

*A thesis submitted to the Department of Environmental Sciences and Policy of  
Central European University in part fulfilment of the  
Degree of Master of Science*

***“Preserving the last wild river in Europe”:***

**Political Opportunity Structure and the Vjosa River Protection Campaign  
in Albania.**

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**ABSTRACT OF THESIS**

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for the degree of Master of Science and entitled:

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July, 2021.

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Flowing still almost freely over its complete course of 270 km from its source in Greece into the Adriatic Sea, the Vjosa River in Albania is labeled the “Last Wild River in Europe.” The river and its tributaries are home to a multitude of endemic and endangered species and provide various ecosystems. Since 2014, the “Save the Blue Heart of Europe” campaign is fighting against hydropower projects on the Vjosa River and its tributaries and is advocating the establishment of Europe’s first “Wild River National Park.” This research assesses the campaign’s activity in the light of the theoretical framework of “Political Opportunity Structure” (POS), a concept used by scholars since the 1970s to explain the emergence and successes of social movements within a specific political environment. Through review of academic literature, media reports, and semi-structured and written interviews, the research concludes that the environmental campaign faced a relatively closed POS based on centralized political power and a low number of available access points for contesting parties to the polity system. However, openings within the political structure could be utilized in the form of elite political allies, the judiciary system, and the inclusion of science, media, and international lobbying. The findings of this research might facilitate environmental movements and campaigns that encounter similar obstacles in finding strategies to circumvent them and provide a basis for further research, comparing Albania’s POS with similar countries of the Balkan region in terms of environmental movements and their possibilities for action.

**Keywords:** Political Opportunity Structure, Albania, Vjosa River, Environmental Campaign,

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## List of Abbreviations

CMD.....	Council of Ministers Decision
EBRD.....	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EIA.....	Environmental Impact Assessment
EIB.....	European Investment Bank
HPP.....	Hydro Power Plant
IFC.....	International Finance Corporation
IUCN.....	International Union for Conservation of Nature
NAPA.....	National Agency of Protected Areas (Albania)
NANR.....	National Agency for Natural Resources
NEA.....	National Agency of Environment
POS.....	Political Opportunity Structure
PPNEA.....	Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania
PPP.....	Public-Private Partnership

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Problem statement

Albania is a country still in transition from a former centralized communist regime towards a liberal democracy (Danopoulos et al. 2001). Environmental concerns have often been neglected, and public opposition to environmentally harmful projects has only occurred occasionally (İnaltekin 2016). Public participation, transparency, and involvement of citizens in relevant decision-making processes are also features that are still not well developed in Albania when it comes to planning large infrastructure projects with potentially severe impacts on the communities and the environment (Williams and Dupuy 2017; Manxhari 2015). Albania's strong focus on hydropower plants (HPPs) in their energy mix of almost 100% leads to the exploitation of pristine riverine ecosystems (Schwarz 2020; ERE 2020). As the planning of additional HPPs is still ongoing, an environmental campaign openly contests the energy policy of Albania and demands that no more dams shall be built in the country (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2021a).

One of the most pristine rivers in Albania is the Vjosa River and its catchment. Flowing still almost freely over its complete course of 270 km from its source in the Pindos Mountains in Greece into the Adriatic Sea, it is labeled the “Last Wild River in Europe.” The river and its tributaries are home to a multitude of endemic and endangered species and provide various ecosystems. Since 2014, the “Save the Blue Heart of Europe” campaign is fighting against hydropower projects on the Vjosa River and its tributaries and is advocating the river's long-term preservation by establishing Europe's first “Wild River National Park” covering the whole Vjosa catchment (Meulenbroek et al. 2021; EcoAlbania 2021).

In social movement theory, the theoretical framework of Political Opportunity Structure (POS) emerged in the 1970s to help explain how social movements emerge and endure due to objective or subjective opportunities that arise in the political system (Eisinger 1973; Tarrow 1996). This thesis aims to analyze the environmental campaign for the protection of the Vjosa River from the perspective of POS. By conducting this study, I aim to expand the knowledge about POS in Albania and what factors are utilized to achieve the campaign's goals.

## 1.2.Aims and objectives

This thesis aims to assess the Political Opportunity Structure in Albania based on how it is perceived by the members of the Save the Blue Heart campaign on the Vjosa River and other relevant stakeholders in the political field of Albania. The challenges for the environmental campaign are examined as well as the opportunities that could be facilitated. Since the government's original plans to erect hydropower plants on the Vjosa River seem dismissed for now, this environmental campaign did clearly exhibit successful actions during the course of their involvement.

In light of this aim, the following objectives are set:

- (1) Reconstruction of the history of the environmental campaign for the Vjosa River and the political development around the case.
- (2) Assessment of how the Albanian Political Opportunity Structure facilitated and impeded the environmental campaign for the Vjosa River.
- (3) Assessment of the main opportunities and barriers that the environmental campaign faced.

To achieve these aims and objectives, I analyzed available newspaper articles, media reports, and publications on the Vjosa case in-depth to determine the chronological development of the protests and the relevant actions. I conducted interviews with involved stakeholders of the environmental campaign and political actors in Albania to gain enhanced knowledge about their perception of the Albanian political structure they were acting in. A more detailed description of the methodology applied in this research will be discussed in Chapter 3.

