

Topic / Tema broja:**ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORIES OF WESTERN
SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE : HISTORIOGRAPHICAL
SURVEYS OF SERBIA, KOSOVO AND METOHIJA, BOSNIA
AND HERZEGOVINA, MONTENEGRO AND MACEDONIA/
POVIJESTI OKOLIŠA ZAPADNOG DIJELA JUGOISTOČNE
EUROPE: HISTORIOGRAFSKI PREGLEDI SRBIJE, KOSOVA
I METOHIJE, BOSNE I HERCEGOVINE, CRNE GORE I
MAKEDONIJE****SMELTING HOPE: ENVIRONMENT, HUMANITIES, AND
DISSENT IN SERBIA****TALJENJE NADE: OKOLIŠ, HUMANISTIKA I OTPOR U SRBIJI**

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Received / Primljeno: 13. 11. 2025.
Accepted / Prihvaćeno: 21. 12. 2025.
Original scientific paper / Izvorni znanstveni rad
UDK / UDC: 502.1(497.11)
504(497.11)

Summary

This paper offers several interconnected strands of inquiry which define the difficult and contested, however strong and intimate relationships of the people and the environment in Serbia. The first is the inextricable entanglement of war and material environment. The second is people's perceptions of and relations to the pollution (biophysical and political), and the long history of dissent framed around ecological issues in the country. The third is environmental impacts on Serbia as one of the middle and low- income countries subjected to various local and international extractive interests, and the scholarship engaging with these dynamic relations. The fourth is the call for attention to the history of environmental humanities discourse in Serbia, which builds on an important albeit internationally overlooked scholarly tradition, the aspects of which were instrumental in the development of scholarship in the field internationally. By bringing these threads together, this paper calls for further in-depth study of each of these themes. In this context the paper touches on eventful relationships between environmental movements, academic community, and the wider public.

Key words: Serbia, wasteocene, profit, ecocide, dissent, protest, extraction, neocolonialism, European periphery, environmental humanities

Ključne riječi: Srbija, wasteocene, profit, ekocid, protesti, ekstrakcija, neokolonijalizam, periferija Evorpe, ekohumanitiska

1. INTRODUCTION

We fulfill Pančić's will. We put him to eternal rest here. We relay his message to the Serbian youth - that only by getting to know the natural world of our country in depth will they show how much they love and respect their homeland.¹

On the 24th March 2025, exactly 26 years since the NATO bombing of FR Yugoslavia² began, I went down a sombre rabbit hole, reading various texts that covered it over the years. Among them was a 2014 article from the Serbian weekly *Novosti*. It relayed that Josif Pančić's resting place, a small mausoleum perched on the peak of Kopaonik mountain in southwestern Serbia was still off limits to the public, following the 1999 NATO bombing of its summit with depleted uranium-loaded missiles and cluster bombs.³ Pančić (1814–1888) was one of the world's most renowned botanists, a medical doctor, professor of natural history and founding father of Serbian mountaineering. He was also the first mountain guide in the country. Pančić's unique competence for this role stemmed from his own embodied, explorative experience. He knew the mountains intimately as he had traversed them, often on foot, both as a physician seeing patients in the mountain villages, and as an avid researcher of the rich and diverse alpine ecosystems. He was a beloved figure among the locals, as well as among his students, whom he often took on study trips into the mountains. It was thus a large group of mountaineers who accompanied his remains from Belgrade all the way to the summit of Kopaonik mountain to be buried there, in a small sepulchre of stone. Carved into that stone were the words which introduced this paper.

When one of the NATO missiles that rained on the mountain in 1999 hit Pančić's tomb, its stone blocks fell apart, revealing a simple wooden coffin made of the endemic spruce, (*Picea omorika* – Pančićeva omorika), one of his most important botanical discoveries. Because of this, visits to the summit were prohibited from 2001, putting an end to the tradition of youth excursions, school trips, and mountaineers' meeting at the so called Pančić's Peak. The two tragedies which happened within months of each other in 2012, when detonations of the remaining cluster bombs lodged into the soil around the tomb killed the deminers who were trying to clear the area, proved that this was a prudent measure. Both times the detonations had also set the top of the mountain on fire which swallowed plants and trees, wrapping the peak into a thick layer of smoke.⁴ Visits continued to be forbidden afterward and, according to the official website of the Raška municipality, part of which is Kopaonik, they are still forbidden today.⁵

There are several notions in this story which underpin the text that follows. First, as summarised by Joseph Hupy, is that 'warfare and the physical environment have always shared a close and an interconnected relationship.'⁶ That this material reality directly reflects on the pertinent scholarship shows John McNeill noting that 'war and military organisation routinely played a major role in environmental history.'⁶ There are however (regional) contexts in which this is particularly true. Serbia, alongside the region of the former socialist Yugoslavia is one of those places where history of the environment and history of war are not just close and interconnected: they are *inextricably entangled*, and at times almost

¹ 'Ostvarujemo zavet Pančićev. Prenosimo ga da ovdje večno počiva. Objavljujemo njegovu poruku upućenu srpskoj omladini – da će tek dubokim upoznavanjem i proučavanjem prirode naše zemlje pokazati koliko voli i poštuje svoju otadžbinu' An inscription on Josif Pančić's tomb, on the occasion of transfer of his remains on July 7th 1951, tenth anniversary of the 1941 day of antifascist uprising of the people of Serbia.

² FR Yugoslavia (Federative Republic of Yugoslavia) was the country consisting of Serbia (with Kosovo and Metohia) and Montenegro, between 1992 and 2003, changing name to Serbia and Montenegro between 2003 and 2006.

³ Marko Lopušina, 23. 02. 2014. *Novosti* 'Neispunjeni zavet Josifa Pančića' <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/reportaze/aktuelno.293.html:479637-Neispunjeni-zavet-Josifa-Pancica> (accessed March 24 2025).

⁴ M. Nićiforović, *Novosti* 13.09.2012. Hronika: 'Bomba ubila deminera i upalila vrh Kopaonika!'

⁵ Official website of the Raška municipality <https://raskaturizam.rs/activity/pancicev-mauzolej/> (accessed 5 November, 2025).

⁶ Joseph Hupy, "The Environmental Footprint of War." *Environment and History*, 14:3 (2008) pp. 405-21; See also J. R. McNeill, 'Woods and Warfare in World History' *Environmental History* 2004 9:3, 388-410, p. 388. See also Benjamin Neimark, Oliver Belcher and Patrick Bigger 'US military is a bigger polluter than as many as 140 countries – shrinking this war machine is a must', *The Conversation*, June 24, 2019 <https://theconversation.com/us-military-is-a-bigger-polluter-than-as-many-as-140-countries-shrinking-this-war-machine-is-a-must-119269> (accessed March 26, 2025).

indistinguishable.⁷ The grim implications of this entanglement seamlessly pour into our material present: from the uncleared minefields and the cluster bombs which continue to take lives and set mountains ablaze, to other tangible remnants of ecocide – the often overlooked, long-term companion of war and the military interventions in the region. Particularly devastating example of ecocide in Serbia was the 1999 NATO bombing, which killed thousands, jeopardised health and safety of millions, contributed to disappearance of multiple plant and animal species, and deeply and thoroughly polluted both the soil and the waters of Serbia and neighbouring countries alike, infusing hundreds of megatons of toxic and cancerogenic waste into the environment.⁸ These implications have motivated a body of place-specific scholarly works dealing with the cumbersome aftermath of the 1990s in the region as a major shaper of environment in today's Serbia. One strand of this paper engages with a portion of this scholarship.

