Yet, for the period before the party was established, they will appear with Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade affiliation.

which was identified as a green party by the EGP. For a limited time, the party was successful, but then it lost direction with its initial program and became a great disappointment to its own constituency. A bit less successful was the Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM) party in North Macedonia, also recognized by the EGP as a member party. In neighboring Croatia – a member of the European Union – the Green-Left block around the political platform Možemo has a green city government in Zagreb and a few MPs in the Croatian parliament. In other countries of the Balkans, such as Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greens are still struggling. Although it is evident as to how fragile these political successes are in the context of electoral volatility, we will not evaluate their successes here but instead look briefly at the past decade and search for their origins and inspiration.

There was a long period in the last two decades marked by the complete absence of relevant green political forces, their artificial and fund-driven existence, and the fragmentation of and competition with small irrelevant groups invisible to broader society. Most of the political work – if any – to combat environmental degradation, speculative investments, and the extraction of natural resources was done by civil society organizations, movements, and civic initiatives, although they were hesitant to enter the institutional political sphere. Similarly, feminist movements, anti-war movements, and human rights defenders acted exclusively through organized civil society, without any direct political representation.

With attempts of brutal and orchestrated assaults on the privatization of nature and public goods – coupled with a malfunctioning and captured state, as in the case of Serbia – conditions in society have abruptly and dramatically changed, allowing political parties to develop from the Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade movement so as to gain visibility and relevance. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, privatization was focused on rivers (through the invasive construction of hundreds of mini hydropower plants) and environmental degradation (e.g., highly polluted air⁶). These issues were absent from party politics or only partially addressed by parties that share

6 Human Rights Watch (2022, August 29), Bosnia and Herzegovina: Deadly Air Pollution Killing Thousands, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/29/bosnia-and-herzegovina-deadly-air-pollution-killing-thousands>

only some green values. Similarly, in North Macedonia, urban protests against nationalist-driven construction projects – organized around and beyond the initiative Plošad Sloboda – did not generate new green political actors, though there was a turning point when developments finally would allow for it. Still, both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, there are green parties that claim to be green and use the label. They often have dubious motives and values that operate within nationalist – or in many ways very exclusive – discourses.

“Since the early 2000s we in Serbia have been living under the brutal privatization of banks, financial sector, public companies, land, health, and education. The last frontier included natural resources, public spaces, forests, rivers, coastlines, and mines, which coincided with the election of the SNS [Serbian Progressive Party] and Aleksandar Vučić as prime minister,” recalls Iva Marković, program director at Polekol, a nonprofit organization dedicated to political ecology. “While in previous cases protests were more fragmented,” she continues, “in case of the attack on natural resources resistance was broad and massive, as everyone could identify with the defense of nature. There was a clear shift as environmental problems became tangible, visible, and material.”

This care and concern, she explains, about natural resources, which were under attack, remained in an empty space that was not initially claimed by any political party, and therefore it was perceived as an authentic grassroots struggle of small people against polluters and the regime of Vučić. However, in the last three years, environmental issues became a terrain for party competition. For many political parties, the environment is now the card which they need to show when they want to prove that they are coming from the people and to gain credentials that they are legitimate and authentic. Allegedly, Vučić and his ministers used to pejoratively call them “ecological circus” or “sidewalk ecologists.”

The general impression, confirmed by many other interlocutors, is that green policies are becoming very popular and there is a much bigger demand for them. For newcomers in institutional politics, such as the Zeleno-levi front, that can be an advantage, as they are perceived to be frontrunners and pioneers. This gives them more credibility, apart from the fact that they are able to connect better on socio-economic topics, at least in Belgrade.

Predrag Momčilović, an environmental activist and director of the newly established Center for Green Politics, which is the foundation of the Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade platform (which turned into the Zeleno-levi front), says that the theoretical and ideological basis of the green movement in Serbia has not yet been established. “It was merely that we reacted to the problems, and that was repeated many many times. We were fighting against something, and more rarely for something. We had neither the time nor attention or capacity to develop an ideological consistency or build up sufficient theoretical knowledge. This is now a priority for us,” he says. In many ways, these explanations show that the actions of movements create ideological positions, and not the opposite.

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is difficult to find even traces of green politics. Although “ecological topics” have gained popularity and public attention, the bottom-up process of building a green political movement is absent. Seeds of green politics might be present in very small and isolated feminist or ecological bubbles, but they are deeply disconnected – or self-protected – from what they find in contaminated mainstream political debates. Protest mobilizations against mini hydropower plants on Bosnian rivers in 2018 and 2019 had a distinctive profile and genuine motivation to defend the common good and natural resources. In many cases, these were led by women, which was of utmost importance for an increasingly patriarchal and oppressive society such as Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁷ Again, these protests have not been identified as the birth of a new political actor.

“We are now in the phase where we expect new green political subjects to emerge,” says Alma Midžić, a researcher and activist based in Sarajevo. “If that does not happen soon, space for such intervention will be significantly reduced, as nationalist parties, opportunists, and international organizations are taking over ‘green topics’ and minimizing its political and organizing potential.”

Many will confirm later that donors’ agendas in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there is still a relatively strong donor community, place green

⁷ Patriarchy- and gender-based oppression has increased in the last two decades in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also due to religious influence, unlike in the late 1980s, when society was much more secular.

topics high up, but in a very depoliticizing manner, let alone the risks and examples of greenwashing, which postpones or disables the political articulation of green values.

“It is almost impossible to talk about green politics in an ethnically divided and conflicted society where nationalism is constantly in the focus,” says Jasminka Bjelavac, program coordinator in the Sarajevo office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Although Sarajevo is among the top three most air-polluted European cities, it seems more than difficult to put the environment at the top of the political agenda. “It is still expected that we reach a certain stage of economic development so that we are able to deal with ecological issues. This is now perceived as the privilege. At the same time, decisions made about energy, agriculture, or waste remain completely unknown to ordinary people, while they are most vital particularly in the times of crises,” she explains.

Safet Kubat, an ecological activist from the City of Zenica, says that “although ecological issues are not represented within the existing party spectrum in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” there is still a very small vacuum, as most of the political positions are already determined within the contrasted framework of antagonized society and identity politics. “In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is questionable if ecology has sufficient power as a topic to push out other issues and impose itself as a relevant topic for voters. There are also environmental NGOs where we have certain expertise but that is still far from sufficient,” he says.

Green parties that have existed in Bosnia and Herzegovina thus far would mainly appear a few months before elections in order to top up their number of votes and include ecological topics or caring about nature in their discussions. In many cases, they falsely represented green values and did not demonstrate any sort of organic progress. “In our case, many depleted politicians try to re-incarnate in the political arena wearing a ‘green hat’⁸ and present themselves as something new, good, different, modern, and pro-European, counting on people having forgotten their previous political engagement,” says Alma.

8 Another not irrelevant problem in Bosnian and Herzegovinian politics is the fact that the color green is identified with the Bosniak Nationalist Party, the SDA. In political discourse, the presence of “green” is therefore already occupied and marked with other values related to nationalism, religion, patriarchy, conservative values, exclusion, and sometimes hate speech.

Setting the scene

There are various factors gaining in relevance as to why green politics in the region can establish a presence. There was a recent significant breakthrough of environmental awareness across the region manifested by collective resistance against air pollution, support for the protection of water, and positions against waste mismanagement and the mining of metals such as lithium. Yet, this was done without any – or with very limited – translation into a broader green political vision that would also make connections with gender inequalities, social justice, or an alternative economic model. Ecological appeal was in many cases – and still is – perceived to be beyond, or without, any ideology.

In this chapter, I aim to dive deeper into the context and seek the conditions that were needed to support or enable the emergence of green political platforms and parties across the region. What were the beginnings, and how was the scene set up for, or by, the new changemakers? That mainly relates to the opportunities and incentives – and sometimes the protagonists – that created the space for the appearance of green political platforms.

Most interlocutors I spoke with agreed that the distinction between “ecological” and “green” in the region is still absent, or at least invisible to many citizens. But it is a most important difference for the further development of green political ideas and their implementation into the political realities of the region. Although in the case of this region the term “green” is almost equal to “ecological,” there is actually quite a wide space between the two, as an environmental cause by no means implies a connection to nationalism, gender equality, social justice, class equality, the type of economy, etc. Bearing in mind the difference between ecological (which often appears without ideology – or with different ideologies) and politically green (which implies many other progressive positions and values), we can say that ecological topics are slowly entering the mainstream political debates in the region. Yet, for politically green positions, that is still not the case, and substantial work needs to be done to present stable and viable green political options that go beyond mere environmental orientations. Here I am not pursuing any sort of puritanism, but I want to clearly indicate that ecology cannot be coupled with

exclusion, racism, homophobia, hate speech, nationalism, patriarchy, or authoritarian rule. These are also boundaries that clearly determine that such actors are not green political protagonists, in spite of the fact that they might be involved in struggles related to the protection of the environment or natural resources.

Accordingly, my attention is focused on the transition from increased ecological and environmental awareness of the public manifested through popular support – or lack of it – toward various policy decisions (also related to the work of the movements and activists) into a fully fledged green political project that aims to represent these values in the political space. With the global and European climate and energy crisis induced by Russia's war on Ukraine or, on the other hand, the insufficiently ambitious European Green Deal (and its regional versions⁹), this trend has been accelerated, often followed by specific discussions around food security, waste management options, and sustainable mobility. These discussions are the opportunity for citizens to compare standards and the quality of their lives with their relatives and friends from a massive diaspora who are already experiencing the benefits of eco-modernity elsewhere in Europe. Lately, energy security and climate adaptation are no longer theoretical and abstract topics for activist or expert circles, as they have entered into the mainstream out of necessity due to geopolitical changes. Also, the region was in recent years heavily affected by extreme weather events, floods, heatwaves, and super storms that created millions of euros in damage, again to be covered by public budgets. Climate change and energy security suddenly became relevant topics, but there were not many relevant speakers to have decent political debates. The focus on energy scarcity or the autonomy of energy and food production has increasing relevance for ordinary people. In times of crisis and more available and affordable technologies, many citizens are reorienting themselves to become more independent and responsible regarding their energy, mobility, and resource use, particularly with energy and waste. Citizens and voters in the region were often described as being too poor to be concerned with the environment, and green options were likewise discredited on the basis of myths that only in the distant future would green politics

9 Umweltbundesamt (2022), Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, <https://www.umweltbundesamt.at/en/news220208en>

enter the political stage. This accelerating trend in public opinion is not always followed up with political representation, nor by existing political parties and their capacity to demonstrate their competence and ability to deliver solutions.

Until recently, Đorđe Pavičević was a professor of political sciences in Belgrade and a great supporter of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade. It would be a bit before 2022 that he decides to be a candidate on their list and later become Member of Parliament of the Zeleno-levi front in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, where they will win a few seats. This will be the result of the 2022 campaign for the Serbian general elections¹⁰, in which Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade will become part of the oppositional electoral alliance Moramo (We Must), which will be formed in early 2022 together with Zajedno (Together for Serbia) and Ekološki ustanak (Ecological Uprising). After that, Moramo will cease to exist and each party will go its own way, representing different shades of green. Accordingly, it is not just Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade that will be perceived as a green political force, at least in cases where green equals “ecological.”

There are two more protagonists who earn an “ecological badge” for their recent protests against environmental degradation: namely Nebojša Zelenović, a 47-year-old former major of the Serbian town Šabac (in the same period when Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade was leading protest mobilizations in Belgrade), and now the president of the party Together, Aleksandar Jovanović Čuta, who was one of the frontrunners of the Ekološki ustanak movement but appeared only recently. Both of them ended up as MPs in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. Still, Zelenović (which translates into Mr. Green) and Čuta are perceived merely as professional politicians or ecological activists from rural areas – sometimes more so, sometimes less – acting in a populist manner with right-wing ideas about Serbian nationhood and patriarchy (particularly in the case of Čuta).

I met Đorđe in one of the old and well-known Belgrade restaurants, “Mornar” (Sailman), where we had our conversation. The first time I met him was almost two decades ago, when he was a young intellectual and prospective political scientist. At that time, he did not show an inclination

10 While finishing this book, Aleksandar Vučić called for snap elections in December 2023. The Zeleno-levi front, led by the core group formed from Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade, is part of the oppositional electoral alliance called Serbia Against Violence.

to publicly join any of the existing parties. In his opinion, the invasion of large multinational companies that did not take care of people or nature was certainly one of the triggers that initially led to huge protest mobilizations. Another, more structural reason is related to resource scarcity and demands for their redistribution in light of the polycrises that surround us. Đorđe thinks that people in Serbia are becoming more aware of what people in theory call “distributive justice,” but they are still not able to translate that into a coherent political agenda. “They simply know they need to have it in their program. Though they don’t know how. With the new industrial plans of the SNS and Vučić, with joining the Paris Climate Agreement, with reactions to air pollution, that all became much more relevant,” he adds.

But when did it all begin? In the case of Belgrade – the birthplace of the first protest mobilizations that would later transform into a movement, and eventually into a fully fledged green political project – it was the Savamala neighborhood that provided the terrain which was supposed to be “erased” in order to allow the building of the new urban megalomaniac project Belgrade Waterfront. It began to be pushed and promoted by a clique of Aleksandar Vučić when he still served as prime minister before becoming Serbian president in 2017. That was in 2016, exactly when the first frictions appeared after a group of young activists organized to confront speculative investors in the urban environment.

One of the key protagonists of this struggle was Marko Aksentijević, founder of the Belgrade-based Ministry of Space collective (part of the *Ne da(vi)mo* Belgrade initiative). He recalls that the overall resignation due to – and distrust with – the political elites who took part in massive waves of privatization were some of the triggers for the first mobilizations. “First they privatized firms and companies, later they continued with land, public spaces, and natural resources,” he explains. Now 40 years old, Marko remembers that a decade ago, it was literary a “finger in our eyes” when the demolition of Savamala started, as an introduction to the Belgrade Waterfront. “This project was literally implemented as the complete opposite of what we found important, and that was to include citizens in urban planning. We have created a very successful narrative about ‘our city’ that is supposed to empower citizens to reclaim their city as their own against the privatization of public spaces. During protests,”

Marko says, they would ask “Whose city?,” and citizens protesting would reply in one voice – “Our city!” The Ministry of Space collective started its work in 2011 and has focused on investors’ urban projects, which later led to protests against the Belgrade Waterfront. Marko himself was one of the key figures and the main vehicle of operations behind the protests.

Radomir Lazović, called Mika, is a guy in his early 40s – burly, charismatic, with a black beard, often smiling. Yet, his smile is not on his face when he debates against the Vučić regime. He became MP in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia of the Zeleno-levi front and is one of the founders of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade. Today, he recalls that their main motivation almost a decade ago was – and remains – to fight injustice. “We managed to fight for these topics and we won. We literally had to force them into the public space, which was completely controlled by Vučić,” he says. Mika later became one of the few who would be attacked most frequently and assaulted by the regime media, which would try to exhaust him using a variety of oppressive and manipulative tools. Mika, Marko, and Iva Čukić later became, together with Dobrica Veselinović, city councilor and candidate for the City of Belgrade, key figures of the Belgrade political powerhouse, born from Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade.

Natalija Stojmenović, who at the moment of our conversation was city councilor of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade in the City Assembly, was a student during the protests in 2016 against the demolition of Savamala for the Belgrade Waterfront. She recalls that back then she wanted to join the movement, but she was not interested in joining the party. “People have shown interest for green topics, as they were literary fed up with nationalism. Now the environment is among the top three themes in the country, everybody has something to say about it. We see very clearly our own agency in enabling this tendency to take place,” she explains.

“It was a nexus of a captured state, ecological problems, and corruption that triggered a huge wave of protest mobilization around ecological issues,” says Jelena Vasiljević, a senior research associate at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, and also councilor of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade in the City Assembly. “Initially, most of the ecological protests were perceived to take place outside of politics, regardless if it was a protest against mini hydropower plants, air pollution, or investors’ urban projects. That was the birthplace of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade

as a protest movement, which grew into a social movement, and later it will become an electoral actor,” she explains. “Like other environmental and social struggles in Serbia, the fight against the Belgrade Waterfront development took place in a particularly complex and hostile context. But this did not prevent the initial single-issue protests from developing into a social movement with a broader agenda. Its next step was to develop into a municipal-level political player.”¹¹

Iva Marković from Polekol agrees that reclaiming the city or nature has been a central point for green political actors to create successful mobilizing narratives around “our city,” “our forests,” or “our rivers.”

Paola Petrić, deputy office director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Belgrade, has been observing and supporting Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade since it was established and began acting as a social movement. “As politics was perceived as dirty for a long time in Serbia, the main reaction toward the expression of political interest in Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade was surprise. People would ask, ‘They are such fine people, why would they mess with politics?’ Public interest was at the center of the mobilization around the demolition of Savamala. Later, it was translated into concerns around air, waste, energy, or housing,” she says, explaining how a broader supportive ecosystem consisting of many other organizations, cooperatives, and micro-initiatives was created, with resistance to the Belgrade Waterfront project being the epicenter of their political collective action.¹²

Iva Čukić, architect and activist from the Ministry of Space collective and a close colleague of Marko, is another key figure who co-created the Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade movement. She explains that, until recently in Serbia, almost nobody had referred to green topics and “themes.”

“The general public is still not sure what that exactly means, it is often perceived as a bourgeois privilege, not a core orientation,” Marko adds. Green is not by default connected with democratic values or economy. It is merely perceived as an environmental topic, which is on the other hand

11 C. Fache (2023, October 13), Ecology Is Serbia’s Democratic Hope, Green European Journal, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/ecology-is-serbias-democratic-hope/>

12 “When construction accelerated after the illegal demolition of several buildings in Savamala by 30 masked men with bulldozers on the night of 24 April 2016, one of the men guarding the buildings died as a result of his injuries, but to date the investigation remains open. Only the police officer responsible for the area was prosecuted for failing to transfer the emergency calls made by local people, preventing the intervention of law enforcement” (see Fache article in previous footnote).

quite highly positioned among citizens' needs and concerns, particularly after massive protests against the mining of lithium – a topic at the center of the Ekološki ustanak movement, which would later also turn into a party and be a part of the Moramo coalition.

“In these terms, Zelenović and Ćuta are facing their limits,” says Paola. “They can ride this so-called eco-populist wave but not much more. They can be noisy there and irritate the Vučić regime, but it is clear it stops there. On the other hand, while in Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade we have all the ingredients – green, ecological, and left positions – this is not yet synthesized, nor publicly presented as a coherent set of green ideas, programs, and a broader vision. They are often not able to intervene immediately with their own affirmative actions.” For example, if the prime minister proposes electric cars as a solution with the goal of decarbonization, they should be able to confront her with the carbon footprint calculations of coal-based electricity production in Serbia.

Đorđe thinks that the main difference between the Zeleno-levi front and new ecological platforms is mainly that they are much more intrinsically interested in a more democratic form and we are less conservative. “In our political space, it is not yet evident that green implies a whole set of policies that go beyond environmental protection and nature conservation. For most of the others, it is technical – or a technological problem,” he says.

Natalija explains: “Although Ekološki ustanak was a bottom-up movement, very soon it lost horizontality, was reduced to one person, and that happened without any tension or internal resistance whatsoever. This is one of the core differences between our movements. We take our freedom, autonomy, and solidarity very seriously.”

In this short period of “institutionalized green politics,” there is a sort of unspoken division of labor/roles among various actors. Those perceived more as “left” (and therefore green) in the national context are perceived to be standing together with gays and lesbians, those who are identified as ecologists, and they stand with ordinary people, who are also concerned with defending the “grandfather land.”

“We gathered around ideas of radical democracy and solidarity, and we demanded participation in spatial and urban planning so that decisions

about our future can be collective. Same goes for potential successes or failures,” says Marko. Because that was continuously rejected by Aleksandar Vučić, this was upgraded into a civic, anti-Vučić, anti-corruption, anti-authoritarian counternarrative. Vučić is able to turn every debate into self-referential mud or vague concepts, such as the currently so-called big deal with Europe. “Nobody knows what is the substance of this deal with Europe,” says Marko, adding, “it is devastating to know that only an anti-Vučić narrative works with the media, which cannot be said for affirmative proposals.”