## 1.3.Outline

The following chapter provides the literature review and the theoretical framework. This chapter will review the available literature on Political Opportunity Structure, which will set the theoretical framework of this thesis. The existing literature on environmental movements in Albania and environmental movements against hydropower plants will be reviewed in the subsequent sections. Chapter 3 discusses the methods that were used in this research and what limitations the research faced. Following that, Chapter 4 provides the broader context in which the issue of hydropower plants on the Vjosa River and the environmental campaign against those plans must be understood.

For this reason, the respective subsections will discuss the political challenges in Albania in a more general way, as well as the historical experiences with environmental movements in Albania, the issue of hydropower as a source of electricity within Albania, and the Vjosa River as the main point of contention. Based on this information, Chapter 5 introduces the environmental campaign that contests damming projects on the Vjosa River and demands a National Park alongside the whole Vjosa Valley. Within the subsections, the most contested HPP projects on the Vjosa, as well as the historical development, the set actions, and major achievements of the campaign are described. The discussion part starts with Chapter 6. Here, Albania's national Political Opportunity Structure will be assessed based on the previously discussed information and the conducted interviews with involved stakeholders. Next, Chapter 7 discusses the ways around the encountered POS that the environmental campaign identified and tools and tactics utilized to influence the political structure and open up new opportunities. Lastly, Chapter 8 offers a conclusion of the findings and a further prospect.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the literary background of this thesis and to describe the theoretical framework under which this research will be conducted. Furthermore, the chapter aims to introduce the reader to the already conducted academic work on environmental movements in Albania and the context of hydropower plants and show what knowledge gaps still exist that this thesis shall contribute to filling.

Firstly, I will review the general concept of Political Opportunity Structure, used by scholars since the 1970s as a framework for explaining the emergence of social movements as well as the different schools of thought that formed around this concept and criticism that arose.

Following that, I will define what characterizes environmental movements as observed in this research and connect them to the broader category of social movements. Based on that, I will review the academic literature on environmental movements in Albania and their history. Since this research focuses specifically on an environmental movement against dam projects, the literature review also covers academic work on anti-dam movements worldwide and what factors seemed to be success-bringing.

The conducted research shows that analysis of environmental movements in Albania in light of the theoretical framework of Political Opportunity Structure is scholarly work that has not yet been done so far. Especially in a case study that, at the current time, seems to be proven a successful one, this research might help to understand what factors might contribute to making environmental movements successful in Albania.

### 2.1. Political Opportunity Structure (POS)

The term “Political Opportunity Structure” (POS) is associated with the possibilities and challenges political actors, like protest movements, face in pursuing their targets. According to Tarrow (1996), Political Opportunity Structure can be defined as *“consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements”* (:54). Tarrow is thereby referring not only to formal structures, like state institutions, but also emphasizes conflict and alliance structures that provide resources and oppose constraints that are external to the group. Political

opportunities in this sense refer to those aspects of the political system that affect the possibilities that challenging groups and social movements have on their hands to mobilize resources effectively (Giugni 2009). Thus, POS conceptualizes the political environments in which social movements act (Goodwin and Jasper 2004). Existing literature's conceptions on the topic of Political Opportunity Structure identify four main dimensions (McAdam 1996):

- (1) The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system
- (2) The stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity
- (3) The presence or absence of elite allies
- (4) The state's capacity and propensity for repression

Peter Eisinger is usually credited with being the first one to use the term of Political Opportunity Structure as he looked at how the degree of institutional openness or closure explained variations in riot behavior across American cities (Eisinger 1973). It was Tilly (1978) who first conceptualized opportunities within a more comprehensive model of collective action, which included the following five components: interests, organization, mobilization, collective action, and opportunity. Opportunity in this model "*concerns the relationship between a group and the world around it*" (Tilly 1978:1-11). It refers to how institutional repression, facilitation or tolerance, power, interests, and interactions shape the opportunities for collective action. Giugni (2009) lays out that from Tilly's initial conception, there emerged basically two directions in which the concept and usage of political opportunities developed.

On the one hand, American scholars in particular, have focused on the more volatile aspects of the political environment that open "windows of opportunity" and encourage the formation of social movements and start collective action in protest movements. Changes in the institutional political system and in the configuration of power are hereby seen as the main source of explanation for the emergence of a particular movement (McAdam 1999 and Tarrow 1989).

On the other hand, European scholars in particular, but not exclusively, have studied the more stable elements of political opportunity and used those in their attempts to explain cross-national differences in the forms, levels, and outcomes of social movements and protest activities (Kischelt 1986 and Kriesi et al. 1995).

However, the lack of consensus on the relevant dimensions of the concept of political opportunities led to their immense growth. While early studies of political opportunities focused on a small number of variables, since the 1980s, a variety of case studies and cross-country examinations have added new variables to the original set. On the one hand, this has expanded the explanatory power of this theoretical framework, but on the other hand, it has reduced its specificity (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

The ever-growing application of political opportunity to explain social movement's emergence and success led to it becoming the object of criticism. Gamson and Meyer (1996) for example, stated that:

*"The concept of political opportunity structure is in trouble, in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment - political institutions and culture, crises of various sorts, political alliances, and policy shifts." And further that "It threatens to become an all-encompassing fudge factor for all the conditions and circumstances that form the context for collective action. Used to explain so much, it may ultimately explain nothing at all"* (Gamson and Meyer 1996:275).