There are of course other significant disruptors to Serbia's biophysical environment. The range is wide: from poor internal regulation and large-scale exploitation of waters and ores to poor waste management on the local and state level which, in turn, attracts international actors to Serbia to set up profit-churning projects with devastating environmental, social and economic implications. Such projects (to be dealt in more detail further in this text), involving the local elites and international conglomerates alike, are, of course, not new on the global scale. Histories of colonialism, for one, are rife with the one-directional relation of exploitation, extraction and devastation of the communities and environments of the Global South by the imperial governments and companies that served them.⁹ These relationships are certainly not new in Serbia either. Nor is the resistance against such treatment. As we shall see below, according to local historians, Serbia was where the first ecological protest in Europe took place (against a French mining company partnered with the local investor).

One of the key objectives of this paper is to contextualise the works of scholars studying this wide range of environmental disruptors in, or related to, Serbia.¹⁰ This scholarship considers how the decades of devastation, 'both physical and political' – as members of Serbian public often express their perception of the pollution– created a contested relationship between humans, the environment, and the various domestic and international political actors.¹¹ The political processes which brought such perceptions demand both scholarly and public engagement. In addition to the works of scholars covering these issues,

⁷ Here I specifically refer to all the former countries of the SFR Yugoslavia (Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia), and the regional legacy of its violent collapse in early and mid-1990s. The focus of this entire section however are the consequences of the 1999 NATO bombing on FR Yugoslavia – the remnant of SFRY, constituting of Serbia and Montenegro.

⁸ For example, in 1999 The London Times reported that the fires caused by the NATO bombing of the Petrohemija paint factory in the Serbian town of Pančevo released 'a toxic cloud of smoke and gas hundreds of feet high' containing gases the concentration of which was up to 8,600 times higher than the danger level. To avoid further catastrophic explosions, the workers at the factory complex 'were forced to release 1,400 tons of carcinogenic ethylene dichloride and 800 tons of hydrogen chloride into the Danube.' In addition, as Robert Hayden, Director of the Center for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Pittsburgh said, as reported by Phillip Frazer: '[the bombings] risked the life, health and safety of the civilian population' including 1.6 million people living in the city of Belgrade, closely downstream from Pančevo. Many animal species whose habitats were the river islands of Belgrade, such as for example, the white heron, have not been seen since the bombing. The damage, of course did not stop there, as the Danube carried the toxic spillage downstream through Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine into the Black Sea. When, on the other hand, the NATO bombs hit oil refinery in the city of Novi Sad in the north of Serbia, as Dalmacija et. al. noted, the destruction released '73,569 tons of crude oil, of which 90% was incinerated; 560 tons reached the Danube River through the destroyed refinery's sewerage system' The bombing further 'resulted in contamination of soil, groundwater, the Danube River water, and sediment in the vicinity of the water supply source.' See: Phillip Frazer, 'What NATO's Bombs Did to the Environment' *Earth Island Journal*, 14:4 (1999 - 2000), pp. 40-41. For studies conducted by local scholars drawing from primary sources, consultations with independent experts, and/or fieldwork see: Božo Dalmacija, Ivana Ivančev-Tumbas, Jasmina Zejak & Maja Djurendić (2003) 'Case Study of Petroleum Contaminated Area of Novi Sad After NATO Bombing in Yugoslavia, Soil and Sediment' *Contamination: An International Journal*, 12:4, 591-611; Vukašin Pavlović (ed.) *Ekologija i rat: izveštaj nezavisnih eksperata o NATO bombardovanju SRJ*. Beograd: Službeni glasnik (2012); Saša T. Bakrač et al., *Ekološke Posledice NATO Bombardovanja Republike Srbije Vojno Delo* 7:1 (1999) pp. 475-492.

⁹ See for example Vinitia Damodara, Anna Winterbottom and Alan Lester (eds.) *The East India Company and the Natural World*, Palgrave McMillan (2015).

¹⁰ I understand this scholarship broadly as works which bridge and bring together sciences and humanities to engage in the interrelations of human and other-than-human world.

¹¹ For example, extensive research on the notion of Serbia's current 'political and mental ecology' has been done by anthropologist Maja Petrović Šteger. See: 'On the Side of Predictable: Visioning the Future in Serbia' – 'O onome što predvidljivo ne obuhvaća: Zamišljanje budućnosti u Srbiji', *Etnološka tribina : Journal of Croatian Ethnological Society*, 50:43 (2020) pp 3-67, p.3.

this paper draws attention to some recent environment-focused work of journalists, activists, and public initiatives in the country.

This overview (which is by no means exhaustive) also engages with the works of Serbian scholars from the previous two centuries which fit under the umbrella of environmental humanities today. I argue that these undercelebrated, yet vital and relevant works have not only shaped the contemporary relationship between people and environment in Serbia, but also the scholarship in the wider region of the Western Balkans, and on the global scale. As the sections that follow will show, thinking about the environment – including pertinent scholarly production, legislative and public responses to environmental issues, as well as organised expressions of public dissent, have long been a strong presence in Serbia.

2. ORIGINS AND UNDERPINNINGS OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES IN SERBIA

In the recent past, the scholarship of environmental humanities (including environmental history) in Serbia has been described somewhat reductively as nascent or embryonic. As Martin Kalb noted, because of language barriers and (in)accessibility of materials within the vast international sweep of environmental history, some scholarships sadly remain under the radar of the mainstream scholarly production.¹² This is particularly true for the works authored in smaller languages: if only a portion of such scholarship gets translated and into the conversation within the currently dominant Anglophone academia, it can (at a cursory glance) seem smaller still. The visibility of environmental science and environmental humanities discourse in Serbia is arguably the case at hand.

Serbian nineteenth and twentieth century scholarly tradition gave the globally renowned multidisciplinary scholars and polymaths such as Milutin Milanković, Jovan Cvijić, or the above-mentioned Josif Pančić. While their scientific discoveries and contributions revolutionised several fields of study on an international level on the one hand, their humanities-leaning works, on the other, represent the scions of what we can define as the contemporary environmental thought and environmental humanities discourse in Serbia. In other words, these scholars engaged with the type of writing which would comfortably sit within the disciplinary realm of environmental humanities today. Though a significant body of their scientific work in climatology, biology, botany, or geology has either been published in or translated (from Serbian) to English, French and German, many of the humanities-leaning work they authored remained significantly less visible in the international discourse today.¹³

For example, mathematician, astronomer, geophysicist, and climatologist Milutin Milanković (1879–1958) is mostly known as the founder of planetary climatology and as the father of paleoclimate modelling.¹⁴ One of his major scientific contributions was refining the theory of the ice ages reoccurrences through his ‘painstaking calculations’, as John McNeill describes Milanković’s method.¹⁵ The theory, known as the *Milankovitch Cycles*, in turn also explains the climate changes to be expected in the future over very long timespans – for that alone his work is arguably relevant to environmental and atmospheric humanities scholars.¹⁶ Less known, however, is that Milanković was also an avid popular-

¹² Martin Kalb, “Moving Beyond the Nation State? Reflections on European Environmental History,” *Global Environment* 12 (2013): 130–65, p.160; p.130.

¹³ See, for example, Cvijić’s *Das Karstphänomen, Geographische Abhandlungen* (1893), *Grundlinien der Geographie und Geologie von Mazedonien und Alt-Serbien. Nebst Beobachtungen in Thrazien, Thessalien, Epirus und *Nordalbanien*, (1908), *Hydrographie souterraine et évolution morphologique du Karst* (1918); Milanković’s *Canon of Insolation and the Ice-Age Problem* or *Théorie mathématique des phénomènes thermiques produits par la radiation solaire*, (1920); Josif Pančić’s *Eine neue conifere in den östlichen Alpen* (1876) and *Die Flora der Serpentinberge in Mittel-Serbien* (1859), among other editions.

¹⁴ André Berger, “Milankovitch, the father of paleoclimate modeling”. *Climate of the Past*. 17: 4 (2021) 1727–1733.