“We managed to show another face of politics working directly with citizens in neighborhoods through local groups,” Iva Čukić explains. “In that way we have shown we are easily accessible, normal, and present, like anybody else. We turned some of our values into action and gained huge visibility and trust.”

On the other hand, Đorđe sees very important value in the ability of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade to name the problems even without solutions. “We dare to hit the wall with our head and people respect it. We can show that we are not perfect, but also that we will go all the way,” he says. He also explains that Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade is able to say “no” to cooperation when it sees risks of co-optation or control. “In such cases, they immediately turn that against us, saying that we are extremist and not willing to cooperate,” he adds.

Paola from the Heinrich Böll Foundation office in Belgrade says, in a supportive manner, that this could be compensated if Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade could be more proactive in creating and building the vision for the socio-ecological transformation of the country, which they are offering to citizens. “It is essential to show how that will be done, and that can be ownership and the authentic position of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade, which cannot be replicated by others. That is already there but not so outspoken. Let’s re-pack Serbia in the next two mandates. It sounds nice, but this is challenging. We need a much less fragile infrastructure to make this happen,” she says.

Natalija is one of the those who shares the view that, currently in Serbia, there is no one at the national level who can consistently implement green policies as their own authentic piece of work. “We are trying to offer a different perspective about the priorities of development and

show that our agency is important, not to wait for someone to solve our problems. We want to show that we are able to make a difference,” she says.

“In my opinion, green actors in Serbia are primarily gathered around values of democracy and equality, apart from ecological sustainability,” says Iva Marković. “We managed to mobilize,” she continues, “narratives that contrasted weak, unprivileged, and small people of Serbia against the untouchable power of the Vučić regime and multinational corporations seeking to extract natural resources and disable a sustainable future for generations to come.”

“In my point of view we want to be recognized as green, left, and democratic,” says Đorđe. Our strong asset was the articulation of these values, while Ecologic Uprising and Together had many gains across Serbia with their local presence and struggles, but not with their articulation into values. Predrag Momčilović, the environmental activist and director of the newly established Center for Green Politics, considers environmental protection, democratic management, and human rights as the main values around which *Ne da(vi)mo* Belgrade managed to gather supporters and members. Given the delicate position of Serbia due to Kosovo and its relationship to Russia, he adds, we still need to work a lot on our foreign policy positions.

Predrag thinks that, in the Serbian public space, there is absolutely no distinction between ecological and green issues. “Not only in the public debate or media space, but even among some colleagues, we are not always on clear terms as to what’s ecological and what’s green,” he explains. “That is why I think it is crucial to relate ecological topics with social and economic issues. Then we can more easily explain what green can mean.”

Boiling

However, the ascent of new political forces challenging Vučić's willful and authoritarian decisions and haughty behavior was nothing but easy. The media were in different and often polarizing ways caught in Vučić's mesh, as he would not allow the public profiling of emerging opponents and forcefully attacked their attempts to contest his decisions. Yet, the patience of new progressive protagonists around Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade also wore thin. Their discontent and dissatisfaction – if not anger – increased as Vučić (together with his henchmen at the Belgrade level) remained arrogant, continuing with the mismanagement of public authorities and evident violations of the public interest. Thus, many people joined demonstrations and protest mobilizations, acknowledging that the presence of their bodies and voices was needed on the streets in order to show their disagreement.¹³ One such protest became even more attractive, as activists placed a giant yellow duck (in local Serbian slang, “duck” stands for a lie or a scam) in front of the Serbian National Parliament. The duck has been used to symbolize that legislative changes related to the megalomaniacal Belgrade Waterfront project (introduction of *lex specialis* for the purpose of a land grab) are nothing else but fabrications, or just deceptions by Vučić's for short-term political – if not economic – gains from foreign investors. For a time, the duck became a symbol of the Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade movement, both for better and for worse (political opponent activists were often pejoratively called “duckers” or “patkari”). Protests became bigger and bigger, one after another, and Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade was more and more successful in giving voice to invisible but concerned citizens and empowering them. A new phase started that many called “boiling.” The social atmosphere was heated and people had enough when they recognized that the regime was occupying all the levers of the system. Protests were gaining more and more public attention, and people were joining marches on the streets in larger numbers. The streets of Belgrade

13 Lupiga.com (2015, April 2), NE DAVIMO BEOGRAD: Zbog “Beograda na void” vlast želi oduzimati građanima imovinu, <https://lupiga.com/vijesti/ne-davimo-beograd-zbog-beograda-na-vodi-vlast-zeli-oduzimati-gradjanima-imovinu>

were loud and glowing.¹⁴ Iva Čukić, architect from the Ministry of Space collective based in Belgrade, says that the demolition of the Savamala neighborhood in spring of 2016 was a key factor that gave impetus to massive protests. “It was only when authorities started to demolish the neighborhood of Savamala that dozens of thousands of citizens joined us in the protests. Until then we were showing a variety of disadvantages of the Belgrade Waterfront project. But that wasn’t as successful as when they were triggered by the Savamala demolition,” she explains.

Iva was – and remained – an inspiring protagonist of the new movement and was part of the core group that initiated protests since the beginning. While staying on the side of the movement, she worked together with Dobrica Veselinović (future city councilor and candidate for Belgrade mayor) and Marko Aksentijević, who was the main doer, organizer, and driving force of the emerging movement. She recalls that only after these massive protests was there a sort of inclination to develop a political faction of the movement that would later run in the 2018 municipal elections. Very soon the movement would also be recognized through the faces of Radomir Lazović, Robert Kozma, and Ksenija Radovanović, other visible personalities of the movement. “Before that moment, our members were not interested at all to enter party politics,” she says. “Today it seems like it was always our decision to take this pathway,” adds Marko.

Radomir, called Mika, says that the political actions of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade were focused on regaining trust in the belief that politics can make a difference, and that it can work toward the public interest. “We initially faced a big wall of distrust about any political aspirations that we had to dissolve,” he says. “When all is green, you have to be left – that was our strategic approach, as the green transition was occupied by various players with different and often suspicious agendas. And it is a core element of our political work to ensure that the green transition is done in just and fair ways, and that we talk about the redistribution, affordable housing – that is the only way how we strengthen the green agenda. We were pioneers in putting green issues on the agenda, now everyone is doing that. And

14 Later this will be repeated in massive protests during 2023, triggered by the cases of violence (mass killings) in public primary schools and lead to the consolidation of the electoral alliance *Srbija protiv nasilja* (Serbia Against Violence), in which the *Zeleno-levi front* (successor of *Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade*) will have some of the leading candidates as frontrunners.

we have to make sure that both democracy and social justice are part of that contract. This is the basis of our political work,” Mika concludes.

“The Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade movement managed to show and capitalize on all that was wrong with the Vučić regime. Up to that moment, Vučić was still trying to show his fake pro-European face. After the first protests, that was much less possible,” recalls Simon Ilse, former director of the Belgrade office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Simon took his post at the Heinrich Böll Foundation after the first wave of protests but immediately realized how vital and crucial it was to support the transformative agency of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade. “For me, these people had street credentials, and their vision of the city was something incredible. They were kind of a new political animal, and they showed skills in connecting socio-economic issues with ecological constraints,” says Simon.

“When it comes to the idea of social discontent and how green politics can use it,” says Đorđe Pavićević, intellectual, scholar, and Member of Parliament of the Zeleno-levi front in the National Assembly of Serbia, “we in Serbia face a huge number of pressures coming from different directions. There are obligations which are taken with the commitment to the Paris Agreement and pressure by the European Union [EU] to implement measures related to decarbonization. On the other hand, there are pressures from Chinese investors who don’t like the idea of carbon taxes. And there is also big competition around green topics, as every political actor wants to have their say. Yet, for us in Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade, it was always our core topic, and there we have an evident advantage. We deeply understand that it is a set of progressive policies and that our way to implement them will always be more democratic.”

One morning in July 2022 in Novi Sad, I met the scholar and activist Aleksandar Matković, who I had known for almost a decade for his genuine research interest in a variety of aspects of ecological transition – primarily those related to issues of labor, trade unions, and foreign investments. Aleksandar, or Saša, is a scholar of a younger generation that demonstrates interest around many issues I have found to be the most important building blocks for the future of green politics in the region. He invited me to join a local group as a speaker at their discussion, and I used this opportunity to dive deeper and learn about his perceptions of the green movement in the region, and particularly in Serbia. During that particular period,

local but still relatively weak environmental groups were motivated by concerns that the Vučić party (SNS – Serbian Progressive Party) would build a new bridge, a new infrastructural project that would be financed through another loan from China. Most recently, Aleksandar’s work has focused on Chinese and foreign investments. That is why he quickly came to his main argument: Foreign investments in Serbia – and in particular the way they are implemented by Vučić – insufficiently address the topic of domestic politics, primarily the social dimension related to violations of workers’ rights, both domestic and foreign.

“Vučić has been (ab)using public development agencies to give lip service to foreign investors,” says Aleksandar, adding that the government completely denies a massive increase in violations of workers’ rights. “For Vučić it is important to stay as long as possible outside of the EU so that he can use European funds and also speculative funds of foreign investors. But he does not want to be accountable, nor regulated, like he would be if Serbia were a member of the EU. The social dimension of the green transition is a key point where discontent will appear, and it is rarely covered by green protagonists in Serbia,” he says.

Obviously, there are many boiling points where discontent continues to be present in Serbian society. However, the central question gradually became more important: If systemic change can be carried by the actors who neither represent green politics nor care about the social dimension, who will benefit from that boiling?

“There is only nuance that can differentiate movements from their own society. But movements make this important step forward, they make a difference. At the same time, they have to stay close to be able to mobilize,” says Katarina Tadić from the European Fund for the Balkans. She has been observing the developments of the new waves of protests with curiosity.

Apparently, the boiling phase was necessary to realize the adverse patterns working in the background of society, regardless of whether that is the exploitation of workers and nature; nepotism and corruption; patriarchy and oppression; or plunder and privatization. Although polarizing and based on the contrasts between losers and winners, it underlines what will be important later (while finalizing this book, the electoral alliance Serbia Against Violence has been established and has included Zeleno-levi front

members as key protagonists). Therefore, the boiling effect later led to the naming of violence as being the main problem in Serbian society – systemic and structural violence against people and nature, against the future.

In Montenegro, the United Reform Action (URA) party did not come into a position of power through a comparable process. There was somewhat of an opposite and surprising development. As the “boiling” phase started, the URA became a disappointment to their own voters when they felt that the party had become isolated from their electorate and disconnected from their supporters and voters. Although the URA was formed by some of the protagonists of Positive Montenegro (Pozitivna Crna Gora) – such as Dritan Abazović, who would later become a prime minister of Montenegro and had for some time decent support from organized civil society circles – it did not emerge through any similar or organic process compared to the protest mobilizations in Serbia (later we see that the cases of Serbia and Croatia are only some of the examples where protest movements born on the street transformed into fully fledged green-left political projects).

“Green still does not use its political value and potency in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Foreign funders and civil society still don’t see that as added value,” says Jasminka Bjelavac, project coordinator in the Sarajevo office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. She explains that you lose much more than you gain, so you risk a lot. “You immediately become a political opponent to the ruling political cast,” she says, explaining that for being green in Bosnia, it is about being a risk-taker. That is what you need!

“We are still not sure if it is a momentum to build a social movement. It’s highly risky, precarious, and immediately you become a target without a future,” says Tihomir Dakić, a seasoned environmental activist from Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Tihomir has been active in environmental protection for almost two decades and knows similar organizations across Europe very well. He explains that detrimental structural conditions are a solid reason to think twice before establishing a party. “Key questions are about accountable leadership and collective action. We are not in a healthy state, we did not care enough about veterans of the movement and now we don’t have a next generation. There is a collective burnout that prevents us to enter into the complex and delicate political sphere. So far, so-called green parties did nothing else but add to overall confusion,” he concludes.

Goran Jovanovski and Dragana Velkovska are a dynamic and efficient young duo who are the founders of the recently formed “Green and Humane City” political platform from Skopje, North Macedonia.¹⁵ As a movement they are potentially one of the boiling points. They only became politically active recently. They emerged as the Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM) party as the European Green Party from North Macedonia was entering in a sort of crisis. Even they do not address the same audiences, but they are both aiming to represent the green agenda. They hold two seats in the Skopje City Assembly, which is the result of a modern, digital, innovative, and affirmative campaign in which they collected almost 10,000 votes in the capital of North Macedonia. They explain that they emerged and found their own way through the jam between the social democrats, the left and greens (DOM), and as such they are, so to say, the new kids on the block, surely representing the voice and discontent of a new generation. Their pace of growth has been rather slow, and it has yet to be seen how inclusive they will be as they grow and need to gain massive support. On the other hand, outside of the urban bubble of Skopje, Macedonia is coping with more massive political challenges related to the shutdown of the mines. Jobs and workers’ rights in a decarbonized economy will surely be an issue of the “just transition,” and therefore an evident boiling point that would need to be addressed by any existing green party.

Albania is a country flooded with investments and focused on economic growth at any cost. Edi Rama, the Albanian prime minister from the Socialist Party of Albania (one of the two dominant parties), has already been in power 10 years and has huge ambitions to bring the country into the EU, while at the same time focusing on excessive economic growth. The price of that growth has already been paid multiple times by nature, which is exposed to various examples of extraction and overdevelopment. A two party system presents a difficult context for new political actors to emerge. Accordingly, so far the Albanian Green Party has been active only at a local level, being a sort of junior partner to the socialists. Although there might be many reasons for discontent, none of the social movements

15 Biljana Spasovska (2022, September 1), North Macedonia – Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/exploring-worldwide-democratic-innovations-north-macedonia/>

or players have the capacity to address it. “Conflict is the only way to gain something. Two ruling parties don’t really differ, so we have to find a way through,” says Edona Bylykbashi, program coordinator of the Heinrich Böll Foundation office in Tirana.

View from Europe, and back

Although this is not an historical overview of the development of the green party in the region of the Western Balkans, we will briefly take a look back at the past. As mentioned earlier, green politics in the Balkans was absent for way too long, at least in the institutional sphere. It resided mainly in civil society circles and presented a counterforce to challenge mismanagement, the captured state, or violations of public interest. Although we have witnessed few green surges around Europe since the early 1970s with ups and downs and relatively solid consolidation currently, in the Western Balkans green politics has only emerged during the last few years. It is relatively similar to Central and Eastern Europe, where Greens had gained more visibility and impact a decade earlier, as in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland – but in many cases they could not stay close to power for long.

Still, during the last two decades, various green groups, parties, foundations, and other actors from Europe have been demonstrating different levels of interest or curiosity for the region, aiming to foster the emergence of sister parties or political formations that represent green values in the region. Their agenda was sometimes confusing, sometimes dubious or misleading, but often very useful, directional, and overall supportive. Yet, it took a while.

In the early 2000s, most of the Greens from Europe in the region were focused on the early phase of movement-building or party-building, and providing room for exchanges and political education. Various green actors were aiming to provide the necessary support for protagonists who were showing an interest in defending the environment, addressing burning ecological problems, and democratizing societies, which were heavily burdened by the consequences of the war, omnipresent nationalism, human rights violations, the predominant patriarchy, uncontrolled privatizations – and again ecological degradation. Sometimes the attempts of these protagonists were honest and trustworthy; sometimes they were not and were perceived only as opportunities to use the European label “earn a seat” and do nothing different. During these years, there were many adverse developments across the Western Balkans and, due to their weak and fragile position, Greens were then merely observers. Usually

they were isolated in smaller circles of like-minded people with increasing discontent and frustration that green values were not being politically articulated. In many ways, the development of this articulation was incremental and difficult to accelerate – there were no shortcuts to stable and resilient structures of political formation. One had to be patient and diligent. Those who lacked patience and were only hungry to get a seat for themselves as politicians with a green label often failed very quickly. Those who were not able to build a genuine homegrown party remained irrelevant and faded away. Very often it was a trial-and-error approach, both at the domestic level and the European level, where more advanced and experienced sister parties were learning about their future potential partners and comrade activists, very often working in hostile political environments that systematically undermined their chances to surge.

A very important stakeholder — both due to its strength and presence at the European level – was the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the German green political foundation, which established its offices in the Western Balkans in 1999. Azra Džajić was the director of the regional office established to give a signal as to how important it is for politics in the region to have a space for the Greens. However, this space was not granted, and many of the self-proclaimed green parties that were emerging would quickly disappear. With offices in Sarajevo, Belgrade (also covering Montenegro and Kosovo), and Zagreb, the Heinrich Böll Foundation created a supportive ecosystem for actors. Efforts were aimed toward working on political education around ecology, democracy, gender equality, and accession to the European Union (EU) – vital pillars for the region's transition. In the early years, it was more indirectly signaling that it would require political work to engage with these issues – through activism, policy development, and ultimately even politics. Surely, the space to maneuver was limited, as support to parties was not possible. But on the other hand, the support given to civil society, which would use these issues to re-politicize public life, was both instrumental and essential.

The German Greens' foreign policy in the late 1990s was strongly tied to the developments in the region (particularly during the mandate of Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, one of the leading figures of the Greens for many decades). In the spirit of the strong and appealing quote of Heinrich Böll (“Meddling is the only way to stay relevant”), the Foundation

supported the boldest political actions to challenge the status quo, confront the recent past burdened with war crimes, support state-building and human rights protections, and last but not least – address the increasing environmental degradation across the region. Also, other Heinrich Böll Foundation offices, such as the ones in Berlin (Headquarters), Brussels, and Prague, were often engaged in fostering connections and exchanges with groups from the Balkans, which were often the driving forces behind EU membership aspirations in their societies.

There were also other European actors in the region such as a Green Forum Sweden and Dutch GroenLinks that were doing similar work, although with less of a presence and more modest capacities. Exchange platforms were established as a result of the Europe-wide coordination of various green actors on the European level. For example, there was the Green Forum Sweden, the Green East-West Dialogue, and the Central European Round Table¹⁶ – the latter initiated by Viennese Greens – where green political activists from the Western Balkans were frequently invited to take part and share their experiences. For the younger members of the green political movements, it was of utmost importance to take part in the activities of the Central and Eastern European Development Network, which worked in close cooperation with the Federation of Young European Greens. Since the early 2000s, there have been many summer schools organized for the youth in the Western Balkans that were nothing more but an anteroom to politics. Yet, many core ingredients were still missing.

These efforts were further strengthened by the presence of the newly established Green European Foundation in 2008. It is a political foundation at the European level funded by the European Parliament (EP). Although it is independent, it is linked to the European Green Party (EGP) and the Green group in the EP. The Green European Foundation was also searching for partners from the Western Balkans. Later, the Heinrich Böll Foundation would also extend its activities to North Macedonia and Albania, covering the whole Western Balkans region.

The presence of green European actors across the Western Balkans region gave a strong signal of support to like-minded groups and individuals in

16 Greening the Cities (2023), Central European Round Table – an Overview, <https://greeningthecities.wordpress.com/central-european-round-table/>

the region so that cooperation could be taken to the next level. Although green politics was the past and is the future of Western Europe, it has only just emerged in the southeast of the continent, whose development was heavily disrupted and downgraded by the decade of war in the 1990s.¹⁷ One of the signs of pre-war normality was the fact that Greens were already in the early 1990s on election ballots, and politicians from Croatia and Slovenia were elected as the first Members of Parliament (MPs) in the newly independent countries. It would take more than two decades to recover from that defeat and emerge again with a new generation.