Other scholars have criticized the inclusion of non-structural variables into the POS framework without being accurately theorized as non-structural, like strategy and agency, cultural factors, cognitive understandings, and emotions that already exist prior to a movement but are also transformed by it (Goodwin and Jasper 2004; Rootes 1999). Rootes (1999) proposes a more proper distinction between a political system's structural and contingent or conjunctural features.

Perhaps as a result of these criticisms, Rootes (1999) and Giugni (2009), have observed a shift away from the classical term of Political Opportunities and POS in the academic literature. Instead, scholars have identified new approaches in political opportunity theory, from which Giugni highlights the following four:

- (1) *Discursive Opportunities*: Recent theories emphasize that mobilization opportunities have two sides: the institutional side, which refers to factors like the challengers' access to the institutionalized political system and the configuration of power, and a discursive side which refers to the public visibility and resonance and the political legitimacy of particular actors, identities, and demands in the public discourse. The role of mass media in this process to gain visibility is also a relevant factor based on their role as the main arena for the public expression of opinions and a tool to get their message across (Koopmans et al.

2005; Della Porta and Diani 2006; Giugni 2009). Put in other words, the openness or closeness of political institutions is not the only factor that matters for social movements, but also the extent to which their claims and identities comply with the prevailing discourses in the public sphere and how visibility through media attention can be secured (Giugni 2009; Della Porta and Diani 2006).

- (2) *Specific Opportunities*: While the traditional conceptualization of Political Opportunity Structure assumed that institutional features, like openness or closeness, are applicable to a variety of movements to a similar extent, regardless of their political claims, some scholars have tried to nuance this general statement by stating that there are political opportunities that exist for specific social movements or interest fields, while others might face more restrictions in pursuing their agenda (Giugni 2009). Rootes (1999), referring to Kriesi (1995), states that not all social movements are equally affected by Political Opportunity Structure. He is hereby distinguishing between “conjunctural” movements that are heavily dependent on POS, while “linear” movements are much less affected by changes in the POS. Instrumental movements, such as environmental movements, are particularly vulnerable to the impact of Political Opportunity Structure, according to Kriesi (1995).
- (3) *Perceived Opportunities*: Another approach by which scholars have tried to improve the concept of political opportunities is in acknowledging that political opportunities need to be perceived by the involved stakeholders in order to be utilized. So while political opportunities can objectively be present, they can be overseen or ignored by social movements (Giugni 2009; Della Porta and Diani 2006; Rootes 1999). Contrary, activists might perceive closed opportunities as open. For a protest to emerge, activists need to believe that the opportunity for action is given and that they have the power to bring change (Della Porta and Diani 2006). In this sense, McAdam et al. (2001) state that “*Opportunities and threats are not objective categories, but depend on the kind of collective attribution that the classical agenda limited to framing of movement goals.*” In the words of Gamson and Meyer (1996), it is essential how political opportunities are framed because an opportunity that remains unrecognized is no opportunity at all. It is therefore essential to analyze activists' understandings of available opportunities through their perception in order to recognize potential opportunities for their political agenda (Della Porta and Diani 2006).



- (4) *Shift from Conditions to Mechanisms*: A more radical departure from the traditional view of political possibilities came from McAdam et al. (2001). These authors proposed an alternative approach to what they called the "classic social movement agenda for explaining contentious politics." Specifically, they proposed moving away from looking at the conditions that favor or prevent challengers from mobilizing and instead focusing on the processes and mechanisms that underlie their mobilization. They suggested distinguishing between cognitive, relational, and environmental mechanisms (Giugni 2009; McAdam et al. 2001).

When observing the case study of the environmental campaign against dams on the Vjosa River in light of POS, I will hereby, on the one hand, focus on the four main dimensions as outlined by McAdam (1996). Those account for the set environment that social movements face when deciding to engage in the political field. On the other hand, the more recent schools of thought, including the notions of *Discursive Opportunities*, *Specific Opportunities*, and *Perceived Opportunities* will be considered (Giugni 2009). Those take into account the interplay between the political system and contesting movements as new opportunities can arise from set actions and the act of framing an issue differently can alter set structures. Looking at the Vjosa case in different terms of POS shall provide a more holistic picture of the possibilities and obstacles that the environmental movement faced in Albania.

## 2.2.Environmental movements in Albania

This section aims to give a brief overview about the existing literature on environmental movements in Albania. Since within this paper, environmental movements are seen within the larger context of social movements, the chapter starts with a selection of definitions given by academic scholars for the term "social movement." Based on this, the history and characteristics of environmental movements in Albania will be reviewed.

### 2.2.1. Social movements

Sydney Tarrow defines social movements as "*collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities*" (2011:9). Another vaguer definition is offered by Christiansen, who states that a social movement "*is not a political party or interest group, which are stable political entities that have regular access to*

*political power and political elites; nor is it a mass fad or trend, which is unorganized, fleeting and without goals. Instead they are somewhere in between*” (Christiansen 2009:2). In the words of Zirakzadeh, the *“participants of social movements not only challenge decisions made by authorities and make demands on authorities but also try to make lasting, large-scale, and significant changes in the texture of society”* (2006:4). According to Kriesi, who finds a similar definition for social movements as Tarrow, we can understand social movements as *“a group of people involved in a conflict with clearly identified opponents, sharing a common identity, a unifying belief or a common programme, and acting collectively”* (2011:293).