¹⁵ J. R. McNeill, Peter Engelke *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945* Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press (2016) p.73

¹⁶ Milanković’s theory however does not explain the current Earth’s rapid warming induced by exuberant anthropogenic factors since pre-industrial period, and especially since the mid-20th century. See: Alan Buis, 27. 02.2020, *Ask NASA Climate* ‘Why Milankovitch Cycles Can’t Explain Earth’s Current Warming’ <https://climate.nasa.gov/explore/ask-nasa-climate/2949/why-milakovitch-orbital-cycyles-cant-explain-earths-current-warming/> (accessed March 20, 2025).

iser of science. With that hat on, he engaged in literary writing through a series of magazine articles on astronomy and climatology. His actual personal bestseller at the time of publishing, in the recent decades largely forgotten, is a literary volume *Through Distant Worlds and Times: Letters from a Wayfarer in the Universe* (1928). From today's point of view, this book can be described as the combination of popular science and an experiment in ecocriticism, written in the form of 37 letters to the unnamed woman which 'serve as vehicles for discussion of the history of astronomy, climatology and science.'¹⁷

Josif Pančić, known as the father of Serbian botany, is credited with having discovered 47 plant species previously unknown to the international scientific community, and having classified many others.¹⁸ He was also the founder of Jevremovac (Belgrade's Botanical Gardens), and Chief Physician of the Belgrade Hospital. However, as an educator he encouraged students and researchers of ecology and botany to physically immerse themselves in the nature they are studying. This idea, which he passionately promoted in his practice-based research, in his writing, and even posthumously, as we could see, through the message carved into his tomb, is what Christopher Sellers defined in his work on Henry David Thoreau as *embodied environmental history*.¹⁹

Jovan Cvijić (1865 – 1927), has long been considered the founding father of karst geomorphology.²⁰ Though some more recent works on history of geology accentuate the cooperative undertaking of karstology research in the late Habsburg Monarchy, they recognise the magnitude of Cvijić contribution to the field in general, and in particular that he was 'first to classify karst features and to propose a unified typology that is still widely in use to this day'.²¹ His PhD thesis, completed in Vienna under mentorship of Albrecht Penck, *Das Karstphänomen* (The Karst Phenomenon), revolutionised the field of geology – particularly karstology, which is why a significant portion of terminology within the discipline comes from Serbian, Cvijić's mother tongue. The lively interdisciplinary studies of the Dinaric Karst region, reflected in the recent significant contribution entitled *Environmental Histories of the Dinaric Karst* by a team of regional and international scholars, deeply engage with Cvijić's field-defining contribution.²² He is also considered the founder of modern geography in Serbia. Cvijić is also renowned for his field-defining contributions to historical and human geography on the international scale. As Jelena Mrgić notes, through a tireless fieldwork spanning decades, Cvijić had also set the foundations of anthropogeography, 'presented in his Sorbonne lectures and his masterpiece "La Peninsule balkanique. Géographie humaine" (Paris, 1918).'²³

Alongside these multidisciplinary contributions disseminated across the international scientific community, Cvijić's work has also been discussed as in the context of national determination of Southern Slavs under the Habsburg Empire. Historian Johannes Mattes for example argues that Cvijić, by introducing terminology derived from South Slavic languages, contributed 'to the growth of an independent, language- and nation-oriented geoscientific community in Serbia', thus 'unintentionally' fuelling 'nationalistic tendencies in karst research'.²⁴ Contrary to this (imperial) point of view, Cvijić's efforts could arguably be interpreted as a contribution to what we would today call decolonising the curriculum in the Balkans. According to an obituary written for him in the 1927 issue of the *Slavonic Review*:

¹⁷ Danica Spasova, Đuro Radinović, Vlado Milićević, Slavko Maksimović, *Milutin Milanković: putnik kroz vasionu i vekove* Beograd: Udruženje građana "Milutin Milanković" (2007).

¹⁸ Biljana Lubarda et. al (2014). "Plant species and subspecies discovered by Dr. Josif Pančić – distribution and floristic importance". *Botanica Serbica*. 38:2 pp.251-268, Ioannes Tsekos; Michael Moustakas (6 December 2012). *Progress in Botanical Research: Proceedings of the 1st Balkan Botanical Congress*. Springer Science. p. 142.

¹⁹ Christopher Sellers, "Thoreau's Body: Towards an Embodied Environmental History," *Environmental History* 4: 4 (1999) pp. 486–514.

²⁰ See :Derek Ford, (2007). "Jovan Cvijić and the founding of karst geomorphology". *Environmental Geology*. 51: 5 pp. 675–684.

²¹ See: Johannes Mattes, 'The making of "Classical" Karst: Serbian geographer Jovan Cvijić, (inter)nationalism, and the emergence of karst sciences, 1870–1914', *History of Geology* 48:1, pp. 117-130, 117.

²² Borna Fuerst-Bjeliš, Jelena Mrgić, Hrvoje Petrić, Matija Zorn and Žiga Zwitter (eds) *Environmental Histories of the Dinaric Karst*, Cham: Springer (2024).

²³ Jelena Mrgić, 'Something Old, Something New: Historical Geography and Environmental History Discourse in Serbia,' in Hrvoje Petrić and Ivana Žebec Šilj (eds.) *Environmentalism in Central and Southeastern Europe: Historical Perspectives*. London: Rowman & Littlefield (2017).

²⁴ Mattes, 'The making of "Classical" Karst, p. 124.

‘Before Cvijić, the scientific and geographical investigation of the Balkan peninsula had been almost exclusively the domain of Austrian, and particularly Viennese, scholars, who have not always kept their studies independent to the political interests of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.’ His research, according to the obituary, inspired the post-imperial regional scholarship: ‘stimulated by Cvijić, research in the liberated countries became more self-confident and original, and the national consciousness in those areas which were still directly subject to Austro-Hungary was immeasurably strengthened’.²⁵

The Germanophone scholars, including Cvijić’s own mentor Penck, who championed research through work with local communities, did so in the Balkans through engaging in the so called *Kulturarbeit*, the colonial-style project through which ‘Germans and other “civilized nations” were entitled to cultivate (karst) environments inhabited by indigenous Slavic-speaking populations and thereby acquire a territorial claim to these areas’.²⁶ Contrastingly, the ground-breaking quality of Cvijić’s own research stemmed from his ‘intimate understanding of the psychology and the development of his own people and the Balkans’ both because he was a member of the said Indigenous community and the native speaker of its languages, and because he travelled it extensively, ‘on foot and in the saddle’ immersing himself into its places and people, their stories and customs, traditional methods of construction, agriculture, animal husbandry, and migrations.²⁷ In the process of preparing and publishing the startling 24 volumes of his anthropogeographic research, he devised a robust set of methods which he describes in one of them, *Naselja sprskih zemalja (Dwellings in The Serbian Lands, 1902)*, flagging as central to his work the knowledge co-produced in collaboration with the vast network of his interlocutors – the local people. In other words, the crucial element of Cvijić’s approach to producing his anthropogeographical magnum opus was co-creating a vast, systematised research integrating traditional local knowledge.²⁸

After a long period of marginalisation, local and Indigenous knowledge have in recent years finally began to receive more attention in mainstream scholarship. Seminal works such as Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* squarely place such knowledge at the front of the scientific conversation, challenging the hitherto observed knowledge hierarchies.²⁹ In the context of generational, local, traditional knowledge of the Balkans, in 2021 an interesting contribution came from a Serbian environmental historian/ethno-anthropologist team, Jelena Mrgić and Bogdan Dražeta, who explored how local people in pre-industrial Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina made sense of the weather and the climate.³⁰ Combining written sources from pre-industrial times with ‘sensory data’ and trans-generational knowledge reflected in the contemporary ethnographic material, they showed the continuity of people consulting the sun, the clouds, the winds, the animal behaviour, and ‘their own feelings on the skin and “in the bones”’ to predict the weather and engage with the climate changes today.³¹

There are also Serbian historians who have built the environmental thinking into their already established historical work, using commodities like food as vessels for discussion of economic and environmental changes, migration, and trade. For example, in her recent popular history publication, one of the greatest Ottoman historians in the region, Olga Zirojević, through intertwined stories of caviar and *boza* offers a history of the Ottoman Danube; of Belgrade’s fish markets of those times when the caviar-heavy sturgeons used to swim upstream, decades and centuries before the construction of the Iron Gate Đerdap power stations blocked their routes and flooded the large island of Ada Kaleh, complete with its cobbled

²⁵ “Jovan Cvijić, 1865-1927.” *The Slavonic Review*, 6:16 (1927), pp. 193–99, p.195.