The EGP was probably much more attentive and pragmatic when searching for new parties as their political allies. Already since the mid-2000s, the EGP had had member parties in Slovenia and Croatia. Later there would be new members from Macedonia (back then with its old name, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Albania, and Montenegro. Yet, membership in this case was not often affiliated with political success or a presence at the institutional level (local or national parliaments), but more as a sign of recognition and alignment with their values, aspirations, and mission. In many cases, it was trust given in advance. This will continue to be the case, sometimes even a contradiction, whereby the public visibility of some green-minded protest movements will not automatically be related to EGP membership. The fact that a group of people registered a party with ideas similar to those of the EGP was sometimes enough for the EGP to recognize them as potential allies in the future. The processes were often parallel, top-down approaches, which were recognized sometimes by even more opportunistic groups. This was done with the intention of establishing a green party that would soon ask for membership, even if there were some conflicts with core values – not always easily detected with only three days for a fact-finding mission to spot them.

Many aspirants often presented hierarchical or even oppressive party structures with a focus solely on the leaders, but also hidden nationalism agendas and xenophobic or even anti-LGBT positions. In many cases, there were individuals or small clubs of friends that wanted to “wear” green. For them, as they were not intrinsically green, it meant mainly

17 This devastating lineup of wars and conflicts started with the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991 with Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and ended with the bombing of Serbia in 1999 due to war with Kosovo.

addressing ecological problems without a broader comprehension that human rights and a pro-European civic orientation were expected to be as equally relevant as environmental struggles. Sometimes there was even an unspoken understanding on behalf of European partners that these negative aspects could be tolerated for a short time, while the direct work and exchanges with their Balkan allies could transform them into modern, fully fledged political projects.

During these formative years, some young green parties – which often lacked not only resources, but also legitimacy from the supporters or substance in programmatic and political work – often thought it is more important to have membership in the EGP than to develop their own program and attract new people to hold leading positions. At the same time, vibrant civil society movements and initiatives that had been mobilizing protests for years did not have immediate party aspirations, and therefore were not on the radar as potential candidates. It turns out that this is often one of the phases of development and is shared in many countries.

Still, in the course of the early 2000s, there were many green politicians learning about and supporting green groups in the Balkans. People such as Milan Horaček, a Czech-German green politician and one of the German Green Party veterans (back then a Member of the European Parliament, MEP); Rainder Steenblock, German MP; Marieluise Beck, German MP; Manuel Sarrazin, German MP (later to become a Federal Government Special Representative to the countries of the Western Balkans); Ska Keller, German MEP (former co-president of the Green group in the EP); Terry Reintke, German MEP (later to inherit Ska Keller as co-president of the Green group in the EP); Marije Cornelissen, Dutch MEP; Anna Cavazzini, German MEP; Bas Eickhout, Dutch MEP; Tineke Strijk, Dutch MEP; Reinhard Buetikofer, German MEP; Sergey Lagodinsky, German MEP; Ulrike Lunaček, Austrian MEP; Viola von Cramon-Daubadel, German MEP; Sophie In't Veld, Dutch MEP; and Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield, French MEP. They all frequently traveled to the region to show support not only for the European future of the locked region facing EU enlargement fatigue, but also for the various environmental struggles and human rights struggles. During this period, up to this very moment, strong and lifelong contacts were established, together with

some seeds needed to create deeper connections between domestic green forces and the European green political community.

Thomas Waitz, a 50-year-old Austrian farmer, forester, and green politician, is an Austrian MEP and co-chair of the EGP. Active in Austrian politics since his teenage years, he became present in the region in the early 2000s. Initially, he was active through the Styrian green foundation Gruene Akademie, which involved the education of young generations and the exchange of political experiences with neighboring states (Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia). He later became an Austrian MEP.

“At the European level we did not always have so much focus in the region. However, in the recent decade, we became more and more interested and were always looking for a local cooperation partner,” he explains. “For us,” he continues, “it was essential to find partners who are able to gain legitimacy and support from civil society and develop on that basis. We found it important that their struggles be linked with political demands and solutions. It takes time and effort to build such alliances, particularly in political realities like in the Balkans, which are not always friendly toward these developments.”

“Our experience was,” Thomas continues, “that in the Balkans political engagement was often discredited, as it was perceived as a pure power grab and politics as something dirty and not very honorable. In most of the countries, you have political actors in power that show signs of running a captured state. If you propose to be elected from an oppositional or non-establishment party, you can quite soon experience repression – if not directly as a threat to your life and security, then for sure in accessing information, employment, funds, or even pressures on your family,” he explains. “We learned very soon that in the larger cities and urban areas, with media and higher education, we could find these partners more easily, as there were struggles present which focused on quality of air, water, waste, or energy. While these were expected green issues, we also learned that social issues are much more central in the region, as polluted areas were inhabited by poorer people.”

“In the European Green Party,” he continues, “we expected that our allies are able to be an honest voice of citizens and put the common good in the center of their political project, so to say, to re-inhale some hope that there is a different way of doing politics than capturing power and

filling your pockets, which is how politics is perceived in the Balkans. Even when Greens are not in decisive positions, they can lift the top of the boiling pot through mobilizations, as they are forcing ruling parties to take social and environmental issues more seriously, and that makes an impact on the voters base,” he says.

For him the key message of the green movement was to change the perception of citizens about what they can do, their ability to empower citizens, and to show that we are all in the same struggle, even across the boundaries of nation-states. That approach is very important, as it unites regions through these very often similar struggles. Green politics is bridging this split, which is often composed of divisions made by various interests and local or national governments.

“We could easily see that when connections with civil society are neglected, if they don’t engage with the expected level of inclusion and transparency, they lose support and their prospects for further growth become very limited,” says Thomas, thinking of cases with their partners in Montenegro and North Macedonia. These are the warning signs that need to be taken into account in a timely fashion. In the case of Serbia, on the other hand, in Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade, Thomas sees an example where the convergence of people from art, academia, and civil society shows what is possible. “Even in repressive and semi-authoritarian regimes like in the case of Serbia, we can reach respected and substantial results,” he says. “It is a combination of reliable and clean opposition forces that stand behind their values of defending the common good and equal participation. That is our main ideology, which we also see in the region. Greens appear to be trustworthy, loud, and confident, and they have enough self-confidence to claim victories. When other parties speak about the environment, that often goes into the boxes of the Greens,” he concludes.

The Italian Benedetta de Marte is general secretary of the EGP and local councilor in the municipality of Brussels. With a rich biography of work in the green political sphere, she is the main driving force of various EGP operations at the transnational political level and also engaged in observing political developments in the region.

“It often goes beyond core green topics when Greens are recognized by the broader population. This can be triggered by environmentalist struggles or adverse urban projects, but then it ends with corruption and

democracy. You usually need a nucleus of people that share common values, strong activists that want to trigger change in society. It is very difficult to dismantle the corrupt system; this is a big block, you need to be stubborn. You need to have internal anti-bodies to fight the system without being absorbed by it,” says Benedetta, underlining the transformative agency that is often linked with the emergence of green political forces.

“Experiences from the last years show that there is room and an audience for green politics in the region. We have to honestly say that we did not pay enough attention to developments in the region in the last years, as some countries are backsliding toward authoritarianism. For these countries, EU accession can be a positive aspect, but enthusiasm related to EU membership is declining. There is increased social discontent, and it is a question of who will be able to catalyze this boiling,” she explains.

“The main strength of green ideology – or our ideas – is that we can adapt to different scenarios, and that is very much transnational and goes beyond borders. This is the most mature ideology for adapting to the post-materialist world, although we are now in the process of regression. Now we will see how our ideology is adapting to these crises,” says Benedetta. “It was us Greens who have been challenging ourselves with these questions for long enough, but now we are one step ahead. This is our advantage, we can be in tune with society and gain the trust of the people. By working very hard, we can make the set of our ideas fit for the future and forthcoming era.”

Terry Reintke is a German Green politician of a new generation who is now co-president of the Green group in the EP and – at the time of completing this book – has been appointed to be lead candidate of the German Greens for the EP elections in 2024 . Since her early 20s, even before establishing her official political career, she has been a regular guest and friend of many protest groups in the Balkans – often she was seen marching on the streets of Zagreb or Belgrade during Pride events. She has not only been an observer, but also an active and engaged supporter of various progressive groups and circles across the region – from human rights and anti-corruption to environmental and climate protection. Many experiences collected through her presence in the Balkans have made her a genuine European politician. I knew Terry from the early times of

her political engagement, and I asked her to share with me her outlook on the development of the Greens in the region. She immediately came to the point, saying that the trickiest part is to achieve a state of play in which Greens would stand as a regular political force, a consolidated actor so to say.

“A structure for long-term presence is what they need, and many movements have been struggling with it,” says Terry. “We are now living in the age when everyone is expected to take part in the green transition, and any shift is helpful in this direction, regardless of where it comes from. We Greens can only benefit from it, particularly in cases where we are still smaller or not fully established parties.”

Today, in sensitive geopolitical situations, in which the course of development in some countries in the Western Balkans has not yet been decided, Greens indeed can offer specific perspectives. For the Western Balkans, which survived war in the 1990s, it is even more true. There is a huge experience in the region of life in diverse societies, and now when Europe is becoming increasingly diverse, that is exactly what Greens in the Balkans could offer.

Green formations across the region are protagonists for EU membership and therefore see their societies within the EU, sooner or later. Although enthusiasm has declined, membership remains the main orientation and source of hope. Yet, with adverse developments in the EU, there is less of a belief than before that the situation will automatically improve. The lack of a social dimension, inequalities between big and small member states, the prevailing growth-oriented economic model, the position and role of the semi-periphery – they are all sources of concern for democratic forces that want to adhere to green values on their way toward joining the EU.

“We consider ourselves as Europeans. But in some cases we don’t always agree with the way we are treated in this relationship. Very often it is top-down, with a need to do things more quickly, even sometimes imperial. Also, the EU often neglects the social dimension of the green transition or even at a general level, the social dimension almost does not exist in EU negotiations. If we want to stay loyal to our values, for us that is not acceptable,” says Đorđe Pavićević, an MP from the Zeleno-levi front.

Predrag Momčilović, director of Center for Green Politics, also points out a very contradictory relationship. “For example, we have the Serbian government and the Ministry of Energy, which are currently implementing some green policies directly from EU legislation. However, most of these policies are very neoliberal, lacking social or just dimensions. We would gladly criticize the implementation of these policies, but as most of us green actors are very pro-European, in some moments we found ourselves in a strange and counter-productive situation, whereby we lose some of the strong cards in our hand.”

Jelena Vasiljević is a local city councilor and senior research associate at the Institute for Social Theory and Philosophy based in Belgrade. She explains that “it is because of the EU negotiations that Vučić has a full mouth of green policies. But otherwise, we cannot expect the SNS [Srpska narodna stranka, Serbian Progressive Party] and Vučić to deliver on the green program. While it has departed from anti-establishment sentiments and contestation, the political character of ecological movements is more and more normalized in Serbia. To a limited level that can be connected with the general impression of modernization,” she concludes.

Yet, this impression stands in strong contrast to the prevailing feeling of regressing and sliding down, as progressive voters perceive Vučić as an actor who is pushing Serbia to the periphery, beyond the EU’s borders; he uses the public mandate to give lip service to foreign investors, very often non-EU players.

Simon Ilse, a former director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation Belgrade office, recalls that the development of green politics around the Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade powerhouse would probably not have been possible without the rise of Vučić and the subsequent radicalization. “These developments have created the space for a new political counterforce. And although he played the EU card for some time, it was through the confrontation with Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade that this mask very soon fell. It was Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade who uncovered this,” he explains. “It is highly questionable if the EU can be satisfied with Vučić’s maneuver to deliver green policy through measures related to renewables or waste water where he tries to use European money. That is a short-range intervention and obvious greenwashing,” he concludes. Simon thinks that the EU integration

process can be useful for new political forces such as the Zeleno-levi front (successor of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade), as it relies a lot on the rule of law, transparency, environmental protection, and other values; but given the relatively low reputation of the EU in Serbia, gaining massive public support for this remains questionable.

Many of my interlocutors tend to mention the “great deal with Europe,” which is a narrative originating from Vučić’s media machinery, and then reproduced even by his opponents, such as Together’s Zelenović. They agree in one thing – Vučić has been playing tricks with the EU on that account, and it is in the Serbian public’s interest to dismantle this type of fake position that locks Serbia into an unfavorable position.

Other Western Balkan countries have far less antagonistic relations with the EU, and many still have not experienced a significant decline in public support regarding a future in the EU. For example, Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo are strongly determined to resolve domestic issues and accelerate toward the EU. On that account, the EGP member party United Reform Action was a strong proponent of EU accession and had a clearly defined agenda to make substantial progress toward this goal during their stay in power. In some countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, membership in the EU is perceived as the solution and a main source of hope. Relationships in Bosnia and Herzegovina are so complex that often only a new life in the EU is perceived as a guarantee for a prosperous and peaceful life. Safet Kubat, an ecological activist from Zenica who is known across the country, says that the “European path of Bosnia and Herzegovina has to be articulated through green policies as key milestones of this journey. Our negotiation position has to be strengthened through a green agenda. However, first you need to read the documents before you promise something. Surely, we should not limit our role to being an energy export country for dirty technologies,” he says.

Bosnia and Herzegovina indeed has many boiling points, but it is less likely they will be articulated through a green agenda very soon. As a captured state with a very complex composition, it is terrain for a battle between various hegemonial and external influences. Green politics in this case would need to be a civic and uniting emancipatory force that is able to survive various battles.

Greens are, in general, perceived as pro-European forces and a constitutive part of the normalization and modernization of political life. Yet, they have a formidable task to translate European values into political realities burdened by inequalities and extractivism. Apart from that, increased geopolitical risks and growing insecurities in countries such as Kosovo, Montenegro, or Bosnia and Herzegovina are apparently polarizing the public and political spheres. Green politics in the region still has to pass through various filters in order to confirm its emancipatory and transformative agency. Fortunately, the journey has started. The bad news is that there is a stormy sea out there. And that is why European allies are very important.

“EU accession is bringing us many good things, but sometimes also prioritizing economic development over environmental concerns,” says Joni Vorpsi, an Albanian environmental activist from PPNEA (Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania). “For example, in the last progress report, we did not see any conflict between the development of an airport and new energy infrastructure in protected areas. Destroying habitats and installing PVs is not the way to please the EU.”

I sit in Tirana with Lavdosh Ferruni, a frontline activist from an older generation who has been active for the last 30 years fighting against detrimental projects related to fossil fuels and extraction. While drinking chamomile tea in a modern Tirana cafe, he says, “People who have a seat already are not environmentalists,” he explains, referring to the existing green parties in Albania. “I see fertility in the younger generation, although I still don’t see a person.”

We are the ones we have been waiting for

In this chapter, my intention is to take us on a trip through various experiences about the conditions necessary for green politics to emerge. These conditions can be external – or so-called objective and related to historical, political, economic, cultural, or any other structural context – but they can also be adjusted if agents of change take a proactive stand. In the case of the latter, it is analogous with planting the tree – there is a certain climate, quality of soil, temperature, care, etc., needed for the tree to grow. In this case, I was searching for the conditions necessary for green politics to be born and develop into a fully fledged political project. Because the trajectories for the development of green politics in the region are at very different stages, we will not be able to discover all the phases in each case, yet the perception of conditions also matters. In countries where citizens can only hope that green politics will emerge, I have therefore paid attention to what is perceived as the most important, as a removed obstacle, or as the main ingredient.

I have already mentioned a couple of times on these pages that green values were not represented in the institutional political sphere across the Balkans, and that during most of the 21st century we did not have (many) green politicians in the region. I have also intentionally referred to the absence of actors in the political sphere who could use all the available and accessible instruments and means to foster systemic change within and throughout the institutions: through laws, policies, political speeches, and public debates. Starting in the early 2000s, crises emerged one after the other at both the global and local levels. Although there were plenty of reasons to address them from a green perspective through political institutions, the momentum was simply not yet there for protagonists of green politics – they were not hurrying to come into being, in spite of various pressures and expectations. Here I refer to full-fledged and plethora political projects, and not to the irrelevant multitude of fabricated efforts and artificial parties with dubious motivations.

During this period, there were at least three categories of actors who could have tried to play the role of green protagonists but did not. First,

in some cases there were already established or self-proclaimed marginal green parties in the region that were simply too weak or fragile to survive any serious political battle. In some cases, they were reduced almost to a group of friends that shared identical values or experiences; in other cases, they were predominantly focused only on one person, often the party leader. Many times they just vegetated in the political arena. In some cases, they did not have the necessary skills, competences, programs, or even ideology; in other cases, they primarily used the “green” label as a potential shortcut into politics, trying to take advantage of the ideological vacuum present in this part of the political spectrum.

There were also cases in which people who were already members of other parties would use “green” as an instrument for their survival or next incarnation in political life.¹⁸ The size of this problem can be shown by the fact that, during some periods in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (or for comparison Croatia), there were seven, eight, or even more registered green parties at the same time. In the cases of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania, there were many examples where so-called green political forces would behave as satellites to large dominant parties,¹⁹ or they would serve as a temporary shelter for their ex-politicians. In countries such as Montenegro and North Macedonia – where parties such as United Reform Action (URA) and Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM) managed to participate in institutional political life for limited periods of time – it became evident that, apart from their dubious ideological stands,²⁰ they also did not have healthy and democratic working structures within the party to sustain long-term pressure, and very often they became isolated in their ivory towers from their supporters and voters.

The second type of players were institutionalized civil society actors, but also movements and initiatives that very often were political, and they defended green values against the violators from the institutional

18 Case of Zlatko Lagumdžija in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ex Social Democrat) who established a new party, “Zeleni pokret,” <https://www.faktor.ba/vijest/koalicija-sdbih-i-zeleni-pokret-predstavlji-program-za-opce-izbore-2022/166191>

19 For example, Greens of Serbia, who constantly offer to be junior partners to bigger political players. Likewise, the Green Party of Albania is informally attached as a junior partner to the Socialist Party of Albania (PS).

20 For example, in certain periods problematic relations between DOM and the Albanian people in North Macedonia, or liberal economic ideology in the case of the URA.

sphere (state, municipal, or corporate). Many of them were genuine, homegrown, organic protest mobilizations against ecological degradation (air pollution, waste management, cruise ships), the fossil fuel industry (coal, gas), extractivism (mini hydropower plants, mining), or investors in urbanism (Belgrade, Skopje). Mainly they were basing their political actions on direct confrontation and antagonism. Yet, they were often reluctant to enter into the institutional political sphere for multiple reasons.

The main point was that they perceived politics as something dirty, corrupted, contaminated – they had strong anti-establishment sentiments and their position was to remain a counter-power. Also, many of them did not want to have a feeling of having “betrayed” the genuine causes of the protest movements, nor translate these successes into political scores. There were others who already had a feeling that they were hitting the wall with their civic activism and who recognized the limitations but felt too isolated and fragmented to enter into the political sphere alone. For many of them, more time was needed to acknowledge that a political project is a collective action based on a lot of cooperation and trust.²¹ Apart from that, donor agendas across the whole region were – and remained – very often an instrument of de-politicization. As such, their individual choices to enter politics would often result in long-term implications, both for them individually and for their organizations.

The third type of actor was the least likely, but still a possible option – ordinary citizens who were neither politically engaged nor active in movements or initiatives. Yet, as green-minded voters, they could feel frustration due to the non-existent or absent political options, and they could organize themselves into new political formations. If a party could emerge from them, that would indeed be a genuine homegrown political project which would be inoculated against top-down political engineering and immune from limiting experiences originating from the non-governmental sphere.

Still, for many years more, countries in the Balkans waited for an authentic and relevant green political force that could make a difference.

21 The case of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade is an excellent illustration of such a political project. On the other hand, mobilizations such as Plošad Sloboda in the North Macedonia around 2010 to 2015 had a similar trajectory, although of a bit lower magnitude. Although, they did not translate into an autonomous and self-standing political project.

For way too long, they expected it would come from somewhere, not at all thinking of themselves as politically active persons. In the case of Belgrade, where protest mobilizations were continuously increasing, it became almost self-evident that change would have to include everyone – each one of “us” protesting on the streets would be part of this change. This collective recognition, acting almost as a sort of alarm, was a tipping point that preceded political engagement and would later translate into the political project of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade before transforming into the electoral alliance Moramo, and ultimately into the Zeleno-levi front. It was a new perspective that became the driving force of the political project which was no longer on the crossroads. In their case, it was them who they were waiting for.