When summarizing those different definitions of what defines a social movement and trying to apply those characteristics to the more specific field of environmental movements, we could define environmental movements through four significant factors and state that an environmental movement is: “A group of people, (1) who follow a common purpose for the benefit of the environment, (2) trying to make lasting impacts, (3) by challenging authorities and elites, (4) through collective action.”

In the case study presented in Chapter 5, the collective challengers of hydropower projects describe themselves as an “environmental campaign.” The “Save the Blue Heart of Europe” campaign was originally launched by the environmental NGOs “Riverwatch” (Austria) and “EuroNatur” (Germany) (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2021b). However, their characteristics fit well with the abovementioned definition of an “environmental movement” and meet all of the four above-mentioned criteria. Therefore, the terms “environmental campaign” and “environmental movement” shall be understood as interchangeable within this work when referring to the “Save the Blue Heart of Europe” campaign. Thus, in descriptions in the context of the case study, it is referred to as an “environmental campaign”, while in terms of the theoretical framework and academic literature, it is included under the term of an “environmental movement”.

### 2.2.2. History of environmental movements in Albania

Within the existing academic literature, works on “environmental movements in Albania” are not very abundant, and only a few papers and works could be found. The subject, therefore, seems to be a relatively unexplored field until now. The most extensive work available is from İnaltekin (2016), who researched the emergence of Albanian environmental movements by conducting

qualitative interviews with people who were involved in those first movements, as well as journalists, government officials, and academics in Albania to explore origin and characteristics of Albanian environmental movements. Other contributions to this topic come from Xhafa and Kosovrasti (2016), who analyzed environmentalism in Albania, and Danopoulos et al. (2001), who researched environmental policy in the Balkans with Albania as a concrete case study. Those studies assert the environmental problems of the country during the past decades and the only slow emergence of environmental movements. A more recent publication from Tsimonis et al. (2019) analyzes Chinese foreign investments in the Balkan region and discusses the case study of a protest movement against hydraulic fracking in the Patos-Marinza oil field in Albania that ultimately led to the stop of fracking activities.

One reason for the low coverage of environmental movements in Albania could be explained by their late emergence and impermanence. Danopoulos et al. (2001) did not detect any organized efforts supporting the environment in Albania until the paper's publication in the year 2001, except for a loose association of academics, scientists, and a small number of nature lovers. To understand the context of the missing environmental movements in Albania at that time, one needs to consider the country's historical past. During the years after WW2, the country was ruled by a centralized communist regime under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, which lasted until 1991. During this time, the country suffered considerable environmental damage due to the high concentration of heavy industry, isolation and self-reliance, minimal pollution control, antiquated equipment and technology, and lack of government and managerial interest in environmental protection (Danopoulos et al. 2001). The formation of protest movements was also forbidden. After the end of the communist regime and the start of democratization, Albania inherited severe economic problems alongside the environmental ones. The economy was in a state of near collapse. Industrial production and agriculture were down by almost 80%. Moreover, in 1997, the country was shaken by a civil war, sparked by a pyramid scheme failure. Therefore, environmental issues were for a long time seen as a luxury issue that had to wait until the more pressing issues were resolved (Danopoulos et al. 2001).

Danopoulos et al. (2001) conclude that the communist past of the country, with a high emphasis on quick industrialization, isolation from the outside world, political repression, and the Marxist-Leninist belief that “man” can triumph over nature, alongside with less visible levels of

environmental damage than in the former Soviet Union, and the maintaining of a rural society partly explain the almost complete absence of an environmental movement in Albania until 2001. İnaltekin (2016) and Xhafa and Kosovrasti (2016), however, date the emergence of environmental movements back to 1991, right after the end of the communist regime. The first environmental organization was called “Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania (PPNEA)” and was established in Albania on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1991 and had a major interest in conservation and sustainable development, wildlife management, and landscape conservation (İnaltekin 2016; Xhafa and Kosovrasti 2016). İnaltekin also states that between 1997 and 2001, there were already over 160 environmental NGOs present in Albania.

### 2.3.Environmental movements against hydropower plants

According to Rodríguez-Labajos and Martínez-Alier (2015), despite the current boom in the construction of hydropower plants and the prevalence of anti-dam movements, water conflicts and water-based activism have not been given much attention in scientific literature. Especially the coverage of successful anti-dam movements in developing countries that resulted in suspensions or cancellations of the opposed project has been largely neglected by the scientific community. The likely reason is that such cases are extremely rare empirically (Kirchherr 2018). Kirchherr (2018), analyzing 30 scholarly articles covering the strategies of anti-dam movements, found that only five report a successful movement, resulting in cancellation or suspension of an HPP project. Three out of those five happened in developed countries, while two occurred in the developing world.