²⁶ Mattes, ‘The making of “Classical” Karst’, p. 120.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.193.

²⁸ Jovan Cvijić, ‘Naselja srpskih zemalja’ *Srpski Etnografski Zbornik*, Beograd: Srpska Kraljevska Akademija (1902), p. VI.

²⁹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, London: Penguin Random House (2013); ‘Reflections on the Past, Present, and Potential Futures of Knowledge Hierarchies in Ocean Governance Research’, Niner et.al. *Frontiers In Marine Science* 11:1.

³⁰ Jelena Mrgić and Bogdan Dražeta, ‘Seeing, Sensing, And De/Scribing – Narratives On Weather And Climate In Preindustrial Serbia And Bosnia-Herzegovina’ 16:16 *Economic- and Ecohistory* (2020) pp.184 – 200, 184.

³¹ Mrgić and Dražeta, ‘Seeing, Sensing, And De/Scribing’, 184.

streets, markets and gardens; and of how boza, the ‘suspicious’ fermented corn drink connected peoples and cultures from the Danube to Bosphorus and beyond.³²

The Danube, and the (over)exploitation of the mighty river’s resources, has been subject of both historical and contemporary issues in Serbia. This year, an edited collection by an international team of scholars entitled *Flowing Progress: Transforming Danube Through Infrastructure* (Purdue University Press, 2025), also featured my chapter, entitled ‘The Specter of Infrastructure over Belgrade’s Urban Oasis’, an environmental history of Veliko ratno ostrvo, central Belgrade’s (and Danube’s) largest fluvial island, an urban oasis of remarkable biodiversity, which has been both a witness and the participant in the city’s turbulent past for centuries. It focuses on the *longue duree* of human attempts to build infrastructure on its muddy soil, and the island’s resistance against these attempts.³³

3. THE LONGUE DUREE OF SMOG: SERBIAN CONTRIBUTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Going deeper in time, to the pre-industrial period and Middle Ages has emerged as a distinctive feature in the work of historians engaging with environmental themes in Serbia. In this context, there are prolific scholars who have built environmental thinking into the core of their authorship and inspired others to do so too. For example, the late Serbian academician, Miloš Blagojević, had worked on array of relevant topics – from medieval Cyrillic terminology describing the variety of plants, to perceptions of nature and legislative measures on land use, among other themes. Interdisciplinary Blagojević has done ‘extensive archival research on medieval Serbian lands prior to the Ottoman conquest’ for the meticulously researched book *Zemljoradnja u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji* (Agriculture in Medieval Serbia).³⁴

Building on the historical geography working group at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade convened by Blagojević in the previous decades, historian Siniša Mišić, whose research among other themes covers settlement history and water use in medieval Serbia, officially established the Centre for Historical Geography and Historical Demography (CIGID), which has been active since 2010.³⁵ At the same department, environmental historian Jelena Mrgić brought environmental history squarely in to the University of Belgrade’s curriculum, by designing the module ‘Introduction to Environmental History’ (Uvod u ekološku istoriju), which has been taught since 2021. Mrgić also wrote widely on environmental history and historical geography themes. For example, her book *Zemlja i ljudi* (*The Land and The People*) gives a broadly contextualised overview of environmental history of the Western Balkans drawing from author’s medievalist and historical geographer background.³⁶ Budimir Pavlović authored ‘Ekologija gradske sredine u antičkoj i srednjovekovnoj Srbiji’ (Ecology of the Urban Environment in Ancient and Medieval Serbia). A historian of medicine, he also explored conditions of medicine and spiritual culture in the medieval Serbian state in the thirteenth century, bringing closer his interests in the fields of medical and environmental humanities, which have recently begun to fruitfully merge in the international discourse.³⁷ Historians of law also engaged in pertinent themes and produced some fascinating research – Srđan Šarkić for instance wrote extensively about the complex and well developed environmental legislation in medieval Serbia.³⁸

³² See: Olga Zirojević *Od sumnjivog napitka do kavijara: iz osmanske baštine* Beograd: Most Art Jugoslavija, (2020).

³³ See: Milica Prokić -The Specter of Infrastructure over Belgrade’s Urban Oasis: The Layered Past and the Uncertain Future of the Great War island (Veliko ratno ostrvo) in *Flowing Progress: Transforming the Danube Through Infrastructure* (Stefan Dorondel & Luminita Gatejel eds.) West Lafayette:Purdue University Press (2025).

³⁴ Mrgić and Dražeta. ‘Seeing, Sensing, And De/Scribing’, p.187.

³⁵ <https://www.f.bg.ac.rs/sr-lat/instituti/CIGID>

³⁶ Jelena Mrgić, *Zemlja i Ljudi – Iz Istorije Životne Sredine Zapadnog Balkana, (Land and People – From the Environmental History of the Western Balkans)* Beograd: Equilibrium (2013), 26.

³⁷ See for example, Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Vidaya Sarwesvaran (eds) *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Medical-Environmental Humanities* Bloomsbury (2022); Budimir Pavlović, ‘Developmental conditions of medicine and spiritual culture at the time of grand Prince Stefan Nemanja’ *Srpski Arhiv za Celokupno Lekarstvo* (2012) 140:3-4, pp. 250-254.

³⁸ Srđan Šarkić ‘Može li se govoriti o zaštiti životne sredine u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji? - povodom člana 123 Dušanovog zakonika’. *Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta*, 2014, 48:1, pp. 45-52

Indeed, environmental regulation and legislation in Serbia has a long (if fragmented) past, dating as early as the fourteenth century's Code of law known as Dušanov Zakonik (The Dušan's Code) – after Serbian Emperor Dušan. In his book *Vazduh Kao Zajedničko Dobro (Air As A Common)* journalist and activist Predrag Momčilović engages with The Dušan's Code in the context of the long history of air pollution, and Serbia as a medieval centre of silver production, which attracted a community of Saxon miners to settle in the country. As Momčilović discusses, from the Medieval sources it is evident that the authorities in Serbia at the time understood that the excessive mining, which exacerbated the deforestation, had likely affected the air quality.³⁹ As Srđan Šarkić discusses in his paper about environmental protection in Medieval Serbia, the law makers of that time undoubtedly also understood the importance of forest protection, as it was written into Article 123 of Dušan's Code which stipulates that “[t]he right to cut forests for the purposes of Saxons' mining is limited”, and that no one should settle on deforested areas, which must be left undisturbed so the forest can grow again. The Code further proclaimed that ‘the Emperor has allowed the logging to Saxons only for the amount of timber they needed for fuel or for building.’⁴⁰

The regulation must have been well implemented, as the travel writers who went to Serbia in the Middle Ages uniformly describe the country covered with dense and vast forests of beech and oak.⁴¹ Central Serbia remained lushly verdant for centuries to come – it was named Šumadija (the Woodland) in the eighteenth century, the name it carries to this day.⁴² However, after the environmental protection law in Medieval Serbia the care for the environment, especially for air quality, was not mentioned for centuries, Momčilović notes. This was until the period of industrialisation, which arrived later to some parts of the Balkans, but was largely present in urban areas at the beginning of the twentieth century. With the development of industry in Serbia, pollution also grew. With it in turn grew public concern – and, as we shall see in the following section, also the public dissent.⁴³

4. QUOD ME NUTRIT, ME DESTRUIT? POLLUTION, DISSENT, HOPE, REPEAT

Anyone who has not seen this grandiose enterprise and its smelters cannot imagine the clouds of smoke that billow day and night from dozens of huge chimneys...