One of the ideas tested throughout this book is this very idea, namely that authentic green politics cannot become relevant unless it is born through this type of empowerment, or even the embodiment of political values through personal engagement and gaining – in Gramscian terms – autonomous political power. It is body, voice, memory, time, and knowledge that count; together they co-create the preconditions for constituting new social and political power. Many of these conversations led me to the conclusion that the main turning point was when they realized that this change will not happen without them, and actually that they need to be a part of that change. It was understanding that it was they who were the main agents of change, that the change they wished to see in society could only happen through their own agency. There are many personal choices to be made around the common goal, the sense of urgency, and saying “enough is enough.” In that way, ordinary citizens – through protests against and antagonism toward violent and corrupted regimes – become political subjects. Struggle becomes like a mirror through which they see their own personal stake and agency in the system change that they are fighting for.

Dobrica Veselinović, who many will notice is a person with an elegant and impeccable clothing style, is one of the founders of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade, a key figure of the movement, and a Zeleno-levi front councilor in the Belgrade City Council (and candidate for mayor of this city with 2 million people). In his early 40s he already has a large amount of knowledge about local politics. Together with Radomir Lazović (Mika),

Natalija Stojmenović, Iva Čukić, and Marko Aksentijević, he is – regardless of the different roles within and outside of the party sphere – an inevitable element of the Belgrade progressive political powerhouse.

“Green-left politics in the Serbian public is still often perceived as non-patriotic and not sufficiently engaged in the protection of national interests. It is very easily connected with the recent history of the NATO bombings and Kosovo independence, which was supported by Greens in the late 1990s. We are perceived through that lens and trying to swim in that the best we can,” says Dobrica. He continues, saying that “economic development is soon to reach its limits with privatization and the extraction of natural resources. When nothing will remain – neither people, nor resources – then there will be not much to show, or to change. That is why we are acting now, without a delay. And apparently they want to stay in power until the very last moment, to privatize, extract, and hijack it,” he explains.

“But it is always crises in which we are able to make a significant step,” he continues. “The position of green politics in Serbia is still pretty blurry and framed by contradictions. It is placed between the invention of the rich and well-situated West that can afford ecological thinking [as something expensive and not feasible] and the pure necessity and common sense which is necessary for normal life today.”

Furthermore, he says, “there are two fundamental problems related to our energy policy. First, it is about the coal mining/burning municipalities of Lazarevac and Obrenovac [which are artificially added sections of Belgrade], from which you get at least 10 percent of votes in Belgrade [as most of the local community is composed of miners and workers in coal power plants]. This relationship is particularly sensitive, as it is related to evident corruption that is often connected to election results in Belgrade. Second, it is Russian gas that contains geopolitical value and demonstrates national sentiments toward Russia. Both of these problems are solvable, but so far there has been a lack of political vision and solutions, as each party was caught in the trap of securing these votes and maintaining this status quo. Now that fossil fuel phase-out is becoming a necessity, this is even more challenging.” Dobrica adds that the “type of investments into renewables in Serbia are also a problem. People in power [Serbian Progressive Party, SNS] are more inclined to make room for foreign in-

vestors in wind, or tomorrow solar, than support cooperatives or citizen energy that is in the hands of citizens. That way, they can show jobs, they can show that there is green energy, they can show new investments, they don't have any other interests and particularly not to democratize the energy sector," he says. "It is about the adverse triangle between the lack of a proper ideology one wants to promote, a lack of human resources, and a lack of results one can show every few years in an election cycle. That is how the green transition is presented to the public by these authorities. They don't have any of these three components, but they still act like they are engaged with the green transition."

Dobrica continues: "In the political arena, being green is rather new, so it automatically has resulted in differentiation, as there was a demand both by the media and the public to determine who is who. Initially it started with response, with resistance, with defense, with reaction, and then very quickly it entered into the political sphere, where it is confronted at the daily level with authorities, which again deserves our reaction."

He explains that in the end, they are facing the paradox of simplification, which is co-created by the media that all of these nature defenders – regardless if they are defending a river or fighting against the mining of Rio Tinto – are the same, and that they are all fighting against the power personified by Aleksandar Vučić, the shiniest star. "Common ground is portrayed as being against Vučić and not defending nature and resources. In such a context, which is carefully orchestrated, it is difficult to offer a clear vision of the future we want to offer," says Dobrica.

Vesna Jusup is a seasoned Brussels-based green activist from Serbia whose most recent job was to develop policy, strategy, and capacity-building in the European Green Party (EGP). For her, in the case of Serbia, there are two conditions that made space for new actors to emerge. The first was the brutal privatization of natural resources.

After that, she says, "there is only your own life and existence that remains. And they came for natural resources, which are basic conditions for life. That is why Ekološki ustanak in Serbia, which is perceived more as a green populism, has an important historical role, as it will accelerate our understanding of what green political movements should not become. This way, we know we should not be populists, and they helped us to learn that much faster," she says.

Another condition, she continues, “is visible to us through the fact that the majority of people already know that the green transition is in the interest of all of us. Even conservatives are aware of that, and this opportunity is attracting various actors to appear at the surface. Then we are able to be more informed and make our offer more distinctive and original, since we are the ones who have been engaged with it for decades. This is our obvious advantage,” she says.

“Nobody is born as ‘green’ in the Balkans, even not the children whose parents are green activists. Being green is a matter of education but also of one’s permanent choice. In the Balkans, it is not yet defined what it is to be green. We too easily fall in a trap to say that some topic is ours. We still don’t have enough people, resources, and knowledge to own it completely. What we do know is what a green idea is and that it is a solid departure point,” she adds.

“We need to embrace a full ecological narrative, as that is our home. That’s what we’re here for. Who else will do it? It is essential that you keep your spine visible, clear, and upgradeable. We have to gather around the solutions.” She is inclined to say that green policies today are not revolutionary, but that they are necessary. “Each attempt of the green transition by those who don’t support its main purpose [but use it for other means] is a new catastrophe,” says Vesna, alluding to a long lineup of various clients waiting for their portion of benefits in exchange for their support to the party led by Vučić.

“If others behaved nicely, Greens would not have reason to emerge,” she says. “Still, in this moment, we cannot afford too many nuances. In this sense, in many countries in the Balkans, we need to take over the role of democrats and focus on progressive values, democratic procedures, European/international orientation, and care about people and the environment.”

Dobrica explains: “We are perceived as being closer to the left as we address issues of social justice, governance, and redistribution. Other ecological actors in Serbia tend to profile themselves more as conservative. In cases where we made concrete policy proposals such as affordable housing, we did not encounter any strong resistance or pushback due to these positions. For the moment, we are still far from the levels of decision-making and implementation. Perhaps when we are closer to

that level we will find more resistance or more agreements. Now, people don't care about it so much, they perceive us mainly as an urban party for the middle class and highly educated people. Also, in our own circles, we often lack the time to commit to more ideological discussions. I personally miss this."

Ekološki ustanak can be loud and present and irritate authorities. But they don't have the capacity to be more than eco-populists," says Paola Petrić, deputy director of the Belgrade office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. "Yet, even in Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade, which has all the main green ingredients in their program, it is not articulated as a green program. We have concerns about air pollution, clean rivers, solar power plants, but as to which kind of social policy, which kind of industry, what gender relations are – these questions are still not framed as green issues," she continues.

"The main difference between Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade and other ecological actors is the ability to articulate how: how to develop, how to transform our society – this is a clear advantage where they can make a difference, further develop, and earn credibility," she explains.²² "Occasionally there are green policies proposed by government in a very superficial way. For example, recently they wanted to introduce electric cars as an instrument of decarbonization. Yet, while the high price of a car and public subsidies for richer users has been addressed, a carbon footprint of one megawatt of electricity produced (through coal power plants in the Belgrade municipality) has not been addressed, nor the ways how energy production can be practically transformed and decarbonized. There is still a lot of room to learn from such cases," Paola says.

People from the Zeleno-levi front did not earn their political credentials or gain their visibility by positioning themselves around the central coordinates of domestic politics that often serve as filters: Kosovo, Srebrenica, and Belgrade Pride. They often do not share their positions around these issues. They profiled themselves as urban fighters for the well-being of the city and not as politicians around the central questions of national sovereignty. Their grand opening was shaped in an extremely hostile environment. "I would love if it all went faster, but I have to say, they arrived

22 A few months after this conversation, Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade officially transformed into the Zeleno-levi front, in which both green and left components were part of the name and therefore the ideological framework of the party.

at the right time. As a non-conformist political option, they are not late at all. And they show that they can stay. They made a breakthrough and they survived, transformed, and continued. This is their trajectory,” she says.

Alma Midžić, a researcher and well-known activist based in Sarajevo, has been active on the scene for almost 15 years. So far she has not considered engaging with politics, although she is one of the rare personalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina who has a capacity for the big picture. In her point of view, “we still don’t have any alternative political options while trying to survive in the current political environment for nearly 30 years. We would need a person we can trust to give legitimacy and then all sit together to write a program. Though I think it would be a difficult process; imagine only that we have to find a common position on NATO accession. But for sure we know that we don’t need another sketchy party.”

Alma, originally from Bihać, a smaller city in Western Bosnia, gained a lot of experience as an activist with the Coalition for River Protection, which was established in 2016 by organizations and local groups that wished to defend rivers from a new wave of extractivism mainly through the construction of new mini hydropower plants. She has also been active in struggles around the urban commons in Sarajevo. In that work, she finds a narrative of resistance toward the extractivism of natural resources to be very important, as it includes anti-colonial and anti-imperial dimensions.

“That unites people and goes beyond their existing ethnic divisions. They all perceive nature as the last resort and they are willing to protect it – for them this is literally the final frontier,” says Alma. “In our struggle, we managed to transform the prevailing narrative of mini hydropower plants as a ‘chance for development’ into one of the most hated projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That was mainly as we repeated constantly our main arguments: Local communities will be poorer and rich individuals and companies even richer.”

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, progressive activists like Alma are impatient when thinking of the green political project in the country. She continues: “I am afraid that the room for consolidation of the left-green platform will be significantly shrunk if a serious political subject does not appear. This room will be taken by nationalistic parties, opportunists, and international organizations that will reduce this potential. We don’t have much

time left, but on the other hand, we cannot skip the necessary steps that would enable organic development.”

Alma explains that during the last general elections in 2022, “there were many worn-out political figures (such as Zlatko Lagumdžija and Adis Arapović) who tried to use a green political framework to present their programs as something good, new, pro-European, and pro-Western, counting on the fact that people had forgot their previous political engagement,” she says. “People who bear responsibility for the plunder of this country – during and after the war – who have actively participated and voted for policies that allow the extraction of public resources for private benefit should not be part of any progressive political option,” stresses Alma.

“I find ideology very important in defining such a political program,” she says. “It is not only about water protection, it is also about governance structures and democracy behind the decision-making. I don’t want to see Bosnia and Herzegovina tomorrow without forests, with contaminated rivers, privatized sources of water, and privatized energy networks.”

Jasminka Bjelavac, an engineer and project coordinator from the Sarajevo office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, says that green issues are not at all on the radar of political parties or civil society organizations. “In many countries, air pollution would be a relevant trigger, but in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that is surprisingly not the case. Even those political parties who were self-proclaimed green parties focused on non-environmental issues, instead they mainly focused on ethnic divisions, which are prolonging the sense of insecurity,” she says. “We are like small hamsters running around. That does not allow us to engage with real topics and concerns such as the energy crisis, the food crisis, or affordable housing, which are all key issues we should be dealing with. But nobody cares about that at all. People think that we are an underdeveloped country, where environmental protection is perceived as a cost or privilege,”²³ she explains. According to Jasminka, the fact that we are energy exporters is used as an excuse not to deal with energy challenges such as energy poverty or air pollution.²⁴

23 Also see Harun Dinarević and Alena Beširević (2022, May 20), Reportaža iz Kaknja: Ugalj je ponovo u modi, Naratorium, <https://naratorium.ba/ekologija/reportaza-iz-kaknja-ugalj-je-ponovo-u-modi/>

24 Euronews (2022, November 29), Sarajevo ranked the world’s most polluted city, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/11/29/sarajevo-ranked-the-worlds-most-polluted-city>

The struggles against mini hydropower plants that started a few years ago have demonstrated some potential. “But very soon, it became clear that these struggles, although very focused, were also isolated and disconnected from other environmental challenges and battles. That was rather a strange moment,” says Jasminka, who has been observing these developments for almost a decade in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“In our case, green is reduced to environmental protection in the technological sense or to nature lovers, and therefore highly de-politicized and de-ideologized. Citizens, local communities, and new types of governance are not perceived to be part of the green program. Citizens themselves are not allowed to have access to decision-making processes, which are very often hidden from them. So far, all attempts to build a green party were completely upside down. They were not organic and did not start from the problem or collective action around it, but were merely top-down political entrepreneurship, without genuine motivation or legitimacy,” says Jasminka.

“If you are an expert and declare your political aspirations, you immediately lose. You have to be ready to give up on many things,” she continues, explaining that she felt it in her own skin as a certified consultant for environmental impact assessments. “All of a sudden, you are not invited any more as an expert.”

The green agenda has, during the past few years, become increasingly popular in Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily due to various financing packages that aim to create a regional version of the European Green Deal and foster a circular economy and the green transition in the country.²⁵ Yet, it is evident that there is no genuine agency and that the green transition became another top-down element of the donors’ agenda. And although there are numerous funds available for the green transition, there are no agents of political change. On the contrary, that has adverse impacts on the political value of green issues, and the ability to mobilize citizens is captured by the tight grip of the donors. There is a growing contradiction whereby the green transition agenda in so-called donor communities across the region very often hinders the political articulation of green issues. Still, there are exceptions, as in some cases the goals of donors and green actors

25 Regional Cooperation Council (s.a.), Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, https://www.rcc.int/priority_areas/61/green-agenda-for-the-western-balkans

can align and send positive messages that are focused on transnational cooperation in the region, which is a distinct – although not fully explored – position of many EGP member parties from the region.²⁶ However, in most of the cases, the donors' agenda reduces the political dimension of green topics, and potential agents of change become increasingly demotivated to engage, as they are often not able to solve this puzzle.

It is worth mentioning here that there are two types of cooperation between green players in the region. One mainly takes place between parties and groups that have been established without broader organic development, as top-down political projects, such as DOM in North Macedonia, the URA in Montenegro, Zajedno in Serbia, and Hoćemo in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Very often, these parties are established by political personalities who have past political incarnations in other parties and are very often not rooted in social movements. They are inclined to sign joint petitions or declarations and occasionally participate in similar events or visit each other. On the other hand, in the cases of the Zeleno-levi front from Serbia and Možemo from Croatia (and their prior municipal versions: Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade and Zagreb je naš), there is a practice of very deep, intense, and long-lasting exchanges of political strategies and campaigning.

“In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political spectrum is moving from center to right, although some parties are pretending to be left. But elections are fake more or less, as cards are already dealt out,” says Tihomir Dakić resolutely – he is a seasoned environmental activist from the Banja Luka-based Center for Environment.

In Montenegro, which has a population comparable to European cities such as Rotterdam, Leipzig, or Genoa as well as a highly polarized political space, there were high expectations directed toward the URA, which very soon earned a green badge and membership in the EGP. These expectations were related to fighting against corruption and clientelism, but also against environmentally detrimental economic developments. Yet, when taking over in government, they did not wait too long before they isolated themselves and disconnected from civil society, failing to

26 I-Audit (2023, July 7), NDI Facilitates Regional Conference for South-East European Green Parties in Sarajevo, <https://integrityaudit.org/news/ndi-facilitates-regional-conference-for-south-east-european-green-parties-in-sarajevo-41>

deliver most of their promises and turning into an elitist project that lost its transformative agency. This disappointment led to the thinking that there has to be room for new players who would give new hope to citizens and gain the trust of and legitimacy from the citizens.

One of the responses to this situation was a new group called Preokret (Reversal), which was established in early 2022. In descriptions of their agenda, they aim to build a program based on the accountability of politicians and citizen participation. The main reversal (Preokret) they want to make is to turn things upside down in local politics, empowering citizens to become a center of political life. Their focus is on public housing, creating conditions for more efficient administration, and preventing the privatization of the water supply infrastructure and other natural resources. During my stay in Podgorica, I spent a few hours in conversation with leaders of Preokret, namely biologist Vuk Iković, who already had initial positive results in Danilovgrad and Srđan Perić and was one of the leaders (and had previous political experience from Positive Montenegro, which was established a decade ago and quickly dissolved).²⁷ Arriving in the Montenegrin political space as newcomers and confronted with their resignation from the URA, they grappled with the most challenging problems, such as an economic development model, energy policy, and the privatization of natural resources. However, a few months after our conversation, it turned out that in the national elections of spring 2023, they did not manage to secure a parliamentary seat, though their results doubled, showing an increase in popularity.

“We are now here to offer new hope,” Vuk explains. “The URA did not have the guts to cope with most malign issues in our society, and they reproduced the same matrix. Very soon they forgot what they wanted to achieve, and they did not play their role of leading transformation.”

Yet, at first glance, it is clear that Preokret is still run mainly by men. Vuk explains that the empowerment of women and their political engagement is at the center of their program and strategy, but that patriarchal oppression in Montenegro is still widespread and strong. “We invite citizens who care about public interest to become active and join so that we don’t

²⁷ In December 2023, Preokret reevaluated the unsatisfying results of the elections (they were not able to pass the threshold for a parliamentary seat) and nominated Vuk Iković as a new lead coordinator. Srđan Perić continued his political activity in Preokret as one of the coordinators.

leave the political space to the worst of us,” he says. People from Preokret think that the URA saw green politics as their niche and opportunity, but that they very soon proved to be not credible and abandoned the core principles of green politics. For sure, Preokret in its core narrative calls for citizens to take over and politically engage, and to not wait for worn out political elites to solve their problems. For the moment, they are taking their time to slowly build the movement and are willing to invest lots of time and energy to create conditions for deeper societal transformation.

Changemakers

Social change is at the center of any political project. The vision of this change, or political imagination behind it, are both sources of motivation for personal political engagement and for the collective mobilization of supporters. These ideas also create the pathways for the collective efforts necessary to achieve the political aims and change political realities. This vision determines the strategies, moves, and milestones of this change, but also the style in which this change is translated into policies and distributed across society as a whole. Therefore, in this chapter, we pay attention to the values, ideas, and ultimately the role of ideology among green political players in the region. I also look more closely at where exactly new political players are able to make a difference and create the long-lasting and systemic change that they claim.

Because of the complex political realities in the region, where political actors can be faced not only with political violence, corrupted regimes, and captured institutions, but also with volatile rules and arbitrary interpretations – it is not always easy to find an entry point to a political arena and to consolidate social power, which would serve as a driving force for the transformation of society. In such a context, already an intervention in the form of a protest and challenging certain decisions of authorities present counterpoints and constitute a place from which necessary social power can be created. If this phase is successful, this social power will be necessary to carry this political vision further and to translate it into agency. Very often it starts with orientation around one issue or with anti-establishment mobilization, and later it evolves into a fully fledged political project with a comprehensive vision of social change.

Earlier, we saw that the political players who did not have social power behind them soon disappeared or failed to deliver their declared promises. Evidently, leapfrogging was not the best way to do (green) politics in the region. On the path from protest to parliament, one needs to go through various stages of evolution, where transformative agency creates new subjectivity. Even in cases where one might propose new policies, solutions, or beneficial actions, there is a need for social power that can often only be energized and built through conflict with the unsatisfying or unbearable status quo. In cases where the transition into a fully fledged

political project is successful, these two components continue to be the two main factors that must be continually harmonized; if you focus too much only on one of them, you can lose it all.