In an earlier work, Kirchherr et al. (2016) analyzed the causal recipes in a national context that lead to the emergence of significant anti-dam projects. While, according to the authors, the majority of scholars argue that Political Opportunity Structures are the key causal condition for the emergence of anti-dam protests, their study comes to a different conclusion. By including the conditions of Political Opportunity Structure (POS), Development (DEV), Corruption (COR), Environmental Risk (ENVR), and Social Safeguards (SAFE) in their analysis of 12 case studies of anti-dam movements in Asia, they conclude that either a combination of SAFE + POS + DEV or SAFE + COR + ENVR are sufficient for significant anti-dam projects to emerge. They, therefore, complement the scholarly consensus that POS is a necessary condition for anti-dam movements to emerge, but is rather a part of a causal recipe that might induce massive protests. Instead, the condition of social safeguards proves to be a necessary one. A lack of social safeguards includes a

lack of public consultation as well as insufficient benefit-sharing mechanisms for those directly affected by the project (Kirchherr et al. 2016).

Xie and Van der Heijden (2010) analyzed how the significant change in POS in China between the early 1990s and 2002 influenced environmental movements against damming projects. They argue that POS in capitalist and (post)-socialist countries basically share the same set of core values. By comparing the anti-dam movements against the Three-Gorges-Dam in the early 1990s and against the Nu River dam project from 2002 to 2004, they consider the severe changes in POS during that period in China. They conclude that especially the factor of “Political Output Structure”, which is defined by the capacity of a political system to implement policies as demanded by social movements effectively, is considered the most relevant one. Other authors that considered POS within their analysis of anti-dam movements include Foran (2006), Khatun (2013), Schapper et al. (2020), Kirchherr (2018), and Borgias and Braun (2017). The general findings of those papers underline the importance of a favorable POS for a movement to become successful.

Scholars also emphasize the role of framing when discussing what makes anti-dam movements successful and combine them with POS in order to analyze the successes of anti-dam movements (Kirchherr 2018; Borgias and Braun 2017; Schapper et al. 2020). Framing is a process in which social movement organizations communicate their main concerns in a way that appeals to different audiences by packaging and presenting them in a different way (Benford and Snow 2000). One of the main challenges of any social movement is to gain public attention and to inspire participation and support across local, national, and international levels. Social movements aim for frame alignment on each of those levels so that the movement’s messages correspond with individual interests, values, and beliefs. A shift of public interest to an issue can indicate frame resonance when people relate to the contested issue due to the credibility of the framing (Borgias and Braun 2017; Benford and Snow 2000).

By comparing the case studies of protest movements against the Myitsone Dam in Myanmar and the Kaeng Suea Ten Dam in Thailand, Kirchherr (2018) highlights the role of framing and its contribution to the success in Myanmar. Describing the project emotionally as a threat to the country’s national cultural heritage appealed to a broad popular base. A shift in POS caused by the political change in the country in 2010/11 created further beneficial circumstances for the

movement. Framing can also face so-called “counter framing” when an opposing party builds a different narrative over the same issue in the struggle to win public approval (Benford and Snow 2000). In the case study of the Kaeng Suea Ten Dam in Thailand, it is described how the opponents of dams framed the project as a threat to the villager’s livelihoods and the environment, while the proponents used a positive frame of dams as a solution for flood and drought issues (Kirchherr 2018).

In their comparative analysis of anti-dam movements in Ethiopia, Brazil, and Panama, Schapper et al. (2020) identify the frames of “clean energy”, “development”, “green economy” and “green growth”, and “modernization” brought up by proponents of dam projects. Counter frames of opponents include “inequality” and “injustice”, often related to unfair distribution of benefits and the lack of procedural justice mechanisms, including access to information, transparency, and participation.

Borgias and Braun (2017), studying the success factors of the environmental movement “Patagonia without dams” in Chile, highlight the effects of strategical framing of the issue in response to key political opportunities. In shifting the issue from a primarily environmental and anti-dam frame towards a master frame of structural social injustice and democracy, the protestors were able to resonate with a broad audience and build a robust alliance structure. When the movement faced limited opportunities for meaningful participation in the Environmental Impact Assessment, the reframing of the issue using legal and communication strategies as well as well-publicized lawsuits created further political opportunities that could be utilized, leading to a successful movement against the HidroAysen dam project.

By analyzing the available academic literature on environmental movements against dam projects, one can see that the number of successful ones is quite limited. POS is often taken into account when assessing what leads to the emergence of anti-dam movements and what makes them successful. The apparent consensus about the importance of correct framing of the issue indicates that Discursive Opportunities are a school of thought that provides a well-fitting framework for investigating anti-dam movements in light of POS. Nevertheless, the more generic notion of POS as a success factor in the present literature and other notions like Specific Opportunities and

Perceived Opportunities should also be taken into account when assessing the environmental campaign for the Vjosa River.

### 3. Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology by which this research was conducted. The study aimed to assess the Political Opportunity Structure in Albania in the context of the anti-dam campaign on the Vjosa River and their interplay. Opportunities and challenges that environmental NGOs and local citizens face in their motion against environmentally harmful infrastructure projects in a country with a short history of democratization are what interested me in this case study. Various sources have been used for this assessment, including academic literature, media coverage of recent events in Albania, available publications from environmental NGOs, and semi-structured interviews with actively involved stakeholders. In the following sections, I will introduce the collection of data, the analysis of the gathered information, and discuss the limitations of the research.

#### 3.1. Academic literature analysis

The analysis of available academic literature sets the foundation of this research and serves three main purposes. First, it defines the theoretical framework through which the case study of the anti-dam campaign on the Vjosa River shall be investigated. Secondly, the academic literature review serves to set the available data of the Vjosa case study in reference to already observed cases or parameters that influenced environmental movements in the context of POS and therefore function as supporting data of the original findings. Thirdly, literature on broader contextual topics regarding Albanian politics and policy helps to classify the emerged themes of the collected data from the case study in the bigger picture.