The villagers from the vicinity of Bor should be protected, these are good and hard-working people, to whom the land is everything and who should have their daily bread secured ...

I have spoken, now you act...⁴⁴

With these words, on 29 April 1934 journalist and poet Rade Drainac concluded his article in the Serbia newspaper *Pravda*, about the copper mine by the town of Bor in Eastern Serbia, one of the largest and highest-grossing copper mines in Europe at the time, and the repeated disregard for the complaints of pollution by the local people. In the article, Drainac detailed the workings of the mine: the 50-year concession was sold to The French Bor Mines Company – Saint-Georges Concession (Compagnie française des mines de Bor – concession Saint-Georges), established in June 1904, by Đorđe Vajfert – a Serbian industrialist and Governor of the National Bank of Serbia.⁴⁵ According to Drainac, over the decades the concession extended, gobbling up 13 000 ha of arable land, polluting the air, water, and soil in the area. Each year the villagers increasingly mourned their withering yields, voicing complaints to the

³⁹ Predrag Momčilović *Vazduh Kao Zajedničko Dobro* Beograd: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southeast (2021), p.16.

⁴⁰ Šarkić, 'Može li se govoriti o zaštiti životne sredine u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji?' p.52

⁴¹ Momčilović, *Vazduh Kao Zajedničko Dobro*, p.15-16.

⁴² See Jelena Mrgić, 'Wine or raki – The Interplay of Climate and Society in the Early Modern Ottoman Bosnia.' *Environment & History* 17:4 (2011) pp. 613–637.

⁴³ Momčilović *Vazduh Kao Zajedničko Dobro*, p.15-16.

⁴⁴ Miloš Petrović, Republika Srbija, Borski Upravni Okrug, 'Arhivska građa o borskom okrugu' <https://borski.okrug.gov.rs/arhivska-gradja-o-borskom-okrugu-13/> (accessed March 20, 2023).

⁴⁵ Miloš Petrović, Republika Srbija, Borski Upravni Okrug, 06.06.2022 'Na današnji dan' <https://borski.okrug.gov.rs/na-danasnji-dan-154/> (accessed March 20, 2023).

mine management and the government alike to no avail. It was stated that the mine creates jobs and thus compensates for the agricultural losses. However, in 1935, when agricultural losses were record-breaking, it transpired that the compensation was 100 times smaller in worth than the damage done.⁴⁶

In April 1935 the so called Vlačka Buna (The Vlačka Rebellion) broke out in Bor and lasted to June that year, making Serbia the place of the first known ecological revolt in Europe, according to historian Miloš Petrović. Hundreds of residents rebelled against excessive pollution, marched to the gates of the French concession offices and tried to stop the operation of mines and smelters. The French Embassy exerted pressure to end the rebellion. The army and police were deployed to protect the concessionaires, shooting at the rebel peasants and workers, causing human casualties and injuries. The first (known) environmental rebellion to take place in Europe was thus violently quelled in blood. As Predrag Momčilović noted in 2021, the story of rebellion shows that environmental activism in these areas is not a new thing – people fought for ‘a clean environment and a dignified life in Serbia more than 85 years ago.’⁴⁷

Despite the rebellious past of the area, the extractive grip has not loosened on the people of Bor and surrounding villages to this day. The Bor mines and smelters, state-owned during socialist Yugoslavia, in the post-socialist period piling colossal debt and becoming subject to sale to the highest bidder, changing hands of various international companies in the twenty-first century, finally came under concession of the Chinese company Zijin Mining in 2018. Throughout the smelter’s long past, the health of the biophysical environment and of the local people have not been a priority of any of the owners, despite the technological tweaks announced at the inauguration of a new smelter in early March 2023.⁴⁸ The town of Bor today represents a dark ecological spot on the map of Serbia, Europe, and the world.

In ‘Prosperous Pollutants: Bargaining with Risks and Forging Hopes’ anthropologist Deana Jovanović brought Bor into the conversation of the anthropology of industrial pollution, ‘in relation to air pollution and health hazards’ in the town. Focusing on ‘work of hope’ in this paper (part of her research on Bor which spans over a decade), Jovanović found that while her interlocutors ‘anticipated futures and hoped for stable short-term futures in a heavily polluted environment, their work of hope led to seemingly paradoxical situations when they anchored their hopes in “objects” (such as the smoke or the factory, the source of their toxic contamination) that provided a sense of possibility and opportunity.’⁴⁹ In other words, Jovanović found that the ‘pungent, sharp, soot-heavy smoke’ that falls on their town, the citizens of Bor also saw as its ‘feeder’, the smelting plant being a source of jobs, and by that token, sustenance.⁵⁰ Over time, part of the generational knowledge and local skillset in Bor has become, disturbingly, developing the breathing techniques (through handkerchiefs to avoid breathing in the soot) which they teach the town’s visitors.⁵¹

This position, where the people are forced to choose their allegiance to the ‘smoke that feeds’ their town (while it destroys their health) over clean air and better life conditions, is the synecdoche of the current, contested relationship between the humans and the environment in Serbia. Indeed, as we shall see in the following sections, there is a variety of projects in Serbia whose promise to ‘feed’ the economy is bundled with the damage to the health of humans and of the non-human environment alike. In this context, another crucial notion that Jovanović brings in this paper is the perception of pollution within one’s body as well as ‘out there.’ As some of her interlocutors would say, they have ‘The entire periodic table in [their] blood’ – ‘a poetic metaphor to describe themselves as contaminated yet adaptable individuals with a formidable strength that had rendered them resistant to toxicity.’⁵²

⁴⁶ Momčilović *Vazduh Kao Zajedničko Dobro*, p17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ See, for example: *Vreme* 19.04.2023. ‘Bor: Nova topionica donela novo zagadjenje’ vreme.com/vesti/bor-nova-topionica-donela-novo-zagadjenje/ (accessed 19 April 2023).

⁴⁹ See: Deana Jovanović (2018) Prosperous Pollutants: Bargaining with Risks and Forging Hopes in an Industrial Town in Eastern Serbia, *Ethnos*, 83:3, 489-504, p. 491.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 489.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid* 494.

The perception of all-encompassing pollution among Serbian people is also discussed among other anthropologists and humanities scholars: biophysical, political, and spiritual pollution – the result of the wars, the conflicts, the country's position on the European periphery with everything that position entails, as well as its problematic, inner political life, ridden with corruption that has taken human lives in devastating and tragic circumstances on several occasions in the recent years. The current ongoing (2025) mass student-led protests started when the collapse of the shoddily constructed concrete canopy of the newly restored rail station in Novi Sad killed sixteen people, revealing the bigger picture of systemic corruption which sacrifices human lives for financial gain. Remarkably, the protest has been ongoing with demonstrations happening every single day since November 1 2024, the day of the tragedy.