Another important aspect of social change is that it is also framed by temporality. In the case of the Balkan region, green actors refer to two main components. The first – common to many Balkan countries – is linked to the current continuity of power grabs, of a captured state and institutions, as well as the continuity of corruption and plunder through privatizations or extraction, mainly by one but often two ruling parties. This continuity, which turns into permanent paralysis of the state (or even society) or an unhealthy status quo needs to be challenged and disrupted. From this conflict, there is another option – or alternative – that can emerge.

The second component is perceived to be connected with the past – again common to the countries in the Balkan region: This is discontinuity with the beneficial aspects of a socialist legacy. This is shared by most of the ex-Yugoslav states and refers to well-established welfare systems, high levels of guarantees for education, health, and housing, and a decent distribution of these rights throughout society. In this case, it is the three-decades-old discontinuity that is to be regenerated and reestablished to oppose the adverse impacts of detrimental environmental projects and predatory capitalism that has ruthlessly deepened social inequalities. Very often, people are trapped into a misleading understanding that one belongs exclusively to the past, and another only to the future.

Yet, in my conversations, the social dimension was frequently mentioned as the main coordinate of any political project focused on an ecological, democratic transition. Issues concerning redistribution, social justice, solidarity, and fairness were all signs pointing to the political territory where green politics should land. We will later see that the ecological vision of society is tightly intertwined with ideas of justice and the reconstruction of the social welfare systems that were dismantled in the 1990s by war and privatizations. Green movements that are rooted deep in society express this in a very direct way. Those who are leading self-proclaimed top-down experiments calculate much more, or play the populist card.

Greens are changemakers. They see themselves that way. In many cases, that coincides with the expectations of the citizens. There are numerous examples that show how courageous they can be: They appear where there

is injustice, and if needed, they confront corporations, authorities, and violators. But the question remains, where we do expect this change to take place? Evidence I gathered in my talks across the region has indicated that it is a kind of paradox. First of all, changes take place at the site of their intervention, when they prevent an eviction, when they stand in front of a bulldozer, when they organize a protest. In the best cases, they prevent future injustices with their presence and persistent action, or at least demotivate the violators. Then at the societal level, there is significant interference that requires change in society. Certain things – such as mismanagement, irregularities, adverse environmental projects, the abuse of public functions, often paired with authoritarian rule – cannot happen at all anymore, or at least not without huge resistance. A change of tone in the debate can already be one level of desired change. That can still all happen outside of official institutions.

Then, with the first electoral successes and institutional representation, changes can take place at the legislative, executive, and – finally – the policy levels. Not in all cases, but most often it starts at the local level, where Greens – both in opposition or in office – start to transform decision-making at the local level and practice a different type of politics. For those who are more successful, oppositional work through parliament can show that there are alternatives to the prevailing model, which can be challenged through amendments and requests made to the ruling party. Last but not least, when Greens are in government, they are theoretically in a position to change not only society, but also its public institutions, laws, and policies. In countries in the region, it is far too early to speak about such cases (except for the failure of the Montenegrin United Reform Action, URA), but the work of Greens in the parliaments, both at the local and national levels, have already provided timely results (Serbia, North Macedonia).

But where should we seek and search for change, and in which areas and spheres? It goes without saying that it is about ecological transition or socio-ecological transformation, which has been the grand narrative of green political forces since the early 2000s. It is believed that Greens are the most competent and visible force behind these words, but very often in this corner of Europe they lack the executive power to deliver on their best intentions. This contradiction is not easily resolved in the

Balkan region. Countering detrimental projects is often successful, but proposing alternatives or beneficial actions is often much less successful, particularly when one does not have the power to execute them. Without political or at least social power, it is difficult to make a difference. In such cases, actors remain on the fringe of the political spectrum, with limited relevance. In cases where Greens emerge from the institutional civil society sphere, it is often difficult to translate this experience into the political world, where there is much more competition and hostility. On the other hand, “entrepreneurial” projects around green ideas are often not able to create authentic social power that is backed by citizens, and this reduces their political activity to mere media appearances.²⁸

Yet, with the maturation of political projects, this becomes a necessity. Most of the green parties across the region, regardless of their relevance, have placed ecological transition high on their agenda, though this does not immediately result in greater popularity, or even capacity. Surprisingly, a green transition, or ecological modernization, is often still not affiliated with green political actors in the Balkans. They are expected to be the main actors and carriers of this change, but very often they are not. That is mainly due to the fact that most of these actors are still far from a position to deliver. While a green transition is indeed very often at the top of civil society organization agendas or in the plans of governments, the fact that green political figures are in limbo between the advocacy they did while they were activists on one side, and the executive power they have in the governments on the other side, makes a large difference.

This gap is their main problem, as they are not in an adequate position to activate their agency. If they only morally urge and call for more radical climate or energy policies from the current government, their political activity will be more similar to some advocacy NGOs than to the opposition party. Positioned mainly in oppositional work – or in the best case as small junior partners – they are able to win more political visibility through their work on affirming ecological modernization, but mainly by struggling with parties in power and their corruption, debt, or

28 That is particularly the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where most of the self-proclaimed green parties have so far only been present in social or mainstream media, without any field work, working with the members, or community-building. The usual manifestations of such an approach could be tracked through numerous press conferences held a few months before the elections.

damaging policies.²⁹ Yet, as they are expected to demonstrate competences and excellence in this field, this is where continuous work and a permanent presence have to be ensured, even by bargaining with stronger partner parties to gain opportunities to demonstrate competences in cases where they are not able to take an executive lead, which is a rather rare case.³⁰

Secondly, another very important source of momentum is the change in the overall global and European paradigm. Today, with an increase in public attention toward climate change, energy security, and resource scarcity, any government – green or not – is expected to develop, design, and implement green policies, regardless of their political programs. This sort of political “mainstreaming” of environmental issues does not always help new and nascent green parties to establish themselves as new political figures, in spite of their authenticity. They are therefore often faced with a voluminous challenge to show that they are more competent and that they own their own topics, although they lack the capacity to implement them and deliver. Yet, these conditions can also be an opportunity for young parties to re-politicize the public sphere and antagonize other political opponents that do not have an inherent interest in green politics or share green “DNA.” In such cases, a long-term orientation is crucial, and the evidence shows that shortcuts are not possible.

Thirdly, wherever green political ideas are present in the Balkans in authentic form, their presence highly resonates with the ability to intervene and fight for the public interest or the protection of public goods (be it natural resources, public spaces, coastal areas, forests, mountains, etc.). This most common position is also the result of a development at the European periphery, where natural resources and public services have been exposed to intense waves of privatization via speculative investments. Even when these struggles do not translate into political competition – as in the case of the struggle against hydropower plant investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina or a new airport in Albania – they create a profile of the Greens as those who dare to care for nature and the future of local communities or society in general.

Fourthly, most green parties across the Balkans undoubtedly favor

29 This is often the case in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

30 The URA in Montenegro was one of the rare cases where a European Green Party member country was in power.

and promote membership in the European Union (EU) as being part of their own development path. Belonging to the EU and adhering to constitutional values provide direction, which – in the changed geopolitical situation following Russia's war against Ukraine – is even more important and relevant. In this context, there is an increase in popular expectations for political figures to declare their stance. Very often, green political forces are also perceived as pro-European actors that promote ecological modernization and citizen participation, both of which are expected to be scaled-up in the course of the EU accession process. Recently, some green parties from the Western Balkans signed declarations concerning cooperation and common approaches toward future EU membership.³¹

Moreover, with a lack of energy security in the region and with more public concerns over the price of energy and raw materials, there is a clear opportunity for green actors across the region to capitalize on most of the latest developments and turn them into opportunities for spreading the grand narrative on socio-ecological transformation. Taking part in the socio-ecological transformation – like the rest of Europe – can also be the appropriate narrative to create a widespread feeling of catching up with Europe. Yet, some of the parties cultivate more critical approaches toward membership in the EU, particularly in relation to the speculative and extraction-oriented investments of European companies, which use accession to the EU as a Trojan horse to enter into various agreements.

The feminization of politics and creating equal conditions for political work that is centered around intersectionality is a point of departure for any sound green politics in the region. Although not all green parties in the region still fully comply with gender democracy in their own circles, it is a standard to be achieved and closely followed. While in some cases women are the main protagonists and key political leaders who are transforming the style of politics, in other cases some parties are organized in a patriarchal way or they lack more significant participation from women in key positions. Promoting gender equality in all societal areas and fighting various forms of patriarchal oppression, authoritarianism, or exclusion is – together with intersectional justice – a core area where a substantial

31 Euronews (2023, March 26), Zelene političke stranke Zapadnog Balkana u Sarajevu potpisale Deklaraciju o saradnji, <https://www.euronews.rs/evropa/region/82324/zelene-politicke-stranke-zapadnog-balkana-u-sarajevu-potpisale-deklaraciju-o-saradnji/vest>

amount of work from green political forces is expected. The latter is often missing due to the absence of theoretical knowledge. This is what provides a deeper understanding of the variety of causes of marginalization, which results in the oppression and discrimination (or privileges on the other end) of people with certain social or political identities.

For green politics in the region, ideology is not irrelevant. The ideological expectations of Greens vary. In most cases, the majorities of populations in Western Balkan societies expect that Greens will represent a competent fight for a clean environment. For the broader framework of green politics, that is obviously a reductionist approach. Yet, it can serve as a departure point for green politics to start its political adventure and cover other issues: socio-economic rights, public services, education, housing, foreign policy, etc. The placement of green politics within the broader ideological spectrum is not fixed on the Balkans, precisely because it is still too close to the profile of an “ecological” party. For a smaller segment of society, Greens are often perceived as being part of normalized, progressive, and modern Western societies. Furthermore, green parties across the Balkans often describe themselves as being pro-European parties, whereby green is equal to a modern post-political version, in which identity politics is less relevant.

Before diving deeper into conversations across the region, it is important to provide a bit more contextual background about the conditions through which green politics makes a difference. There is strong evidence, I have found in my talks, that green politics in the Balkans can only be successful if it has a strong social dimension and goes beyond its environmentalist nutshell. Without that, it often remains an invisible, small club or a one-issue party that barely survives in the political arena. We will see that social change that the general public, constituencies, and supporters expect from the political actions of the Greens is expected to be much more than just resistance to damaging environmental projects or investments. Social change is often seen through the lenses of social justice, inclusion, participation, solidarity, and redistribution. And that is exactly where Greens need to be more visible in the future. If we leave out the populist tendencies that are increasing in the region, Greens have a lot of

space for maneuver, as social-democratic parties across the region are in slow decline (perhaps with the exception of Albania, at least formally).

It turns out that this is closely related to two fundamental experiences that are formative for the orientation of successful green political projects in the region. One is related to the remembrance of the developed social welfare system in the former Yugoslavia, and the second is related to the brutal plunder and privatization that occurred during the transition to a market economy, or ultimately adopting various versions of a neoliberal capitalist model. These two experiences – a memory of the past social welfare system, and present experiences of life under the increasing social inequalities within a capitalist model – are crucial for framing the social dimension as a central question for green agency in the region. That is to say, the Greens must offer a vision of a democratic and fair ecological transition, which could save people from further extractivism and offer them a good life through a clean environment and high-quality basic services for all.

Before we focus on the specific changes that Greens across the region have been able to deliver, or at least can be identified, we will pay some attention to the core values of the Greens in the region that are considered to be the most important for their political organization and narratives.

“We are gathered around values of participation, human rights, and a clean environment – we see these as core values,” says Predrag Momčilović, called Pedja by his comrades, from the Center for Green Politics, a think tank close to the Zeleno-levi front. He is one of the few activists who does not have a social science background, and he is the author of the book *About the Green Idea and Green Policies*, which was published during the completion of this book. “Sometimes we have to be very tactical and cautious about profiling in some areas if we don’t want to divide our fresh born constituency. Foreign policy is for sure one such issue,” as Serbia is in a very specific and delicate situation. “In Serbia, there is a lively memory of the period when German Greens with Joschka Fischer as foreign minister were perceived as being responsible for the bombing of Serbia in the late 1990s, and it is quite difficult to work with this legacy. We are often perceived as being under some foreign influence, that we need to go to Germany to get instructions,” he explains.

“People see that we live in an unsustainable way and easily gather

around ecological wisdom,” says Žaklina Živković, an activist who was very engaged in various environmental protests against extractivism while a member of Polekol, a grassroots NGO based in Belgrade. “They are ready to go deep and acknowledge a global and internationalist perspective of the problem, and go beyond nationalism. They already see it’s not a matter of Serbia. In addition to that, the role of women in the ecological struggle is recognized and appreciated. Another value is social justice, I can easily foresee lots of new protests that will go in that direction, for redistribution, against poverty, for workers’ rights,” she adds.

Dobrica Veselinović, founder of Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade and one of the main leaders of the Zeleno-levi front, explains that “solidarity, resistance to various forms of expropriation of public resources and internationalism – these are three values that serve us as an ideological compass for our movement. Apart from that, the main value which we find very important in the internal political organization is pluralism and diversity. Still there are some topics that we intentionally avoid in order to keep common ground for our main political objectives,” he adds.

“The ideological perception of our political activity goes in different directions. In some cases our leftist orientation is much more progressive, if we compare it with a conservationist approach to defend and protect things as they are. Very often we much more frequently demand change, and not only in the environmental protection realm, particularly in situations which are unbearable. The most recent example is our intention and initiative to stop and limit the further rise of renting prices,” explains Dobrica, adding that they increasingly lack the time to invest into refining their ideological positions.

Vesna Jusup, a seasoned Brussels-based political activist who worked for many years in the European Green Party (EGP), sees anti-nationalism, feminism, and secularity as the core values around which Greens can mobilize and join forces in the region. Aleksandar Matković, a researcher and scholar from Novi Sad, sees equality, social justice, and democracy as the key values most important for defining green politics in the region.

Pedja continues with his assessment. “Even in our own circles, within our political organization, green issues are somehow isolated through environmentalist interpretation, and therefore separated from so-called leftist positions. For us it of utmost importance to connect ecological issues

better and faster with other dimensions (social, economic). However, as the party is growing, we need to resist centralization and continue in a democratic way of designing our program, as that is our main strength and distinctive value,” he says.

“I would say that we made significant progress,” he continues, “from a point where ecological issues were perceived as non-ideological to a very specific position. We made a big step from the less ideological narrative of ‘for a good city’ to openly declaring as green-left. On the other hand, people think we are socialists who want to bring the country back to socialism. At the same time, for example, they don’t consider our participation in Belgrade Pride as part of the green agenda, but more a legacy of the liberals who did it for many years,” he concludes.

Žaklina explains that “when you ask people about the environment, they say the environment is a post-ideological question, where everyone is considered, but at a practical level they very quickly position themselves in relation to ideological coordinates. Right-wing forces (nationalist party Dveri) attempted to take over part of the ‘ecological cake,’ framing it in a populist way of so-called eco-patriotism, but they hit the wall very quickly. Some of the countries in the region are quite fertile ground for eco-socialist ideas, where ideas of self-governance are still very alive and active. In some of our struggles, this knowledge may be very instrumental and useful, as some people in local communities at Stara Planina [mountain range] had this experience from earlier years. We see huge potential there,” she explains.

Iva Marković, Žaklina’s colleague from Polekol who is also a seasoned ecological activist and has participated in various struggles during the last decade, says that Vučić is pejoratively calling the most recent green wave an “ecological circus” due to its diversity and colorfulness, but also in an ideological sense. “Nobody is immune from the ideological profile of the most recent green wave. Now everybody claims the environment through their own ideological entry point. That provides new momentum in relation to the so far prevailing conservative approach of so-called mountain ecologists³² and nature lovers, who did not see a political dimension to environmental issues. They wanted to conserve what is here, they want

32 “Goranski ekolozi.”

to protect what exists, although the current situation is bad. They don't have a proactive approach, proposing for example how we will do a coal phase-out," explains Iva.

"Democracy, equality, and environmental protection are values around which progressive green forces are gathering and mobilizing. We want to confront those who are 'untouchable' and reclaim what is ours," she says.

"During the last elections, the environmental situation escalated to a level that it opened the door for political newcomers who gained legitimacy through ecological street struggles. But they did not have previous political experience or a clear ideological profile, and no relationship with existing political actors (parties). They did not see them coming. People with street credentials became loud megaphones for green ideas. They joined with some other people (referring to Together) who already had professional political experience, and that led to the electoral alliance Moramo, Iva explains.

"We have only recently started," Pedja says, "with the development of policy units within the party [Zeleno-levi front]. So far, green politics has been carried mainly by civic initiatives that were limited mainly to analysis, but it did not follow up with the development of proposals. On the other hand, our government, namely the Ministry of Energy, is implementing green policies that are translated from EU directives, mainly in the neoliberal sense," he concludes.

Danilo Krivokapić is a digital activist from the Belgrade-based SHARE foundation. "There was obviously an empty space on the Left, no authentic player there for a decent period of time. Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade has entered that space as a fresh force. It is an emancipatory project of one generation and does represent modern politics. Eventually, there was someone for whom we could vote," he explains. "The fact that they were not corrupted has been turned into criticism that they are incompetent or non-experienced. That was the only thing they could be criticized for in a captured state like Serbia. However, very soon they proved they are not an urban elite party from Belgrade center and that they don't hesitate to appear wherever there is a need across the country, and they establish themselves as a service for citizens," he says.

His colleague Andrej Petrovski adds that people in Serbia are still too pragmatic when it comes to ecology. "We live in a poor society where many

people will choose a higher salary or heating over ecological constraints. And that will define their ideological stand in times of energy scarcity or poverty,” says Andrej.

“Green policies in Serbia were mainly reduced due to pressure from the EU agenda,” says Žaklina. She explains that the approach to green policies was mainly superficial and not intrinsic. “For a certain period, green policies were imposed from the EU and perceived as a must, as a necessity. However, with the SNS [Serbian Progressive Party] coming to power and their gradual power grab, many of the laws were changed in order to align with investment priorities, which were in the interest of Vučić. In the last few years, with the increased attention of citizens toward environmental issues, people are much more informed and ask delicate questions, they consider it very personal. That brings us to the new phase, where ministers are much more meticulous, and they manage to draft much better laws that (only) appear to be green. Mega projects such as ‘Clean Serbia’ are a showcase where the government is doing obvious greenwashing through PR machinery, taking Chinese loans in order to introduce green technologies for cleaning the water supply system. They often lack any serious strategy or action plan. They are merely reduced to the press statements of Aleksandar Vučić.”

She explains that “the current government is at this moment involved in long-term planning that is heavily focused on extractivist-oriented industrialization with lots of mining planned across the country. As such, they cannot even fake they are committed to a green transition. Yet, at the local level, there might be some resistance from municipalities that don’t want to follow this direction, but the tight grip on and centralization of power by Vučić is making it more difficult. They have to be ready to pay the price. There are incredible pressures on them, and often they have to cope to politically survive.

“It is great that people acknowledge that the environment is a political issue. Even in cases where citizens are nationalism-driven, they tolerate green-left actors who work on environmental protection. My opinion is that with time we can convert them,” states Žaklina.

“None of the existing green-minded platforms in Serbia – Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade, Zajedno, or Ekološki ustanak – has succeeded so far to provide a broader platform for people to engage with politics,” she explains, “since

all of them are quite closed off and conservative within their own small ecosystems. There are different levels of education and expertise. There is no ideal political figure at the moment. So we need to endure, wait, and have trust in the process. All three of them have their own advantages and disadvantages. Their cooperation during the elections was forced due to election pressures, but they were not ready for that at this moment, so it could not last. Now they are in a challenging situation to coordinate common activities in parliament while they diverge and build their own parties,” Žaklina concludes.

“In our smaller bubble, Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade is clearly an actor of green policies, without any doubt,” Danilo explains. “But for the general audience, particularly outside of Belgrade, Ekološki ustanak might be more visible, but not necessarily competent.”

Both Danilo and Andrej think that the core values around Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade are equality, inclusion, and justice. Apart from that, they add that the crucial difference is that they are easily accessible and approachable. “There is still a lot of activism and lots of teamwork. There is not just one leader, and our voters consider it very unusual, or even confusing, as they are used to seeing one person only. In their case, there are many people who appear as important faces of the political movement. Sometimes that is used against them, but in general, people learn to recognize this as a new quality,” Danilo says.