Scholarly work on the general topics of Political Opportunity Structure and social movement theory is available in abundance, with an established amount of citations for these topics. However, academic literature on more concrete cases regarding environmental movements in Albania, Political Opportunity Structure in Albania, or hydropower in Albania, were much more scarce and only rarely available in peer-reviewed journals. The accessible literature on those topics mainly consists of published papers with few citations and reports published by environmental NGOs.

Most of the academic literature was searched via Google, Google Scholar, and Researchgate. The possibility to use CEU's VPN for academic research granted access to many major academic literature databases like JSTOR, Taylor&Francis, and Wiley Online Library. The primary sources



of reports on the anti-dam case study on the Vjosa river were the official websites of the Save the Blue Heart campaign, as well as the participating NGOs “Riverwatch,” “Euronatur,” and “EcoAlbania.”

### 3.2. Media analysis

During the time between April 2021 and July 2021 in which this research was conducted, the campaign for protecting the Vjosa River against the erection of HPPs alongside its main flow and tributaries and for the establishment of a Vjosa National Park was still ongoing and in development. In this period, major juridical decisions regarding the Vjosa case were made, parliamentary elections were held, and new reports on the topic were published. The research design was required to include newly available information. The main sources for information on the newest events regarding the campaign activities for the Vjosa River and political developments were the home pages of the involved NGOs, as well as their social media presence on Facebook. Here, recent information was available in the English language.

In addition to that information, newspaper articles from national and international newspapers, like Exit News, Spiegel, and Al-Jazeera were analyzed to supplement the information basis on the Vjosa case study and the development in Albanian politics in general. Most of the relevant articles covering historical events around the Vjosa case (before 2021) were found by online search engines like Google. Once relevant articles in a specific online news portal were identified, those media sources often offered related articles to the Vjosa case as direct links. New articles that were published during the research phase were identified through the social media presence of the “SaveTheBlueHeart campaign” that shared new information and news coverage on the Vjosa case actively on Facebook. Also, TV coverage by television channels and image movies on the Vjosa case were produced and made available on the media platform Youtube. In those contributions, mainly the perceptions of local communities were assessed and therefore included in the research materials. The sampling method could be described as “Snowball-sampling.” At the beginning of the research, all available reports that could be identified were analyzed and compared in order to gain a holistic picture of the Vjosa case. As the research went on and more and more repetitive information was detected, the phase of media analysis was considered completed.

The analysis of media reports also answered the purpose of assessing the historical development of the environmental campaign on the Vjosa River since their emergence in 2014.

### 3.3.Semi-structured interviews and written interviews

By analyzing the available media reports on the Vjosa case, a comprehensive overview of the issue could be achieved. To complement this information with first-hand experiences, I conducted a combination of semi-structured oral interviews and written interviews with the involved stakeholders I was able to identify. The basis for the identification of potential interviewees was again the available media reports and press releases. For example, people that were already interviewed by newspapers or TV media, people that were the indicated contact persons of press releases or indicated as project managers on the homepages of the involved NGOs were identified as possible interview partners from NGO side. Representatives of the municipal political level were identified through an open letter filed in 2017 to Edi Rama with the wish to stop the HPP projects on the Vjosa, signed by the mayors of the affected municipalities (Kapllanaj et al. 2017). Through personal contacts, a written interview with a representative of the National Agency of Protected Areas (NAPA; Albanian: Agjencia Kombëtare e Zonave të Mbrojtura, AKZM) could be aligned.

On the one hand, those interviews aimed to supplement the available information on the Vjosa case with more detailed information and personal experiences. On the other hand, the questions aimed to triangulate the information publicly available about the case and to more precisely investigate the Political Opportunity Structure in Albania as to how the interviewees, who were actively involved in the case, perceived it. Therefore, the questions aimed to gain information about how the involved stakeholders perceive and evaluate the POS they faced during their mission. Since the term of Political Opportunity Structure is not a term well known outside of the scholarly community, the interview questions intended to translate the key assumptions behind POS into a more common language that interviewees would find easier to answer and could relate to their experiences. The questions were designed to be as open as possible so that the general core of the question would be covered and that space for personal input and expression would be guaranteed. All in all, a total number of 8 interviews were conducted. The identities of the interviewed persons were anonymized since consent for publication of personal data was not obtained. Examples of interview protocols can be found in the Appendix of this thesis.

Four semi-structured interviews with representatives of the involved NGOs in the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign were held. Those interviews lasted around one hour and were carried out by video-conference tools or via phone. In one case, the questions were submitted before the interview to grant preparation for the questioning. The interviews were held in German and English and were recorded and transcribed.

In addition to that, written interview questions were submitted to members of the Albanian political apparatus, including political functionaries on both the national- and municipal levels. Those questions were prepared in English language and then translated into Albanian before submitting them. The questions were directly forwarded by an acquaintance with good connections into the national and municipal political circles. In total, 6 interview questionnaires were sent, out of which 3 were returned filled out.

Lastly, personal conversations with a member of the Albanian Parliament were held to better understand the bigger picture of the functioning of the Albanian state apparatus.