According to some scholars, the political landscape in Serbia seems to be perceived by many people as polluted and, as such, the last place where the solutions to the problems of the material, biophysical environmental problems are to be sought. Anthropologist Maja Petrović Šteger for example notes that 'the political as a medium of genuine change seems to many people as hollowed out.' 'Whether considering the past, present or future,' Petrović Šteger notes, people often regard formal politics (i.e., government, formal institutions of power, the frenzied media coverage of party politics, a state of emergency and its normalisation) not only ineffective but perfidious.⁵³ Petrović Šteger's work includes over two decades of conversations with interlocutors from Serbia from all walks of life and covers an array of themes including the 1990's and their aftermath. Drawing on this extensive pool of sources, she notes that her interlocutors 'claim to feel exhausted not only on account of the 1990s wars, or because of the conflicts' economic or psychological consequences, but as a result of Serbia's current 'political and mental ecology.' As a result, she notes that '[t]he majority describe their material and psychic environment as impure, stagnant, and treacherous.'⁵⁴ While many feel that *the political sphere is polluted*, the material reality of Serbia shows (if there was ever any doubt) that, conversely, *the pollution is political*.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL (IN)ADEQUACY IN THE HALLWAY OF EUROPE: THE WASTEOCENE⁵⁵ IN SERBIA

'Pollution is political' has been the refrain heard in the Serbian academic fora and in the media alike.⁵⁶ For example, a 2022 article titled 'Pollution is the main political problem' in the Serbian Daily Danas, brought a statement from the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) regional director, Bruno Pozzi. Discussing the factors which contribute to air pollution and, by that token, harm the health of people in Serbia, Pozzi warned that the poor quality of air is the cause of premature deaths. He pointed towards the people stricken by energetic poverty, who heat their homes with cheap raw and solid materials which emit smoke into the air as exacerbators, as well as victims of the pollution. In other words, in his commentary Pozzi placed the burden of responsibility for the poor air of quality in Serbia- on the Serbia's poor. Pozzi concluded that the Serbian state must 'ensure prosperity, circularity and green economy by implementing nature-based solutions.' He iterated that Serbia must continue to 'fulfil its commitments' regarding environment protection given to the European Union.

For a modicum of balance, in his astonishingly unbalanced, classist statement, Pozzi also acknowledged that pollution is an international matter. He noted that 'those countries which export used cars to Serbia should also take responsibility – as they get rid of the old machines which are no longer compliant to their own countries' emission limits, to send them and sell them to the countries whose "law system

⁵³ Maja Petrović Šteger, Felix Ringel, Sanja Potkonjak, Ivan Rajković 'On the Side of Predicable -Visioning the Future in Serbia p.28.

⁵⁴ Ibid p.3.

⁵⁵ Wastocene is the term coined by the Italian environmental historian Marco Armiero, to explain the embodied 'wasting' relationships, in which subaltern human communities and ecosystems are treated with brutality and impunity by the (post)colonial forces. See Marco Armiero, *Wastocene: Stories From the Global Dump*, Cambridge Elements, Cambridge University Press (2021).

⁵⁶ That pollution is political was reiterated as a matter of course on several occasions on the panel discussions, held in 2019 and in 2022, dedicated to environmental issues and the eco movements in Serbia, at the Nije Filozofski ćutati (Keeping Quiet Isn't Philosophical) – a discussion forum hosted by the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, regularly held in the format of a panel including academics and activists, with audience participation.

is more flexible.”⁵⁷ There is much to be said about the condescending euphemism of ‘more flexible’ law systems used by Pozzi, for among the countries that export the ELVs (End of Life Vehicles) in question to Serbia had traditionally been the countries of the EU such as Germany, using Serbia as a dumping ground for the vehicles that cannot be legally driven at home anymore.⁵⁸

Indeed, it often seems to be the case that among Serbia’s obstacles on the way to fulfilling the said commitments given to the EU – is the EU. In the context of environmental, cultural, economic and, of course, political implications of waste, the situation in Serbia is complex and compelling. Decades of waste mismanagement on the local and state level represent one side of the story. The other side of the story, however, is Serbia’s position on Europe’s periphery, which makes it vulnerable to environmental abuse coming from the actors on local and state level and beyond – from Europe and from overseas, who harness the already dire situation for further profit. The resulting exacerbated pollution is, in turn, a wrench in the wheel of Serbian government’s officially set goals to join the European Union in the future – subject to responding to a long list of stipulations set by the Union, among which is achieving the prescribed level of environmental protection as mentioned by Pozzi.

A striking example of this is the Vinča Landfill in Belgrade, established in 1977. It has been the site where the solid communal waste has been dumped without separation or pre-treatment ever since.⁵⁹ As architect and researcher of urban development Ksenija Radovanović reported, in 2019 French company *Suez* built incinerator facilities on the grounds of this open-air waste dump, one of the largest in Europe. The Vinča-Suez story ties into what environmental historian Emily Brownell (among other scholars studying waste in the context of environmental humanities), analyses in her essay ‘International Trash and the Politics of Poverty: Conceptualizing the Transnational Waste Trade.’ Brownell identifies a tendency of Western economies to make their waste ‘disappear’ by dumping it to the lands of the less affluent nations. Her analysis is highly applicable to the countries like Serbia, ridden by the rampant sweep of wild capitalism on the Europe’s economic periphery.⁶⁰

According to Radovanović, the City of Belgrade signed a 25-year deal for the provision of municipal waste management with a multinational consortium including France’s *Suez* and Japan’s *Itochu*, for the construction of a waste incinerator, with a capacity to process about 340 000 tonnes of waste per year. In so doing, the city of Belgrade’s management *and* its lead transaction advisor, International Finance Corporation, ‘bypassed Belgrade’s official waste management plan which required municipal waste separation pre- processing’ which stipulated that ‘recycling or pre-treatment [must] be part of the project.’ In effect, this meant that Serbia would not be able to meet the EU waste management targets with this project in place. The financing of this ‘highly problematic deal, which also relies on an outdated subsidies model now illegal under EU rules, was approved in breach of Serbian law’, by the IFC, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and Austrian Development Bank (OeEB), noted Radovanović.⁶¹ According to her report, the city’s authorities *and* their international partners thus chose ‘the easiest and most profitable,’ yet environmentally most detrimental as well as illegal option. The conclusion of her analysis was that ‘the whole process was designed according to the interests and wishes of the potential private partners, while consciously neglecting Belgrade’s long-term waste management needs and Belgrade’s and Serbia’s obligations towards the EU’s circular economy goals.’⁶²

⁵⁷ Koprivica, K. (May 2022). Zagađenje je glavni politički problem, *Dnevni list Danas*, Retrieved from: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/zagadenje-je-glavni-politicki-problem/> Accessed 18 March 2023.

⁵⁸ See: Antonis A. Zorpas & Vassilis J. Inglezakis, ‘Automotive Challenges in meeting EU 2015 environmental standard’ *Technology in Society* 34:1 (2012) pp. 55-83, p.63.

⁵⁹ Tintor p.243; Ksenija Radovanović, Bankwatch Network ‘The Belgrade Solid Waste Public Private Partnership Corporate interests vs. the circular economy’ December 2019, p.4 <https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Vinca-PPP.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2023).

⁶⁰ See: Emily Brownell, ‘International Trash and the Politics of Poverty - Conceptualizing the Transnational Waste Trade’ in Erika Bdsunek, David Kinkela, and Mark Lawrence (eds), *Nation-States and The Global Environment* Oxford: Oxford University Press (2013).

⁶¹ Ksenija Radovanović, Bankwatch Network 04.12.2023. ‘New Analysis: Belgrade incinerator public-private partnership a textbook case of corporate capture’ https://bankwatch.org/press_release/new-analysis-belgrade-incinerator-public-private-partnership-a-textbook-case-of-corporate-capture (accessed March 20, 2025).