Srđan Đurović, a senior researcher and program manager at the Open Society Foundation in Serbia, sees the main potential and value of green actors (mainly Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade) to be their own agency to define agendas for long-term solutions. “We need homegrown social innovations that will mitigate a variety of pressures and attacks on our standards, which we will experience due to the climate change policies proposed and designed by the same people who were advocating it. It is up to them to step into these shoes now, and the surrounding ecosystem should provide some support for such an effort. When we talk about green policies, we need visions, not leaders,” Srđan explains.

He continues, saying that “for a green transition, it is essential to be reclaimed back by the citizens, as it is in their very interest. At the moment, this is again being hijacked by a regime serving various corruptive schemes and clients. There will be some losers of a green transition, and

we are lacking programs that can actually reach the ultimate users with tangible results.”

Simon Ilse, former director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation office in Belgrade, says that Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade is still not fully recognized as a green party. “In Serbia people have vague opinions as to what is green. Particularly there is no perception of political ecology as ideology,” he says. “Still, I clearly see values of solidarity, participation, and anti-fascism as core dimensions of their political activity, they are sort of a vanguard with a different style of doing politics, which is surely dependent on the values they share,” he adds.

Natalija Stojmenović is a councilor of the Zeleno-levi front (previously Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade) in the City Assembly of Belgrade. “It was our agency to create conditions so that some issues can gain more public attention. Ecological issues have become one of the top three topics in recent years in Serbia, also due to the fact that people were saturated with nationalism-driven debates. Still, every once in a while, they come back to these big topics. Still, at the national level, we are not yet in a situation that we have actors of green policies who have the capacity to implement them.”

Natalija joined Ne da(vi)mo Belgrade as a young student. She was attracted by ideas of freedom and solidarity, which she finds inherent to this political organization. “In Serbia there are some limitations to be perceived as a Green that are related to culture and recent history. It’s often not perceived as authentic and homegrown, but as imported, and we constantly have to deconstruct these narratives. Yet, we have learned together with citizens to be more sensitive toward sudden and urgent changes in our landscape, city, or land where our direct needs are affected by arbitrary interventions of the regime,” she says, adding: “This is our agency.”

Dorđe Pavičević, a Member of Parliament of the Zeleno-levi front, outlines democracy, antifascism, and European orientation as the three core values that are part of political identity. “When we take these values seriously and behave in accordance with them, we immediately earn a label of ‘uncooperative,’ as we insist on these values and we are not willing to be co-opted by the regime or any other interest group,” he explains.

For Radomir Lazović (Mika), equality, solidarity, and a healthy/livable environment present the main values and coordinates for his political work. “I see our agency in being able to be present and to intervene wherever there is something important happening. The city belongs to all of us, and we are part of it, so we need to be asked,” he says, explaining the philosophy of civic empowerment.

Paola Petrić, deputy director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation office in Belgrade, considers feminism, social justice, and a clean environment to be the core values that define the course of political action for the Zelenulevi front. “They have a lot of room and a large audience to strengthen and clarify their ideological positions in the future. And the quality of their work is perhaps the best ideology they can offer. Content is perhaps better than a label,” she says.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is very difficult to imagine the emergence of an authentic and green political player. An opportunity was lost in the formative years of Naša stranka a decade ago. It was considering membership in the EGP but later joined the liberals. Since then, a lot of the party’s agenda has transformed and the party grew in influence, yet it only kept a minor part of its green program, however it is still close to some of the main values.

Tihomir Dakić is an environmental activist based in Banja Luka. “In my view, green political formations should start from the bottom, through 24/7 work in the local community, to build the base and trust between the people. Therefore, I am very skeptical too of any attempts by politically experienced people (previously engaged in other parties) who discover ‘green topics’ in their mature years with the idea to immediately run for elections. That can only be ignorance, if it is not a plan. There are green parties that appear only before elections and try to confuse voters. It can also be a type of top-down entrepreneurship, which I don’t find as being close to core green values,” he says.

“A green agenda is currently very fashionable and popular in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That does not have a lot in common with the systemic change we are struggling for. On the contrary, the transition to renewables is becoming a very lucrative business and the source of new corruption affairs. We see around ourselves numerous mega-investments in solar and wind energy that are – so to say – creatively designed to grab lots

of money. It is, again, not about an energy transition but about various deals to clientelist groups, just another business opportunity. At the same time we allegedly have the illegal export of coal to Serbia,” says Tihomir.

“We are in a difficult situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as our faith in the possibility of change is very low. We are faced with a complete erosion of democracy, which is even more worrying than a lack of an authentic ecological transition. It is the duty of those who monitor democratic developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina to do something, as we are paralyzed, and there is the absence of an adequate reaction from progressive circles in Europe,” he adds.

“What could be the political direction of the green party in Bosnia and Herzegovina than the protection of natural resources and the struggle against corporate power grabs and extractivism? And again, this is not happening because the situation is very complex and difficult. How to imagine systemic change in a hopeless situation where people are sick and tired of current political life,” adds Tihomir before concluding: “Who profited from the pandemic, from war, from the energy crisis: pharmaceutical companies, arms traders, and energy corporations? It’s clear that we are on the side of pulling the thick end.”

Husein Oručević is a political scientist, journalist, and long-standing cultural worker from Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He describes the heavy constraints for the emergence of green politics in the country, which according to his words is “captured by interests of economic oligarchs who define legal framework to fit their specific needs. For them,” he continues, “the energy transformation (for example, various renewable energy projects) is just an opportunity to realize their economic interests. They have a clear agenda, finances, and documentation, which allows them to use subsidies and completely privatize energy production chains well in advance.”

Husein explains that investments into mini hydropower plants in Bosnia and Herzegovina followed the same pattern, where concessions were issues by authorities in advance in different deals made behind closed doors.³³ “Citizens were completely excluded. They learn about such cases

33 Zoran Bibanovic (2019, January 11), Kako su hidroelektrane uništile život u Bosni i Hercegovini..., Upoznajte svijet oko nas, <https://upoznajtesvijetokonas.com/2019/01/11/kako-su-hidroelektrane-unistile-zivot-u-bosni-i-hercegovini/>

when everything is already too late,” he says. His statement resonates strongly with similar experiences in Serbia, Albania, and Montenegro shared by my interlocutors.

“What remains is the politics of resistance, and that is mainly a reaction, not a strategy. We are facing a dead end and urgency at the same time. As this situation is deeply concerning, it leads to a sort of hopelessness and fatigue. In such a situation, people turn their back on politics and turn toward conviviality and solidarity practiced in nature. Distrust in institutions makes people turn toward nature, where they still can find empathy and autonomy. What remains is enjoyment in sun, mountains, and rivers, while they are here,” he explains, describing the unusual and melancholic pathway for many of his compatriots. “That also relates to our past and our memories of being in nature,” he continues, saying that politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina does not recognize the challenges of living in the Anthropocene period.

“Both conservatives and socialists should be able to match their programs to the future without any postponement,” he continues. “We cannot allow ourselves this type of delay. Mainstream thinking in Bosnia and Herzegovina still says that first we need to deal with religious freedoms and social standards, and only when this is resolved can we afford to deal with the environment. At the same time, various investments are contributing to further environmental degradation, using this discourse as a pretense for their mismanagement. People recognize and understand that, but they are still too meek and polite for strong confrontations with predatory investments that usurp the public interest. Resistance is still too short-winded and burdened with the notion of discontinuity. It’s a fragile situation where people realize that, even if they manage to defend natural resources in one period, they might not be able to ensure the continuous struggle against oligarchic interests, which only have extraction of profit on their mind,” Husein concludes.

Safet Kubat, an environmental activist from Zenica mentioned earlier, managed to create a large virtual community³⁴ on social media (Rivers of Bosnia and Herzegovina – be the change) comprised of people who care about rivers and can be mobilized instantly for a variety of community

34 In January 2024 with 60,000 members on Facebook.

actions against river pollution. He is well-known in almost all parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and has an impeccable reputation, but is also heavily attacked by many who do not support his work. He says that there is no place that he did not visit in his tireless work. His enormous social capital has been transported from social media to thousands of real community actions according to numerous rivers flows. Safet is a real changemaker, and he knows the real value of the change.

“Community actions organized through this network have made incredible pressure against institutions that did not do their jobs. Now they see that we are monitoring how much and what they do,” says Safet, who is well-aware that, for the moment, there are no systemic solutions, which he would love to see. Until then, he sees his work as firefighting wherever it is possible. Safet also has to struggle with lots of hate speech on social media, and this work is extremely time-consuming. Needless to say, the pressures under which he operates are incredible, but still he maintains his wise and humble stance.

“Unlike in Croatia and Serbia, we don’t have any city which has this type of solidary and activist network that could transform into a political wing. Part of the problem is that non-governmental organizations are if not fearful, then for sure hesitant, to make such an effort, as that is also a huge existential question. People who work on progressive values also live from their work, and the donor agenda is extremely strong and conditioning. We have a problem there,” explains Safet. However, “ecological problems indeed can be a factor for uniting the whole country,” he makes a very confidential statement. “For the moment we are in a phase when we think it’s much more important to solve the problem than who will solve it. This ownership is already politics,” he says.

“These parties which are formally registered as greens don’t follow the principles of green politics. They have seen this green wave in other countries in the region and decided overnight to be green. They thought that green politics can be dropped down from above, they went with something which is strange for green philosophy. That is not how it goes,” Safet explains. “There are people and groups who think they can skip and jump over some important milestone just by saying they are green and copying principles of European parties, without any serious work on the ground. They are not in touch at all with the activist circles

who were engaged in early struggles on the ground, in Tuzla, Prijedor, Zenica, Konjic, and Mostar. A still unused potential is our numerous diaspora in Europe.³⁵ With years of life in various European countries, they have realized the importance of green policies, and their knowledge and availability could be very important,” says Safet.

“I don’t think the question is do we need a green party? I think we need it now and immediately. We are witnessing all sorts of violent and wild types of extractivism across the country; namely forests, rivers, mines, protected areas, solar power plants.” This type of development needs to immediately be confronted by Greens.

“Also, to be very pragmatic, the implementation of green policies could strengthen the negotiation position in the EU accession process. Be the change you want to see. We see rivers as evidence of our freedom and as our bloodstream, that is our main narrative, and that makes us sincere, honest, and authentic,” continues Safet in a passionate but very modest manner. “Ecology is an upcoming ideology, but in our case we will have serious homework about gender topics in this country,” says Safet.

“Bosnia and Herzegovina has signed the Green Deal agreement for the Western Balkans, I doubt they even read it. I don’t think they are aware it means phasing out many coal power plants and many coal mines. There is an issue of a just transition and social justice that needs to be addressed, and they all [in power] could not care less. They are also pretty ignorant about it, and that might be a chance for us. We have expertise and we know the direction in which we want to go,” concludes Safet.

Indeed, apart from an extremely difficult and complex system as the source of numerous problems, Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have a persuasive case when it comes to green politics. Numerous well-experienced politicians from different parties and national backgrounds (such as Haris Silajdžić, Zlatko Lagumdžija, but also war criminals such as Jadranko Prlić and Radovan Karadžić) have in different phases of their political activity played with and realized the idea of establishing a green party.

“That is why they lack credibility, and all new green parties who register after them have more or less similar problem. People are not stupid,

35 Just as an example, Alma Zadić from Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a high-profile Austrian green politician who was appointed as Federal Minister of Justice of the Republic of Austria in January 2020.

they recognize there is no work behind their political aspirations, only ambition,” says Anes Podić. I met Anes in the office apartment of his small NGO Eco Action in one of the apartments in the center of Sarajevo. In his mid 50s, he is an experienced and seasoned environmental activist with more than 30 years of experience.

“It is worse than ever with the environment. After a series of privatizations, now there is an invasion of nature. We consume much more and we pollute much more. Forests and rivers are under huge pressure related to construction interests – just look at Trebević! The environment is a marginal[ized] topic,”³⁶ says Anes, pointing in the direction of Trebević, one of the mountains in the immediate proximity of the City of Sarajevo. Anes sees river protection, energy policy, air pollution, and protected areas as the four key pillars of a potential ecological program. However, it is evident that in this case, it has not evolved into a broader political program. Yet, he makes a point by saying “green politics has to be packed in something that people care about.”

“For the moment,” he continues, “we are in a privileged situation where we export energy and we are energy independent, though a significant part of the energy comes from carbon-intensive coal. Yet, our power plants are very old and a few simultaneous breakdowns would immediately turn us into an importer. With a coal phase-out, at least 10,000 miners would lose their jobs, and nobody considers this option at the moment. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, only plunder is well-organized. Until everything is plundered it will be that way,” concludes Anes, describing the grim reality of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After my conversation with him, I see that one generation of activists is already too disappointed, but again, their knowledge and experience should not be ignored by newcomers who might have fresh energy and the power to make a breakthrough that seems impossible at the moment. One should not forget that in 2014, when the country was hit by heavy floods (clear evidence of the regional implications of climate change), there was a last sign of strong civic resistance framed in the sequence “protest, plenary, flood” (protest, plenum, poplava). These three P’s have been the symbol of a deliberative effort by citizens to provide an authentic response to the flood

36 Projects like Roof Gardens and Trebević Hills are just small examples of the pattern of hyper construction on this mountain above Sarajevo.

crisis, which was intertwined with numerous systemic problems, also illustrating the failure of the state to provide support in critical times. Many cities such as Zenica, Tuzla, Mostar, Sarajevo, Bihać, and others have responded with their own spontaneous plenums, but these did not last long, nor did they manage to shake up the authorities.

I mentioned earlier *Naša stranka* (Our Party), the only Bosnian and Herzegovinian civic-liberal party that, in early years, was for a short time at the crossroads of whether they would join the EGP. In the party there were many green-minded and liberal experts and intellectuals, yet they decided to join the liberals. Although that has obviously determined their trajectory in the last decade – and without further questioning this decision in the early years of the party – I still think it is important to pay attention to them as they, despite the many problems in their structures, might be considered as an ally to an upcoming green political option. I also think this as I am deeply convinced that some of the people from the party – such as Sanela Klarić, Nasiha Pozder, or Sabina Čudić – could easily be green politicians in a parallel universe. Although in my personal opinion the party is too liberal in the economic sense, in a national context it still might just be a civic-oriented, anti-nationalist, and liberal party.

Therefore, I met with Nasiha, whom I have known for a very long time. At the time of the completion of this book, she had already been appointed as Minister of Environment and Tourism for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Personally, I am not a fan of incremental change, but in light of the complexities of Bosnia and Herzegovina (where I even lived for a couple of years), my understanding was that *Naša stranka* is – in spite of some criticisms that I might even support – the only player that can be an ally for a potentially emerging and authentic green political formation. Although the party made a decision to join the liberals at the European level, in Bosnia and Herzegovina *Naša stranka* remained a reliable political force, which has within it a couple of people who understand the importance of a green transition, and at the same time adhere to liberal values and open society.

Besides her political engagement in *Naša stranka* since its early years, Nasiha is an architect and she teaches at the University of Architecture in Sarajevo. In the party, she was vice-president and Member of Parliament (MP) in the parliamentary assembly of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (one of two entities in the country).

“It is very difficult to impose as a new political party in our context. You are defending one of the nations or you are a Social Democrat, there was no other option,” explains Nasiha. “We are very active in different areas relevant for environmental protection and ecological transition: agriculture, forestry, energy. In our political system, we are sort of liberal and therefore desirable. This position is tactical and gives us the opportunity to open some relevant themes and topics,” says Nasiha.

Naša stranka had its own government in the last four years in the Canton of Sarajevo, which is a regional unit that transcends the borders of the City of Sarajevo. Their first step was to examine the new terrain to test their capacities before they entered into the government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“When people think about how they will feed their family, ecological topics cannot be so important, they will always vote for those who will guarantee them any sort of future,” says Nasiha, who at the time of our conversation still was not a Minister of Environment and Tourism. “For the environment, they will say, let it go, this is not so important at this moment. At this point they are not aware that with an adequate green policy, they actually can feed their family. We need to make this clear. In some cases we manage to be carriers of green policies, but we are not always in a position to implement it.”

Meanwhile, Naša stranka has been criticized the last few years for ideas about the privatization of the water supply system, transport, and for being friendly with the construction sector lobby. Still, Nasiha has claimed many small victories, such as the resistance to a new block (Block 7) of a thermal power plant in Tuzla,³⁷ the concreting of the Drina river basin, and kerosene storage near Sarajevo airport. From her point of view, there are many burning ecological problems for which citizens are expecting solutions: air pollution, gasification, new thermal power plants (operated with coal), and hydropower plants. Furthermore, there are many open issues concerning forests and land, she adds.

“Unlike in some other countries in the region, although more and more popular, ecology is still not terrain for political competition,” says

37 Fokus (s.a.), Zašto je projekat Blok 7 i dalje živ, a u novembru 2020. se znalo da je propao?, <https://www.fokus.ba/vijesti/bih/zasto-je-projekat-blok-7-i-dalje-ziv-a-u-novembru-2020-se-znalo-da-je-propao/2355138/>

Nasiha. “I hope that that EU candidate status, whenever it comes, will give us a strong slap, so that we need to start to work. I personally see an emancipatory approach as the best entry point – people are fed up with loud advocacy and quarrels, they need to hear why something is good for them and their life.”

In North Macedonia, we already mentioned there is EGP member party DOM (Democratic Renewal of Macedonia), which is going through a kind of crisis following a change of leadership and the “new kids on the block” Zelen Human Grad, which was established in 2020 as an informal green municipal initiative in the City of Skopje. They say that they function as a horizontally organized coalition of local civic organizations and activists committed to animal rights, environmentalism, and social justice. They are not in direct opposition to or confrontation with DOM, but surely they are aspiring at least on an urban level to develop a profile as a green-left political platform. Departing from their version of participatory budgeting and organized resistance to cutting down trees, they rely a lot on digital platform Moj grad (My City), where each citizen can propose their suggestions to improve life in the city. For the moment, they have two seats in city councils, which is the result of the 10,000 votes they gained during the last municipal elections in Skopje (2021). At the moment, the City of Skopje is governed by the conservative VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity), which achieved the victory in these elections.

As mentioned earlier, I have met with Dragana Velkovska and Gorjan Jovanovski. They are the young duo of councilors of Zelen Human Grad in the city council of Skopje and are at the top of the platform. Dragana says she has been an activist since she became aware of herself and is primarily focused on animal rights and the environment. Likewise, Gorjan – a software engineer who graduated from school in the Netherlands, and who returned to Skopje to “give himself a chance” and engage politically – developed the Moj grad digital platform.³⁸ Earlier, he engaged in eco-activism, whereby he mainly focused on air pollution and developed a data-gathering system (application) that aggregates all air quality data through satellites as well as national and volunteer stations.

38 See Homepage, <https://www.mojgrad.mk>

They explain that when they composed a list, their process was very open and inclusive, although people who were more active had a kind of advantage.

“We grow slowly and give a lot of attention to the participative dimension,” says Dragana, “since our state institutions are very closed and function in an authoritarian and hierarchical way. We talk about issues that relate to animal welfare, energy independence, and spatial planning. Wherever possible we include citizens, such as in the case of city mapping. We present ourselves as ‘cool kids of the block,’ showing fresh energy and green ideas, something substantially different in comparison to our domestic politics. We follow the principle, practiced in many sister parties across Europe and now in the region – one leg on the street, another in the institutions.

After the failure of ZaeV’s Social Democratic Union of Macedonia [SDSM, which governed in coalition with the Albanian political party DUI – Democratic Union for Integration], people became resigned with the options on the left, and we identified that there is room for us,” Dragana explains. “We led massive protests against air pollution, and people recognized that there is power outside of the parties, and that not everything is dark and hopeless. We are showing that we are not running after armchairs and that everyone can be part of change. In that way, we face distrust and a fear of dirty politics, and hopelessness that everything is lost.”