The interviews aimed to generate comparable and verifiable results. Therefore, members of all stakeholder groups were given similar interview questions in order to examine if consistent themes emerge from the answers and to see where perceptions diverge.

Table 1 offers an overview of the profiles of the conducted interviews' respondents.

*Table 1: List of respondents of conducted interviews*

Respondent 1	Member of the "SaveTheBlueHeart" campaign; international environmental NGO
Respondent 2	Member of the "SaveTheBlueHeart" campaign; international environmental NGO
Respondent 3	Member of the "SaveTheBlueHeart" campaign; national environmental NGO
Respondent 4	Member of the "SaveTheBlueHeart" campaign; international environmental NGO
Respondent 5	Member of Albanian Parliament
Respondent 6	Representative of a municipality in the Vjosa Valley
Respondent 7	Representative of a municipality in the Vjosa Valley
Respondent 8	Representative of the National Agency of Protected Areas

### 3.4.Data analysis and coding

In order to categorize the collected data from the available written reports and the conducted interviews and to connect them to the theoretical framework of POS, the methodology of coding was used. Coding describes the process of identifying and recording of text or other data items that, in some sense, exemplify the same theoretical and descriptive idea. It is a way of indexing or categorizing text or data to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it (Gibbs 2018).

The coding methodology conducted in this research can be categorized as “data-driven coding” or “open coding,” in which the concepts of the different input data arose without a prior conceptualization of them (Cessda 2021). Open coding can be specified as “The analytic process through which concepts are identified, and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The received interview questionnaires and the interview transcripts were analyzed in-depth and compared to each other and to the available written reports on the Vjosa case study. General concepts and themes that repeatedly arose from this comparison were noted, collected, and categorized. Examples for emerging concepts would be when respondents talked about “being ignored by political decision-makers” or how the anti-dam campaign emerged. The formulation of the interview questions and the coding of the revealed data from those interviews went hand in hand. The themes that emerged from earlier interviews were tried to be incorporated into later interviews in order to verify emerging hypotheses about the POS in Albania. The analysis of the perceived concepts is described in the Discussion-section in Chapter 6.

### 3.5.Limitations of research

The allotted time for conducting this research and presenting the results was from April 2021 to July 2021. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting travel restrictions and insecurities regarding health safety, the original plan to supplement the research with a field trip to Albania and the Vjosa catchment to gain first-hand experience of the situation and to conduct interviews with directly affected local citizens needed to be altered. Also, in-person meetings with the involved stakeholders for interviews were not possible. Fortunately, video-conference tools could replace in-person meetings without many trade-offs.

Another limitation was the language barrier I faced when researching official documentation about the Vjosa case. Incomplete translation of governmental websites and documents caused a problem

in finding relevant reports or documents. Since the information published by the environmental NGOs and the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign was made available in German and English, those contributions certainly account for a higher weighting of input data when it comes to this research. Also, due to the language barrier, direct contact and questioning potential stakeholders within Albania proved to be difficult. Thankfully, I received active support from close acquaintances when it came to translating and forwarding interview questions to Albanian interviewees. However, relying on written interviews imposed the disadvantage of not being able to flexibly follow up on given answers like oral interviews grant to do and could not provide an as comprehensive understanding as oral interviews were able to do.

The research period was characterized by significant changes in events in the Vjosa case. New developments needed to be included and complemented in the research in real-time. Also, the case is still not ultimately decided, so no final result about if the environmental campaign proved to be successful can be assessed. However, crucial partial successes were achieved regarding the abolition of HPP projects on the Vjosa River that that can be referred to.

## 4. Contesting hydropower in Albania: Providing context

This chapter intends to provide the broader context in which the assessed case study of the environmental campaign for the protection of the Vjosa River takes place. This is done to better understand the political, social, economic, and environmental factors that influence the conditions that the environmental campaign faced during their engagement.

First, I will assess the political challenges in Albania on the national level, focusing on present issues that result from the still ongoing transition towards a liberal democracy. In this section I will primarily focus on the fields of democratization, corruption, and the country's aim to approach Western democracies and ultimately become a member of the European Union. Since the political structure of Albania is a central focus of this research, having a brief understanding of the structural political challenges helps to comprehend and categorize the case study of the anti-dam campaign in the bigger picture. Furthermore, factors like lack of transparency and missing public involvement in decision making, as well as opaque granting of concessions directly translate into issues of environmental issues like the planning of HPPs.

Following that, the chapter provides historical examples of environmental movements in Albania and essential milestones that those movements could achieve in the past years. Even though environmentalism was for a long time not an institutionalized asset, emerging environmental issues did create active contention and often led to the abolition of potentially harmful undertakings. Therefore, this section aims to create context towards historical environmental movements and strategies that proved to be successful in the past. By comparison of the observed case study with historical events, factors of success shall be identified.

The following section provides information about hydropower in Albania in general, including its history, the legal framework that governs licensing, construction, and operation of hydropower plants, and the extent to which hydropower defines the energy strategy of Albania at the current time. As the primary energy source, hydropower almost accounts for 100% of Albania's domestic energy production.

Based on this, I will discuss the opportunities and challenges that come with the extensive development of hydropower, which is defining Albania's energy strategy for the past decades.

While it has the potential to attract foreign capital into the country, the high dependence on a single main source of electricity also compromises energy security and biodiversity.