⁶² Radovanović, ‘The Belgrade Solid Waste Public Private Partnership Corporate interests vs. the circular economy’ p.4

6. LAND AND WATER, POLITICS AND PROTEST

A somewhat similar situation to that of the Vinča incinerator facility, as well as the familiar actors – the EBRD and the OeEB – reappeared in the 2018 story of the small hydroelectric power plant (SHPP) Zvonce in the village of Rakita on the Stara Planina mountain. As sociologist Aleksandra Piletić noted, Zvonce power plant was part of a wider ‘state-sponsored move’ stemming ‘directly from its EU accession commitments.’⁶³ According to Piletić, the project, a result of the closely intertwined financial interests of international investors and the local government officials was, however, ‘fiercely contested by the villagers from Rakita who feared its detrimental environmental effects.’ In the following months the state police and private security were deployed to violently quell the villagers’ protests, somewhat resembling the Bor rebellion of the 1935, however luckily without human casualties. Piletić thus argues that the ‘EU – through its enlargement strategy – has legitimised authoritarian practices in candidate states,’ such as Serbia, where ‘the mandated transition to renewable energy, and the associated rise in small hydropower as a solution for meeting renewable energy targets, has led to an intensification of state-sponsored violence and coercion.’⁶⁴ The Rakita protests were successful against these pressures. As Piletić notes, they grew ‘into a nation-wide grass-roots movement called Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina (Odbranimo reke Stare Planine) – a group of citizens who united villagers and environmental activists around the common goal of contesting SHPPs.’⁶⁵ The protestors celebrated, as the construction of the SHPP Zvonce was halted.

Halted were, too, in December 2022, the further works on the construction of the extremely environmentally detrimental lithium mine in Serbia’s Jadar valley – a \$2.4bn project by the Anglo-Australian conglomerate Rio Tinto, backed by the Serbian government and endorsed by the European Commission. In a mass environmental protest, tens of thousands of people blocked roads and motorways across Serbia for days. As historian Vladimir Unkovski-Korica noted, in so doing they ‘also managed to force [the government] to back down on its plans to pass two controversial pieces of government legislation. The environmental movement thwarted plans for a law that would have made it easier for the state to confiscate private land and hand it over to investors.’ Rio Tinto’s project yielded, Unkovski-Korica notes, ‘[t]emporarily giving in to the demands of the environmental protestors was a logical move.’⁶⁶

‘Temporarily’ was the operative word here. The Serbian government has navigated the tempestuous waters of public dissent and the remarkable resolve of the local people and activists mobilised around the goal of preventing Rio Tinto to lay waste on the local environment on the one hand, and fulfilling the contract it has with Rio Tinto on the other. As such it has been attempting to bring together the irreconcilables in its populist dance: striking and maintaining the deal with the mighty multinational while avoiding being held to account by its citizens. The thin veil of the Serbian government’s 2022 promise that there will be no further lithium related exploitation soon lifted. In 2024 it transpired that not only Rio Tinto did not halt the plans of lithium extraction in the middle of this densely populated area in the western Serbia, but that it continued land appropriation and mineral exploration, taking a major part of the whooping sixfold increase in foreign investments in mining in the country.⁶⁷

What brought the 2022 protests together was a network which supported the locals of the Jadar valley, consisting of grass-roots, small, and local environmental organisations. At the *Nije Filozofski ćutati* (Keeping Quiet Isn’t Philosophical) forum, Ratko Ristić, Dean of the Faculty of Forestry at the

⁶³ Aleksandra Piletić, ‘Renewable energy and EU-led authoritarian neoliberalization: small hydropower in Rakita, Serbia and the upscaling of environmental struggles’, *Globalizations* (2023) pp.1-16, p5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁶⁶ Vladimir Unkovski-Korica, ‘Mining Companies and the EU Want Serbia’s Lithium’ *Jacobin* 01.18.2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/01/serbian-lithium-rio-tinto-environmental-protest-movement-eu> (accessed Mar 20 2023)

⁶⁷ Aleksandar Matkovic, economy scholar revealed Rio Tinto ‘continued to buy land worth 1.2 million euros in the villages, with further investment of close to one million euros in mineral exploration in Serbia. Out of the sixfold investments increase in mining in Serbia between 2021 and 2023, more than half was brought by the investments by Rio Tinto. See: Aleksandar Matković, ‘Open letter regarding Rio Tinto and the “mining colony that Serbia is turning into”’ *TNI*, 17 August 2024, <https://www.tni.org/en/article/open-letter-regarding-rio-tinto-and-the-mining-colony-that-serbia-is-turning-into> (accessed September 26, 2024).

University of Belgrade remarked on the transformative character of the protests in the Jadar valley, as the force which united a wide community: from locals to academics; from the small grass-roots and local eco movements, to the more mainstream systemic green agenda parties.⁶⁸ However, things were arguably less idyllic on the ground, as some of the parties which Ristić mentioned in the statement were criticised for building their 2022 election campaigns using their involvement in the protests, claiming, for example, that the vote for them ‘would be a vote against Rio Tinto.’⁶⁹ Such harnessing of the grass roots protest to further their own goals of obtaining parliament seats provoked further mistrust toward the systemic ‘greens’ in a portion of the Serbian public.

The proliferation of eco movements in Serbia in the last several years, ranging from the spontaneous grass-roots organisations of local villagers to the systemic political parliamentary parties with a green agenda, is a material for its own study. Journalist Luka Petrović argued that the green parties have abruptly grown – ‘like mushrooms after rain’: some *organically*, out of the years of activism, while the others, Petrović notes, harnessed the convenient political moment to establish a sort of ‘green political entrepreneurship.’ The interest in green parties, as well as their influence in the region has grown in the recent years – with the victory of the political platform *Možemo!* at the 2021 Zagreb elections in Croatia.⁷⁰ Movements such as Ne Davimo Beograd – strong advocates of Serbia’s prospective membership in the European Union – gained momentum and public support, making it into the Serbian parliament at the 2022 elections as part of the wider *Moramo* coalition, which morphed into the Zeleno-levi front (the Green-Left Front) in 2023.

The wider public in Serbia remains divided: the ideas, affects, and opinions about ecological problems, ecological discourse and the eco movements seem to oscillate. To begin with, the Serbian public views the proliferation of the eco movements as ambiguous: for some they signal a positive tendency – the increased consciousness of environmental issues as gravely needed with the escalation of environmental issues in the country exacerbating the need for response. Other opinions range from the outright denial of environmental issues, or at least their gravity, to their acknowledgement, however bound with the mistrust toward the systemic green political agenda. The collateral of this mistrust are often genuine grass-roots movements and citizen initiatives. The set of reasons for this complex political makeup is intricate, and in some ways specific to Serbia.

One of those reasons is, for example, that the Greens were part of the ruling coalition in Germany at the time of the NATO bombing of FR Yugoslavia, a vociferous advocate for which was the leader of the party and the vice-chancellor of Germany at the time, Joshka Fisher.⁷¹ That the 1999 airstrikes at FR Yugoslavia were the first ones carried out by a German Army (this time as part of NATO troops), after the Second World War when Nazi carpet-bombing devastated the city of Belgrade (for which only a minor fragment of the war reparations were paid) is among the stated reasons why local people express doubts towards the political parties with the green agenda in Serbia. For some members of the Serbian public who viewed the Green movement as a pacifist political option they identified with at the end of the twentieth century, this was also a source of great disillusionment.⁷² That one of the leaders of the *Moramo* coalition travelled to Germany as a guest of the German Greens only five days before the 2023 24th anniversary of the NATO bombing did not help the optics.⁷³ Some members of the public believe

⁶⁸ *Nije Filozofski čutati*, discussion forum hosted by the University of Belgrade’s Faculty of Philosophy, ‘Od zagađenja do uništenja’ chair and discussant: Prof. Nenad Makuljević, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NT0qqxlmXAE> (accessed 19 March 2023).