She continues, saying that “at the moment chaos reigns in the city council and everybody is against everybody, it is very unstable. We try to use these conflicts in our favor and stay outside of them. In our work, we try to make public each document or decision that relates to various approvals the city needs to issue, particularly in areas such as energy or spatial planning. Recently, there has been a growing number of independent groups, and sometimes they become our partners with which we coordinate and collaborate. We are building a solid and stable base, and we are not running after parliament, as we don’t want to burn out too early. We don’t want to be part of another disappointment,” explains Dragana.

“Part of our work was focused on lobbying for solar energy,” she explains and Gorjan confirms. “Due to the energy crisis, they are more and more attentive, but they again see it as a lucrative way to gain profit

and use it as an excuse for deforestation and an agricultural land grab. It is evident that this is tailor-made and adjusted to their clientelist networks,” she says, echoing similar developments in Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

They explain that their main request, for example, is to install photovoltaics on city-owned objects and buildings as a first step. Ultimately, in the country with 280 sunny days, they say they want to cover all roofs with solar cells.”

“We walk the talk,” says Gorjan, who explains that they want to bring the best brains to work for their cause. “While our values belong to the Green-Left block, we don’t want to ideologize but offer tangible and practical solutions through implementation so people can realize that change is happening. We want to build a city in which all citizens will feel like they are at home,” Gorjan concludes.

North Macedonia has many environmental problems: from air pollution in Skopje and other cities (particularly in winter), illegal construction, energy poverty, and extractivism. The country’s energy production is highly reliant on coal/lignite (its phase-out is unrealistically predicted by 2030), and there are numerous extractivist projects such as Ilovica-Shtuka, whereby Canadian-British investors (with support from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) want to dig gold and copper. Highly disputed and resisted by local communities, the case concerning this investment is still in court.³⁹ This case is not unique, and there are many similar places across North Macedonia that have recently become departure points for grassroots struggles against a new wave of foreign investments, which often mean a new wave of extractivism.

Furthermore, in the Macedonian city of Bitola, there is a coal mine and thermal power plant REK Bitola (similarly to the Obrenovac-Lazarevac basin in Serbia), which is producing almost two-thirds of the total electricity production of the country. Currently, the main factor pushing toward decarbonization and an ecological transition in the country is related to progress in the EU accession process. That is – with exceptions (as in the case of involvement by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in the mining project) – only pressure prevents aut-

39 Cision (2023, May 4), Euromax Announces New Legal Decision, <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/euromax-announces-new-legal-decision-881849401.html>

horities from handing over land to foreign direct investors, which they need for the continuation of growth, which is their main objective. In the public's perception, the notion of ecological transition is not well-perceived. In the European semi-periphery (Yugoslavia successor states), the term "transition" is not welcomed and is often identified with an unsuccessful transition and a never-ending project burdened with massive mismanagement and a decline in the quality of life.

As mentioned earlier, DOM (Democratic Renewal of Macedonia) presents itself as a green-liberal party and was established almost two decades ago in 2006. For many years, DOM was led by its president, MP Ljiljana Popovska, an engineer and an experienced domestic politician who managed to place DOM as a coalition partner both with the Conservatives and the Social Democrats (the two main parties and competitors). One can assume that this virtuous move can be explained by the motivation to maintain a green voice in the institutional political sphere, adapt to different political realities, and achieve what is possible. Yet, DOM has paid a price for that move, as they have lost their ideological stance and, in the public's perception, made excessive calculations to stay close to power. Some of my interlocutors think they bargained too much and eventually failed to deliver much. In that way, they lost some of their credibility and legitimacy. In their public presentations, DOM, which is an EGP member party, claims that it actively promotes green ideas for North Macedonia. DOM's political objectives are: green jobs, renewable energy, human rights, democracy, ecology, tourism, eco-agriculture, women's empowerment, culture, and more funds for science and education.⁴⁰ DOM had at times a massive membership and women leaders who demonstrated certain power, but it had an ambiguous relationship as regards the status of the Albanian nation within the party membership.

Today, DOM's president is Maja Moračanin, a medical doctor by vocation and an MP in the national parliament (Sobranie). She was voted the new president after Ljiljana Popovska. I spoke with Maja at the party headquarters in the center of Skopje. She says that, at the moment, there are 5,000 members but they lack the finances and public visibility needed to achieve their political priorities. Although their activity in Macedonia

40 See Homepage, <https://dom.org.mk/>

obviously has some limitations, Maja talks about enriched and intense cooperation with other green parties across the Balkans, where she sees huge potential for transnational cooperation. Although I wholeheartedly support this type of regional perspective and vision for the Greens, I get the impression that, at home in North Macedonia, things are not moving as smooth as desired.

“DOM is one of the largest and most consistent supporters of the EU accession process, and we think this can only be beneficial for the implementation of green policies in our country,” says Maja, who explains that the green agenda is still identified mainly with an ecological program. “We see a huge opportunity for us as Greens in the current energy crisis. However, all planning and implementation goes through government, so we immediately loose our impact as we are not involved in that. The transition to renewables is slowly starting in the country, but for the moment only investors and businesses have benefits. We want to create conditions so that solar energy can be used by citizens. For the moment, we don’t have legislation for energy cooperatives,” she continues, explaining that one of their tasks will be to change it. Maja is also very active in the new Law on non-discrimination, LGBTIQ work, and the adjustment of criminal law in accordance with the Istanbul Convention. “This type of work has significantly improved our relations with civil society. However, there is still a huge gap between what the current government accepts and the values they promote,” she adds.

Maja’s benevolence is self-evident, and it is clear that she does her best to initiate change in her country. “Our environmental laws are generally in good shape, but we lack implementation, coordination is too weak, and we don’t have sufficient capacities to implement the law,” she says, adding that in the civil society sphere, there is more expertise than in government. “Law on climate is now in preparation, but it is going super slow,” she explains. She adds that with a coal-dependant energy policy, Macedonia will need to develop just transition scenarios. “People are afraid that they will lose jobs with a green transition. Government is not showing that they have an idea of what to offer them. We don’t want a scenario in which the green transition will be reduced to businesses that will make money out of solar hours and citizens will be the ones who pay,” states Maja, giving a reminder of the high-level corruption that is present throughout the whole system.

The main values she places in the center of her political work are a just transition, the fight against corruption, and human rights. Maja does not see green politics as an ideological question, particularly not in North Macedonia, where according to her words, the Conservatives are developing social programs, and Social Democrats are taking part in neoliberal schemes with the business sector. “Nobody knows what to expect. But we cannot make progress if we tell only nice stories. For a small party with only one MP, I think we can be satisfied,” she concludes.

As in Belgrade, Skopje also has its own Greens with street credentials. Dejan Dimitrovski is a guy in his early 40s, a former member of DOM, and an independent councilor. After he left DOM because he was not satisfied with the party’s position, he established a local initiative under the name “Greens from Gazi baba” (Gazi baba is one of Skopje’s neighborhoods in the eastern part of city) and started to act as an independent local councilor. The most recent evidence across North Macedonia shows a strong increase in independent councilors who are tackling environmental problems. Yet, they are not joining DOM (Zelen Human Grad is still mainly a Skopje-based party), but they are starting their political work directly, as they are faced with urgent threats, mainly the various investments that are – as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Serbia – supported by the authorities.

“I was not interested in politics. In my younger years I was into music and clubbing. But then, only in one year I have experienced a number of tragedies and that was a turning point. I wanted to engage and fight injustice in Skopje,” he recalls. When speaking with Dejan one can imagine his passion, courage, and rebellious nature from the early days of his engagement. But at the moment of our conversation, I was speaking with a moderate and to some extent resigned fighter. I had a feeling it was Skopje’s green Rocky Balboa in the midst of his crisis. “Very soon after my engagement with DOM, I realized it was not a place for me, as I was thinking with my head and I had some principles. There was a clear hierarchy and instructions on how we needed to position and vote that often went against my principles. I started to act independently, and I was exposed to various pressures. I was beaten twice, and once they even threw acid on my car,” says Dejan, known as Deni in these early years of political engagement.

One of his main struggles was fighting against the disposal of hazardous medicine waste (iron dust) near the water sources for the City of Skopje. “At one moment I had to withdraw from it, as it became far too dangerous, but this turned into a massive protest and the project was stopped in 2020. During my engagement, I was constantly supported, 24/7, with at least 500 citizens from my neighborhood. Later I ran again for the elections but did not manage. I take that as my own defeat at this moment. I stayed alone, fighting with the windmills, so to say. Therefore, I had to stop, it was dangerous for my family and for my health. I could not continue alone. I faced huge risks and did not change anything,” he explains.

Aleksandar Georgijevski is an activist from the Skopje-based organization Sunrise, which is a member of the Green European Foundation network. He sees pacifism, humanism, and ecology as the three core values around which green political forces could gather in the country. “There are 56,000 people who have voted for the green programs on various independent lists. This is a huge potential, but the power is dispersed. Luckily, they all talk to each other and coordinate,” explains Aleksandar, saying that he can easily imagine that this group would form a joint platform one day.

Listening to him, I clearly hear that there is potentially a formative phase of the new green wave in North Macedonia. A country with 280 sunny days has a poorly developed renewable transition plan, authorities exclude citizens, Skopje is among the cities in Europe with the most air pollution, there are numerous mining projects, and 70 percent of energy production is still sourced from coal. People are afraid of a green transition – that all clearly must be an opportunity and a challenge for the Greens. Yet, there is an obvious shift, as people are aware they need to collaborate and form alliances and partnerships (I say it in my mind). That reminds me of the period 2009/2010 when the first massive mobilizations took place in Skopje through a grassroots campaign against the VMRO-DPMNE’s main urban infrastructure project “Skopje 2014,” which transformed the urban landscape and enabled high level corruption. These mobilizations were following the main green values and principles and potentially were changemaking moments, yet their results were capitalized upon by the upcoming victory of the Social Democrat Zaev in 2017.

The whole struggle took place in the context of captured or occupied state, by ruling parties (VMRO and DPMNE) and their economic elites. Resistance to their ambitious projects was therefore accumulated through people who were not part of this elite, and who were systematically neglected and marginalised. Protest mobilised artists, precarious workers, unemployed journalists and nomads—“people who didn't have anything to lose.” In its first days, a part of the movement also included students, but when they realised that the struggle was mainly political and not only about expert opinions, they withdrew their participation and support. Similarly, architects and other professional associations were only occasionally engaged in the struggle. In this case, due to political constellations, the City of Skopje was only the executor of the decisions made by the government. The project of Skopje 2014 was supported by the ruling party most of the time. Only in 2014, when the lion's share of Skopje 2014 work had been done, the opposition gained a new mayor. The media generally supported Skopje 2014 and were often instrumentalised by the authorities to attack protesters on individual or collective level. Interestingly, the non-residents of Skopje, who have certain a relationship toward their capital, played just as important a role. Activists and ordinary citizens from other Macedonian cities were mobilised to join protests under the motto “We build our city with your money” and illustrated what could be built in a specific city with amount of money spent for each of the specific buildings in Skopje. This manoeuvre influenced the general discourse about the usurpation of public funds in the country, but also about the meaning of the whole project, where the notion that both space and budget were common resource played a decisive role. Additionally, the very notion that the process of planning the capital's centre had to be collective and understood as the commons played an important role in collective memory. Later in 2015, when Macedonia was flooded by protests against the ruling party, most of the buildings attacked and demolished by protesters were Skopje 2014 buildings, since they demonstrated the violent political power that transformed the face of the city. The struggle against Skopje 2014 was led by a core group of activists that numbered between 10–15 people who regularly met. Most of them were in a precarious situation and unemployed due to political pressures. Activists claim they had similar concerns that made them come together; destruction of the common good, oppression, illegal decision-

making, state capture and claim for secular state. The intensity of protests did not allow the development of permanent structure levels or a more precise distribution of tasks. One of the activists portrayed their actions as tactical and intuitive, with many instant decisions—which sometimes made them weak.⁴¹

“When lunatics come, smart people leave,” Aleksandar concludes with a local Macedonian proverb to show the character of national politics.

Like many other countries in the region, Albania has also been exposed to a bit delayed but still significant wave of investments and infrastructural projects with adverse or dubious environmental impacts. Ruled for the last 10 years by Edi Rama, prime minister and president of the Socialist Party of Albania and former mayor of Tirana, Albania is quickly catching up with the rest of the region regarding its European accession pathway as well as its growth orientation. Yet, this has been followed by a variety of strange investments, and not necessarily leading to a better quality of life for Albanians.

Lavdosh Ferruni, a seasoned environmental activist who I mentioned quite early in the book, explains that Albanian environmental activism has occasionally been successful in stopping these adverse environmental projects. Albania is still heavily reliant on fossil fuels, oil pipelines, coal-fueled thermal power plants, liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals – these are all current or even planned projects across the country, which is extremely poor regarding its own energy production.

“Albania made a wrong decision when we declared we will distribute gas in the Balkans,” Lavdosh says. “There is an estimation that 2.5 billion cubic meters of gas will be distributed through Albania. That implies not only an LNG terminal but also the Trans Adriatic Pipeline, which connects Greece, Albania, and Italy. That all also includes very frequent truck/road transport, approximately one truck per each minute only for that purpose. It is unreasonable to invest now in gas when we need a transition to renewables,” explains Lavdosh, who is, like Anes from Sarajevo, a very seasoned environmental activist.

41 This is an excerpt of my writing from the following book: T. Tomašević, V. Horvat, A. Midžić, I. Dragsić, & M. Dakić (2018), *Commons in South East Europe: Case of Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Macedonia*, Zagreb: Institute for Political Ecology.

“Fortunately,” he continues, “we have slowed down investment into small hydropower plants, there were at least 150 of them planned, mainly through Italian companies. Apart from that, we have huge problems with waste management and the building of pseudo-incinerators that clearly show corruption and misuse of the funds. Then we have problems with biodiversity and illegal construction in protected areas.” Lavdosh does not think that the Albanian Green Party has grassroots legitimacy, nor that it is sufficiently active.

“In the Green Party of Albania, we currently don’t have environmentalists,” he shares his disappointment. “For the moment they don’t have anyone to run for elections. I also don’t see anyone from civil society who would gladly jump into politics. I would love to have an active party, even if it would not be immediately in the parliament. As it is now, they only pretend to fill space but they cannot deliver anything. Yet, I see the environment as fertile ground for new and young people who might be mobilized and organized tomorrow. We are living in the period when everybody has to be green. I would support a new party if it would appear,” says Lavdosh. But in Albania there are already first victories related to the protection of nature against detrimental projects.

Aleksandër Trajçe, a biologist from the nature conservation NGO PPNEA, writes the following: Vjosa, in south Albania, is one of the most renowned rivers in Albania, in terms of the natural heritage and biodiversity values that it sustains. The diverse geological formations, relief characteristics and climate conditions of the Vjosa basin have contributed to an enormous diversity of habitats and species, many of which remain undiscovered to this day. Vjosa’s abundance with fish, including its estuary and the Narta lagoon, make the region quite important for fishery and many local inhabitants have built their livelihoods based on fishing, which continues with largely traditional practices to this day.⁴² However, in spite of this evident value, the Vjosa River has been exposed to a variety of threats and pressures, from hydropower development, oil extraction, and a new airport to massive tourism infrastructure. A large campaign⁴³ that

42 Aleksandër Trajçe (2022, October 5), Vjosa – a Biodiversity Gem Threatened by Short-sighted Development, Tirana: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, <https://al.boell.org/en/2022/10/05/vjosa-biodiversity-gem-threatened-short-sighted-development>

43 Heinrich Böll Stiftung (s.a.), Actus, for Vjosa, <https://al.boell.org/en/actus-vjosa-0>

included numerous actors across the sectors was fortunately successful. In March 2023, a few months after my stay in Tirana, the Vjosa River was declared a National Park by the Albanian government.⁴⁴ That will supposedly protect the river from further extractivist efforts and land grabs.

“The fight for the Vjosa River is showing us the power of new ideas and visions in Albania,” says Mehmet Gökhan Tuncer, director of the Tirana office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

“We see great value of intergenerational exchange, the energy of the youth, and the wisdom of the elders when envisioning green politics in Albania,” says Jona Haxhialiu, an Albanian environmental expert working as a junior advisor for GIZ, the German development cooperation agency, and who recently returned from Groenigen, the Netherlands. She says that it is very difficult to start with political activity, as you are faced with two extremes: Either they shut you down or they co-opt you. Jona runs a podcast titled “Unapologetically Green,” which addresses climate issues from the perspective of youths, and she is well-aware that change starts with people like her.

When talking with younger people in Tirana, there is clear evidence that the inception of green politics could be near. They do not lack ideas. Jona says that natural protection, air quality, and access to drinkable water can be areas where Greens would have their important say.

“We need to stop thinking that ecology is ideology for the privileged,” says Edona Bylykbashi, program coordinator in the Tirana office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. “That is a myth we need to dismantle. It looks like a kind of privilege in society where many are in survival mode.”

“In the case of Montenegro, expectations were very high, too high for the URA. They failed and now we need to try again, reclaim green and civic values,” explains Srđan Perić, a professor of literature from Preokret. While speaking to him and his colleagues one November afternoon in Podgorica, we did not know that a few months later, in May 2023, he would not manage to get a parliamentary seat, but also that the URA would terminate its mandate during the same year.

“When they got power, they forgot about the change they promised

44 IUCN (2023, March 15), Vjosa, One of Our Last Wild Rivers, Becomes Europe's First Wild River National Park, press release, <https://www.iucn.org/press-release/202303/vjosa-one-our-last-wild-rivers-becomes-europes-first-wild-river-national-park>

to deliver. They did not have the courage to enter into conflict with old structures. They only reproduced the same matrix. Many people who were their supporters and wanted to help did not get this opportunity, as they shut down the doors. We lost a chance for transformation,” concludes Srđan.

“I don’t see that the URA is implementing green policies, just the opposite, they slowed down that process. They are dealing with many other issues, but not with green policies. They are carried away with daily politics,” says Azra Vuković, executive director at the NGO Green Home, based in Montenegro. From her point of view, green policies might come from a new movement.

Biljana Gligorić, an architect and head of the feminist NGO *Ex-peditio*, which is based in Perast, a small town in the gorgeous Bay of Kotor, shares this view. She says that the URA is very authoritarian and old fashioned, which is strange for a self-proclaimed green party. “They became the worst populists. Many of us are pulling our hair out when we hear them. They were not able to open institutions and dismantle the old system. They turned out to be fake, a lie, they just used the green label as an opportunity. They will have to pay the price for that, they are now in free fall,” says Biljana.

“In our system we detect strong resistance against change – changes are disturbing for those who safeguard and defend the old system,” she explains. “Green policies are actually the most vital part of our economies today, they could energize and regenerate our economy. But it is just the opposite, they locked and froze the whole system, so systemic change is impossible in such conditions. For example, they have reduced spatial planning for the construction of buildings for the purpose of serving large capital and money laundering. Our society is going through a process of growing up, and I personally see ecological transformation as an integral part of this process,” Biljana concludes.

From her point of view, people need to be more humble and modest, while society should strive for a new vision and show love for nature and the environment.

Between surge and backlash – the new normal

There is turmoil around us. Uncertainty. Things that we considered for granted, unquestionable, and irreversible are not that anymore. Unacceptable things become present, if not normal. The pendulum is swinging again. Time is accelerating. The changes are fast and difficult to follow with our current systems, institutions, and ideas. One needs to adapt without compromising the values they stand for.

When I started to work on this book in 2022, I wanted to explore to which extent the green wave that has consolidated across Western Europe during the past few decades can cross to Eastern Europe, and particularly to the Western Balkans. There was always going to be a certain delay here, but not by accident. The destruction of human lives, societies, and trust happened in the Balkans already in the 1990s – through a series of conflicts and wars that lasted for a full decade and were paired with the dismantling of the welfare state, and through wild privatization and the emergence of the new elites and oligarchies. Just a decade before that moment, Yugoslavian society was developing quickly, people had a high standard of living, there was a social welfare system, there were even debates about the legalization of cannabis, and Yugoslavia considered starting a process of negotiations with the European Community (later the EU). For most of that decade, people could see a bright future – but then, suddenly, dark clouds and stormy weather appeared. It all ended in destruction, and at least one generation has been lost. It was such a throwback.

Fast forward 30 years, the Western Balkan countries (excluding Croatia) are still outside of the EU. They aspire to join. Yet, the impacts of pandemic, wars on the Eastern borders of Europe, on the eastern Mediterranean, the climate crisis, the rise of the far right, extreme weather events, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence, huge migratory flows, social unrest throughout Europe, authoritarianism – that all paints a picture of turmoil on the old Continent. For the Balkans, that all looks familiar, we lived this reality, beyond the predictability of the comfort zone.

As we see today, the ecological transition across Europe is under attack. They want to say it is not doable, it will cost us too much. But they fail to say that not doing it will cost us even more, and future generations already know it. Therefore, we need to continue, in spite of the resistance. It is one of the historical tests for green politics.

We saw in previous chapters that the development of green politics across the Western Balkans region is in its early, fragile, nascent, and formative years. Until a year ago, we could easily say that every country needs programs, policies, and actions toward a green transition – regardless of the political orientation of the government. As this is now broadly contested even in Western Europe, it becomes even more challenging for the green political project to emerge in the Balkan countries. But at the same time, this requires a broad Europe-wide offensive and calls for synchronized and united action. In a disrupted system, we need to find excitement and joy in continuing our work and in our commitment to a green transition. A true test for European (green) politics is not to be captured by national interests or our own fatigue and lack of courage.

In these conditions, I will only sketch the 10 most important areas that can be “make it or break it” moments for green politics, both as challenges and opportunities. They will not be sorted in order of priority but presented as different elements in one large picture that green political forces need to respond to and anchor their narratives to. Our response has to be grounded in our ecosystem, values, and constituencies, which we need to reclaim again and again, without giving in. Our response needs to be well thought out and strategic, and not be less bold, straightforward, or clear.

Geopolitical security

The positioning of the region in relation to existing geopolitical tensions is very complex and difficult. There is an ongoing and very active arms race. Old nationalism disputes are again being revived, as are the war cries. There are strong traditions in the region related to the non-aligned movement and pacifism where Greens need to make a stronger case and organize their foreign policy toward more cooperation in the region. The region already suffered enough in the 1990s and conflicts have marked too many generations.

Comeback of authoritarianism and erosion of democracy

There is strong evidence that many of the political leaders across the region are experimenting with a variety of practices of authoritarian rule, including shrinking the public debate, controlling the media, and using different pressures against agents of change. The role of Covid-19 and ongoing wars have only strengthened this dimension. In the region, many countries are paralyzed due to being captured states, where all the levers of the system are in the hands of the ruling party and their influential clients. Authoritarianism needs to be permanently challenged, and this must remain at the core of the political action of green forces. That often means very courageous and bold actions in a hostile environment, therefore solidarity, care, and collective action need to be further strengthened.

Countries in the region are very often labeled as young democracies, in comparison to Western European countries. Yet, we see that both in Europe and in the region, democratic spaces are shrinking with no possibility for public debate, with reduced media freedoms, and with a variety of oppressive measures and the criminalization of activism. We are witnessing that the fight for democracy is not irreversible and that democracy needs to be fought for again and again. Therefore, Greens have a responsibility to ensure the continuation of a democratic transition in the countries of the region and use different democratic innovations but also practices that existed previously in our societies. The conditions for the constant regeneration of democracy need to be created, and political education plays crucial role.

Just climate transition

In most of the countries in the region, the climate crisis is not addressed through policies at the national and local levels. Yet, many of the countries still live from dirty fossil energy, open their doors to investors that aim to extract raw materials (lithium, gold, copper), and they suffer from the impacts of extreme weather events (floods, heat waves, super storms) due to poor infrastructure and support systems. There are many sectors that are extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change (agriculture,

fishery, tourism) as well as many sectors for which no alternatives have been given for those working in resource-intensive industries. That is no surprise, since governments that are trying to deliver green policies due to external pressures have no motivation or interest in making them successful. Therefore, the transformative agency and social power of green political forces need to be increased so that they can prepare the ground for this transition. That will not be done by their political opponents, who use the green transition only for the private interests of their clientelistic networks. A timely acknowledgement of these relations will accelerate climate resilience. Alliances with workers in vulnerable industries provides one of the avenues that needs to be explored and become part of the political strategy.

Growth orientation of the economic model

Countries in the region directly or indirectly compete to gain foreign direct investments for a variety of projects that are focused on the pure extraction of natural resources or the labor force. Very often, they offer favorable conditions for investors, giving them lip service or infrastructure free of charge. In return, they supposedly can claim that a certain number of jobs will be guaranteed. Yet, the whole region is still fascinated with promises about the constant and unlimited growth that will supposedly increase living standards and consumption potential. Redistributive aspects and social inequalities are not addressed as problems, which are expected side effects of such interventions. As it is on the European semi-periphery, the Balkan region needs to explore the conditions needed to become more autonomous and self-reliant, abandoning the concept that growth is the only guarantee for the well-being of its citizens. The role of Greens in exploring the post-growth future of the region is essential.

Extractivism

There are tens of thousands of people in the region who are promised jobs that will allegedly guarantee them a decent life and working conditions. Numerous corporations, both European and non-European, are planning to extract natural resources from the region – be it water, sun,

wind, minerals – regardless of the adverse environmental and social impacts for the future of local communities. Life in the local communities is irreversibly changed through such investments. Although the region needs further economic development, it must be ecologically sustainable and should respond to the needs and conditions of the local communities and citizens. Greens need to be there to safeguard that only ecologically sustainable projects are approved that do not neglect workers rights and ensure democratic worker participation.

Social welfare and basic services

A significant part of the population in the region still remembers the benefits of the well-developed social welfare system: housing, healthcare, and education. This system has been more or less successfully dismantled in different countries in the region, yet knowledge and experiences about it are still alive. Wherever possible, Greens in the region can invest in the revitalization of this knowledge and ensure the social dimension and quality of public services – be it through narratives, policy proposals, or policy measures – wherever they have executive power of any kind. This is vital, as it offers a support system for all citizens, but even more importantly for underprivileged groups, frontline workers, and vulnerable communities.

Migration

The Western Balkans is exposed to frequent migratory flows. Not only is it famous for the Balkan route, through which hundreds of thousands of refugees and immigrants find their way to Western Europe, it is also increasingly becoming a destination of many asylum seekers or economic migrants who settle temporarily with jobs on the European periphery. With the current atmosphere of nationalism and xenophobia, they are often exposed to hate speech, discrimination, or various forms of exclusion or violence. It is the task of Greens to keep our borders open and prevent any violent pushback, but also to design programs that can improve their status and ensure human rights protection, or integration,

where applicable. In addition to that, the region suffers from a high level of emigration, both of high-skilled (brain drain) and low-skilled workers aiming to find better living and working environments in Austria, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, and the rest of Western Europe. Although economic reasons are often the main push factors, it is often the case that people are leaving the region because they have the impression and experience that – mainly due to living in a captured state – they are not able to fully participate in social, political, and cultural life and be guaranteed a decent standard of living.

Anti-fascism

Although known for nationalism and wars, our region has a very strong anti-fascist tradition and experiences from the recent past. With the rise of far-right politics across Europe, ghosts of nationalism have been awakened in this part of Europe, too, if they were ever silent at all. However, across the region, there is a strong anti-fascist legacy that can be revisited again to inspire new generations. In these times, it is the task of Greens to oppose any practices of hate speech, violence, autocracy, or suppression that might emerge or develop in our societies in any form: political, social, cultural, or other.

Feminism

With feminism as one of the core principles of green politics, Greens are already demonstrating that a different style of politics is possible in the region. There is a huge and still unexplored transformative agency that can lead to various positive outcomes, both for women and society as whole. Although they are still exposed to discrimination, oppression, femicide, or patriarchy in different societies in the region, there is also a strong and powerful tradition of women emancipatory movements, from culture to science, industry, and public life. Grounded and rooted in intersectionality as the basis of our understanding, Greens can demonstrate the strengths of the feminization of politics wherever possible and defend gender equality through systemic solutions that prevent any sort of inequality, violence, or discrimination.

Participation and inclusion

Participation is at the core of green politics, and this should not be forgotten. It needs to be consistently developed and cultivated through different forms that offer the inclusion of all citizens who care and want to be engaged. The empowerment of citizens and increasing their ownership in political processes, decision-making, and working structures is essential to keep them in the center of the green political project. Pressures related to time or resource availability should never be an excuse for not participating in different avenues of political and social life.

Glimpse into the future

Green politics has always profiled itself as being able to respond to the challenges of the future (to be “future proof”). Today more than ever, we are invited to show this distinctive value. My personal vision of the development of green politics in the region is that of a strong, open, and resilient political community which works together and across national boundaries, against the further development of authoritarianism, extractivism, exclusion, and indefinite growth-orientation in the region.

My intention here is not to anticipate or predict future developments – the conditions are rapidly changing and that is almost impossible. Yet, for the purpose of further debate and joint work on strategies, I will for an ending paint the provisional picture of potential developments.

At present in **Serbia**, there are strong indications that the state system has been completely taken over and captured by the power of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). The last parliamentary and municipal elections (in December 2023) demonstrated serious electoral violations, whereby numerous abuses and irregularities were reported, ensuring the victory of the SNS. Even in such hostile conditions, the electoral alliance of Serbia Against Violence – in which the Zeleno-levi front and Zajedno are key partners – has doubled its presence in the National Assembly.⁴⁵ Leaving the resolution of these developments aside, let us imagine further developments.

The Zeleno-levi front currently has a huge potential to develop into a strong political project with a coherent program at the national level and significantly increasing its number of local councilors and MPs. If it is able to maintain solid democratic practices within the party and invest its increased resources into policy developments for socio-ecological transformation, it can ensure its presence in the political life of the country as the main green-left option. This would give it a strong chance of ensuring key executive positions in the City of Belgrade or becoming a partner in a coalition-led government that would be formed on the basis of resistance to the SNS.

⁴⁵ European Greens (2023, December 21), Deep Concerns on the Serbian Election, <https://europeangreens.eu/news/deep-concerns-on-the-serbian-election/>

As part of same electoral coalition (Serbia Against Violence), Zajedno will also have more seats in the future National Assembly of Serbia. Yet, while its anti-establishment position and pro-European orientation has not been disputable, it still does not have the capacity to profile as a green party. Rather, it sees this moment as an opportunity to gain international support and visibility for its European aspirations. Although it is likely that Zajedno will continue to be in some sort of loose coordination with the Zeleno-levi front at the parliamentary level, it is expected that it will profile as a pro-European civic-liberal party and become partners in any future government, which could result in consistent resistance to the SNS. Still, relatively soon Together needs to build the visibility of other party actors so that its one-person focus does not become an obstacle to the further development of the party's influence.

For the moment, Ekološki ustanak, which has been a visible leader with a reputation of being a grassroots fighter throughout the country, is expected to remain active in the parliament. Given the strong support of voters from rural Serbia who can identify with the eco-patriotic discourse of the party (or its leader), it is highly probable that the party will continue with its political activity. Programmatically, it will face the problem of maintaining a grassroots profile within the institutional sphere, and as ecological conservatives party members might search for partners on the right-wing spectrum. Collaboration in fighting against further extractivist projects with other green partners is possible.

Still, due to expected disruptions and turbulence related to broader geopolitical and security challenges in the region and Europe, a further profiling of all parties and their positioning regarding relations with neighboring countries is to be expected.

The green political movement in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** is in a pre-political phase, and it will take at least two more election cycles before a green political platform is consolidated as a political alternative. This sort of development is possible if various environmentalist, left, and feminist activist circles manage to emancipate themselves from the agendas of large donors and build a genuine political initiative around ecological issues. For the moment, it appears that this type of political formation could mainly have an ecological profile in the beginning. Meanwhile, there

could be further attempts by green “entrepreneurs” to run in elections where they can ensure their political survival. Greater participation by the diaspora in the political life of the country could accelerate party-building with the expertise and experiences gained elsewhere. Initial attempts to consolidate a green political formation in the country could result in local achievements or successes on single issues while remaining focused on emancipation and the fight against corruption and state capture practiced by nationalist elites. Although they might appear as competitors to parties such as Naša stranka, they also can – with certain compromises – become part of coalitions with such parties.

At this moment, the potential success of EGP aspirant Hoćemo (translated “we want”) depends on its capacity to build the movement and attention around a couple of selected issues. The main weak point is that, so far, it is not recognized by movements and initiatives struggling on the ground. In all cases, there is a strong lack of capacity to antagonize and “shake up” domestic politics by green actors who would be anchored in a new political movement and go beyond mere press statements and social media appearances.

In **North Macedonia**, although DOM has a large but passive membership base, it is less likely that the party will continue to grow – just the opposite, membership could decline in the coming years due to resignation and fatigue. With new organization, personalities, and some radical shifts, this decline could be prevented. There is a limited although small probability that DOM will manage to regenerate as a party and take another direction of development. It would require a new working structure, a different type of leadership, and less opportunism in the party’s strategy. Also, an ability to go beyond the Macedonian constituency and have both Albanians and Macedonians as members would be a strong added value. If DOM is not able to go through this transformation, it can be expected that a new citizens’ movement will appear as an alternative and take a more autonomous stand against the dominance of both dominant parties, which are ignoring or abusing environmental challenges.

In contrast, Zelen Human Grad could increase its membership in next few years, mainly among the young urban population in Skopje. Yet, this is still limiting, and the party needs to expand its agenda and gain more

public attention. Apart from these two parties, there is still abundant space that is not covered by green political programs, so there is a chance that a third alternative could be consolidated from the movements and the various independent councilors who have gained some sort of legitimacy in fighting adverse environmental projects across the country. DOM, which already has experienced a loss of councilors, can expect further setbacks unless radical shifts are made within the party structures.

Theoretically, a strong two-party orientation of the political system is creating sufficient space for a third party that could find its place in the spectrum, particularly if it emerges through the close cooperation and coordination of independent councilors working on the social and environmental agenda.

In **Montenegro**, organizations such as Kod and Preokret have significant transformative potential, particularly if they show an ability to grow and spread their presence and impact. There is a high probability that they are the nucleus and gravity points of a new political alternative. There is also the probability that Preokret will be part of a coalition or alliance that will run together with other parties on a pro-European program that goes beyond increasing the conflict between Serbian and Montenegrin nationalist parties. For this movement to develop into a fully fledged political project, it could take three to five years. As the nucleus of a new political movement, Preokret is still fragile but can play an important role in the gathering of progressive forces toward an ecologically sustainable and socially just future or by inspiring a new generation of changemakers, particularly among the youth, to run for elections. It is possible that a new civic political platform created around organizations such as Preokret – but also various activists and initiatives – will be established with an alternative vision of Montenegro.

The URA has disappointed its voters with failure in government, but also – and more importantly – with its behavior toward supporters, which can be a departure point for conducting a thorough inspection both of the leadership and the membership. If the URA intends to continue its activity on the national political spectrum, it will need to make deep and thorough changes within the party and try to regenerate. Yet, it is not very likely that this process will be successful, and there is a question of

whether the URA as a party will survive. There is limited room for differentiation between the few green-minded political actors in the country, and at this moment the potential for alliances is very low. With the new situation in Montenegro, social conflicts will most probably rise due to geopolitical influences, foreign investments, and national identities, so the green agency here could hypothetically be very important as a catalyst of opposition unification. Yet, that will not be possible without many of the activists and experts, many of them women, across the country who are still hesitant to enter into the political sphere.

In **Albania**, there are weak conditions to establish a strong green political platform that could challenge the bi-party system. Environmental issues are still very low on the political agenda, while the general setting is still conservative, particularly on gender equality. Although some breakthroughs are possible, as has been demonstrated by synchronized action around the Vjosa River, in most cases protest movements are still not large enough to make an important difference. Still, the Albanian youth – and particularly those who have returned from various European countries – are interested in environmental issues. There is a possibility to accelerate this process and gain more popular support for these issues. It remains difficult to organize a genuine political movement that would be autonomous and emancipated from the dominance and tight grip of two ruling parties.

A further strengthening of the civil society movement around environmental, anti-corruption, and gender equality issues can be expected, together with an increase in the political dimension of its collective action. Since there are no indications that reliance on fossil fuels and the growth-orientation of the current government will be terminated, there will be a growing number of issues around which activists can learn how to organize and gain visibility. That can lead to choices being made by some seasoned and experienced activists to politically engage on environmental topics. During the next wave, one can expect a bottom-up political project to be established to present a real and autonomous political alternative. Meanwhile, attempts to establish false or fake green parties by bigger political parties can be expected, paired with a passive presence of the current Green Party, which is playing this role at the moment. Without a deep transformation and radical shifts in working structures, there is a very low

probability that the current Albanian Green Party will be transformed to a level where it can deliver better results and enter political institutions, except for the ones it already has permission to access due to its deals in serving as junior partners and satellites.

Yet, Albanian youth are very attentive and learning very quickly. One can expect surprises there. With this notion of hope, I am finishing this small effort to lay the groundwork for further debates and conversations about the development of the green political movement in the region.

Annex – List of interviewees (in alphabetical order)

Indrit Abidjaj, Albania
Marko Aksentijević, Serbia
Frosina Antonovska, North Macedonia
Jasminka Bjelavac, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Damjan Rehm Bogunović, Serbia
Edona Bylykbashi, Albania
Iva Čukić, Serbia
Tihomir Dakić, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Benedetta de Marte, Italy/Brussels
Dejan Dimitrovski, North Macedonia
Ivana Dragšić, North Macedonia
Srđan Đurović, Serbia
Lavdosh Ferruni, Albania
Granit Gashi, Kosovo
Aleksandar Georgijevski, North Macedonia
Biljana Gligorić, Montenegro
Jona Haxhialiu, Albania
Mario Hibert, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Vuk Iković, Montenegro
Simon Ilse, Germany
Gerhard Jordan, Austria
Danilo Krivokapić, Serbia
Safet Kubat, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Gordan Jovanovski, North Macedonia
Vesna Jusup, Serbia/Brussels
Radomir Lazović, Serbia
Iva Marković, Serbia
Aleksandar Matković, Serbia
Sopho Mchedlishvili, Sweden/Georgia
Alma Midžić, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Predrag Momčilović, Serbia

Maja Moračanin, North Macedonia
Therese Nasman, Sweden
Husein Oručević, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Đorđe Pavičević, Serbia
Srđan Perić, Montenegro
Maša Perović, Serbia
Paola Petrić, Serbia
Andrej Petrovski, Serbia
Anes Podić, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Nasiha Pozder, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Terry Reintke, Germany
Milan Sekulović, Montenegro
Stefan Slavković, Serbia
Ankica Sokolić, North Macedonia
Natalija Stojmenović, Serbia
Katarina Tadić, Serbia
Mehmet Gökhan Tuncer, Albania/Turkey
Jelena Vasiljević, Serbia
Sidorela Vatnikaj, Albania
Dragana Velkovska, North Macedonia
Dobrica Veselinović, Serbia
Žana Vokopola, Albania
Joni Vorpsi, Albania
Azra Vuković, Montenegro
Thomas Waitz, Austria/Brussels
Tea Zegaj, Albania
Žaklina Živković, Serbia



Vedran Horvat is a former journalist, sociologist, researcher, activist and author. Since 2015 he works as head of the Zagreb based Institute for Political Ecology. He is the former director of the Croatian office of Heinrich Böll Foundation (2005–2015), member of the board of directors of the Green European Foundation in Brussels and associate of the Amsterdam based Transnational Institute. In the last two decades he has been in numerous occasions involved in environmental struggles, municipalist initiatives and green political projects in Croatia, in the Balkans and Europe. As founder and key coordinator of Green Academy, an advanced program of education in political ecology, he has been operating in the nexus between politics, academia and social movements. He lives and moves between Zagreb, Berlin and Vis.