⁶⁹ N1, 04.03.2021. ‘Zelenović: Glas za Koaliciju “Moramo” je glas protiv Rio Tinta’ <https://www.n1info.rs/izbori-2022/parlamentarni-izbori/zelenovic-glas-za-koaliciju-moramo-je-glas-protiv-rio-tinta/> (accessed March 20 2023).

⁷⁰ Luka Petrović, *Mašina* 25.01.2022 ‘Kako nastaju i nestaju zelene partije u Srbiji’ https://www.masina.rs/kako-nastaju-i-nestaju-zelene-partije-u-srbiji/?fbclid=IwAR23PIkRNcjcUrb_kqEN_dMp6alUn3JgrCOJHQ3BsMsag70CqMF_NS7xJ_A (accessed 25.03.2023).

⁷¹ Osmatračnica podcast- “Zeleno, volim te, zeleno” (2. 2. 2022) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sbDc9OqV5M> (accessed on March 7, 2025)

⁷² Dragoslav Dedović, ‘Bombe zapadne proizvodnje’ <https://www.dw.com/sr/bombe-zapadne-proizvodnje/a-48035830> (accessed March 24, 2025).

⁷³ Danas, 20.03.2023 ‘Biljana Stojković na kongresu nemačkih Zelenih: Promenite odnos prema Vučićevoj nedemokratiji’ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/biljana-stojkovic-na-kongresu-nemackih-zelenih-promenite-odnos-prema-vucicevoj-nedemokratiji/> (accessed March 20, 2023); ‘Zajedno’ <https://zajedno-moramo.rs/biljana-stojkovic-na-kongresu-zelene-stranke-nemacke-nuzna-je-promena->

that ‘ecology should be separated from politics,’ at least in the context of parliamentary politics, while members of the anti-systemic revolutionary left of the political spectrum in Serbia actually criticised the seeming depoliticisation of this ‘par excellence’ political issue, clarifying that the criticism of the systemic green agenda is by no means the denial of environmental issues and the climate emergency.⁷⁴

While Serbia’s eco movements have long been divided for the reasons discussed above, activist Iva Marković from *Pravo na vodu* (Right to Water) was optimistic in the 2019 when she observed that ‘a sort of united front began to emerge,’ from the efforts of the varied and diverse (and sometimes mutually contested) actors: from the urban NGO-backed sector, to those fuelled by the enthusiasm and the dissent of the local villagers whose small mountain rivers and streams are jeopardised by the bulldozers rumbling through the woods threatening to pack their waters into pipes.⁷⁵ This is a hopeful notion, implying that though the relationship between people and the environment in Serbia is contested and often problematic, it is also strong and intimate.

CONCLUSION

Quartered between its position of the European periphery, the violent extraction both by the foreign investors and its own government, and the cumbersome past of suffering pollution, ecocide and environmental and economic abuse, the Serbian public has a contested, yet strong relationship with the environment of their country. This relationship, and the pertinent thinking, scholarship, activism and legislation, could be traced deep into the country’s past. The various stories from the text above aimed to illustrate the history of this relationship on the one hand and its current challenges on the other. The story of bombing which broke the scientist’s stone tomb to expose the fragile coffin made of the local endemic tree can be read as a materialised history of the relationship between the mightiest economic-military alliance in the world and the biophysical environments of the countries on the (European) periphery. The story of Rio Tinto’s plans to extract lithium from under the green fecund pastures of Jadar valley, disregarding the prospect of displacing the inhabitants of multiple Serbian villages brings not-so-distant echoes of the European colonial pasts, violent towards the humans and more-than-human environment alike. The case of Bor or of the Zvonce small hydroelectric plant speak to the complex relationship between the Serbian state, the local and foreign investors, the grassroot movements, and the wider public- including the tradition of environmental protests in Serbia from the 1930’s to the present. These stories also show an interesting juxtaposition: of Serbia’s contemporary governments’ open-handedness to the investors and extractors which scholars like Aleksandar Matkovic see as the neocolonial subjugation, as a contrast to Serbian medieval legislators who strictly limited the extraction and deforestation thus preserving the verdancy of Serbia and its forests of birch and oak for as far as the eighteenth century. These processes are contextualised through the prolific contemporary scholarly work building on the important globally pertinent tradition of scientific production from Serbia. With creativity and intellectual rigour, this scholarship also challenges the actors contributing to the current grim sweep of capitalism in Serbia and will hopefully continue to inform further meaningful dissent against it.

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⁷⁴ Osmatračnica podcast- “Zeleno, volim te, zeleno”

⁷⁵ “Vazduh – Voda – Zemlja – Vatra: borbe građana Srbije za zdrav život” (“Air-Water-Earth-Fire: Serbia Citizens’ Struggle for Healthier Life”), Panel Discussion Nije Filozofski ćutati (Keeping Quiet is Not Philosophical), Faculty of Philosophy University of Belgrade, chair and discussant: Assoc. Prof. Jelena Mrgić, 21.11.2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=le22nRoGJbk> (accessed January 7 2023).

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SAŽETAK

Ovaj rad skicira povijest odnosa između ljudi u Srbiji i okoliša u njihovoj zemlji, kao i povijest znanstvene produkcije koja tematizira te odnose. U kontekstu geopolitičkog položaja Srbije i njezinih (eko)povijesnih okolnosti, rad razmatra nekoliko međusobno povezanih pitanja. Prvo se odnosi na utjecaj ratnih zbivanja na okoliš, kao i na fizičko i duhovno zdravlje stanovništva u Srbiji. Drugo se tiče eksploatacije prirodnih dobara zemalja sa srednjim i niskim dohotkom od strane većih ekonomija te njezina utjecaja na okoliš Srbije kao jedne od takvih zemalja. Treće pitanje odnosi se na percepciju

dvostrukog onečišćenja (biofizičkog i političko-ideološkog) među stanovništvom Srbije, kao i na dugu povijest prosvjeda protiv tih oblika onečišćenja. Četrto se bavi znanstvenom produkcijom nastalom u tom kontekstu: u tom smislu rad također ukazuje na važnu i dugu, iako fragmentiranu, tradiciju istraživačkog rada u Srbiji na području disciplina koje čine temelje eko-humanistike. Rad pokazuje da su određeni aspekti te znanstvene produkcije, iako nedovoljno vidljivi u međunarodnom kontekstu, odigrali ključnu ulogu u razvoju eko-humanistike, povijesne geografije i okolišne povijesti na globalnoj razini. U kontekstu suvremenog trenutka, rad se osvrće i na dinamične odnose između pokreta za zaštitu okoliša, akademske zajednice i šire javnosti, s posebnim naglaskom na aktualno stanje okoliša u Srbiji, čimbenike koji na njega utječu te stavove i reakcije, često u obliku otpora, njezinih građana na tu dinamiku.

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historiografski pregledi Srbije, Kosova i Metohije, Bosne i
Hercegovine, Crne Gore i Makedonije*

Volume XX / Number 20

Zagreb – Samobor 2024

ISSN 1845-5867

UDK 33 + 9 + 504.3

Publishers / Nakladnici:

Društvo za hrvatsku ekonomsku povijest i ekohistoriju
Society for Croatian Economic History and Environmental History
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Article's UDC markups / UDK oznake članaka:
Ivica Zvonar

Layout / Prijelom:
Saša Bogadi

Journal directors / Za nakladnike:
Petra Somek, Hrvoje Petrić, Domagoj Tončinić

ISSN 1849-0190 (Online) ISSN 1845-5867 (Tisak)

Print by / Tisak:
Bogadigrafika, Koprivnica 2024.

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ili Vinka Vošickog 5, HR-48000 Koprivnica

Print partially supported by the City of Koprivnica
Tiskano uz djelomičnu potporu Grada Koprivnice

Cover / Na naslovnici:
The Mratinje dam, photo by I. Laković / *Brana Mratinje, foto I. Laković*

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