The last section introduces the reader to the Vjosa River, the main object of contention in the following case study. By describing its geographic characteristics, the variety of ecosystems, and the biodiversity the Vjosa catchment inherits, it shall be illustrated why environmentalists and scientists value this riverine ecosystem so highly and fight for a Vjosa National Park declaration.

#### 4.1. Political challenges in Albania

This section aims to provide a broader context about Albania's POS. Therefore, it will assess the country's historical convergence with Western democracies and the remaining problems arising from its still ongoing transition to a liberal democracy. The national context in the areas of democracy, corruption, and EU accession will help to place the case study of the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign in the broader picture.

##### 4.1.1. Democracy

As mentioned above, Albania's democratic history is still a young one. With the transformation from a communist regime towards a democracy only starting in 1991, and a civil war happening soon after, the country inherited severe economic issues and a centralized mindset and is still facing its challenges in the transformation process towards a full democracy (Danopoulos et al. 2001; Isufaj 2014). The country has been undergoing multiple transitions since the end of communism: *“a political transition from one party to many, an economic transition from command to market economy, and a social one, from a rural society to an urban.”* (Gjergji 2011:1). But the country is making progress towards increased democratization. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's annual index of democracy, Albania, for the first time, was categorized as a “flawed democracy”, achieving a score just above 6 (6.08) out of 10, and therefore leaving the group of countries who are categorized as “hybrid regimes”. Out of the group of Eastern European countries, Albania now ranks number 13 out of 28, sitting behind the countries of Romania and Serbia. The improved score was driven by several factors, including an increase in public support for democracy. Also, it was argued that the government undertook a series of electoral reforms, with the target to bring Albania's election laws in line with EU standards as the country prepares for the beginning of EU accession negotiations. However, it is mentioned that it remains unclear whether

the reforms will result in completely free and fair elections in the coming years. The weakest categories that influence the overall democracy score were “Functioning of government” with a score of 5.36 and “Political participation” with 4.44. The highest scores are achieved in the categories “Civil liberties” with 7.35 and “Electoral processes and pluralism” with 7.00 (with 10.00 being the maximum score) (EIU 2021). Table 2 indicates the improvements and fall-backs of Albania’s Democracy Index score compared with 2010. Even though the country managed to improve 13 ranks on the global scale, “Political participation” has not improved since then, and “Electoral process and pluralism” has even decreased.

*Table 2: Comparison of Albania’s Democracy Index Scores 2010 and 2020 (EIU 2010; EIU 2021)*

	Overall score	Global Rank	I. Electoral process and pluralism	II. Functioning of government	III. Political participation	IV. Political culture	V. Civil liberties
2020	6.08	71	7.00	5.36	4.44	6.25	7.35
2010	5.68	84	7.42	5.07	4.44	5.00	7.35

Academic literature and reports have picked up issues about centralized decision-making and the lack of public participation. Guga (2018) investigates the outcomes of Albania’s commitment to further decentralize its government functions, especially in terms of fiscal power. Guga (2018) concludes that the territorial and administrative reform of 2015-2020, which aims to redefine municipalities' legislative powers and their sectoral competencies, has not generated the expected result. The reasons for that are insufficient transparency, lack of analytical capacity, poor enforcement of court decisions, and inadequate implementation of the adopted laws. Still, almost 90 percent of the revenues come from the central government’s unconditional transfers, leading to a limitation of municipal entities' fiscal- and decision-making autonomy while increasing the influence of the central over the local government. Therefore, further capacity building and training of employees in each level of government should be prioritized, the author proposes (Guga 2018). Further scholarly papers and reports about the democratization and decentralization process and its challenges, as well as issues regarding public participation and transparency, include the works from Manxhari (2015), Isufaj (2014), Pollo (2012), Dauti (2015), as well as the Council of Europe (2018).

So even though Albania improved its overall performance regarding further democratization in the past years, it still faces significant challenges, especially in the fields of decentralized decision-making and public participation and transparency (Manxhari 2015; Isufaj 2014; Pollo 2012; Dauti



2015; Council of Europe 2018). Until now, most decisions are still made on the national level, and municipal governments still highly depend on fiscal transfers from the national to local level, leading to increased political dependence. Also, public access to information is often limited.

#### 4.1.2. Corruption

Another persistent political issue in Albania is the one of corruption within the country. According to the World Bank (1997), corruption is defined as “the misuse of public office for private gain.” Corruption involves the improper and unlawful behavior of public-service officials, both politicians and civil servants. Their position of power opens opportunities for the diversion of money and assets from the government to their personal benefit, thereby distorting resource allocation and government performance (Muçollari 2018). According to Transparency International’s “Corruption Perceptions Index”, Albania ranks number 104 out of 180 countries, achieving a score of 36 out of 100. Even though the country improved its performance by 3 points compared to 2012, the last years were defined by a constant score decrease since its peak performance of 39 points back in 2016 (Transparency International 2021). Academic scholars investigated the historical, as well as cultural and traditional origin of the prevailing corruption in Albania (Irrera 2006; Prato 2004). Kajsiu (2013) analyzed how different articulations of corruption in the recent past supported different political agendas in Albania and how those were competing to hegemonize the public sphere.

More concrete and recent cases of corruption in Albania are presented by Transparency International (2021) who investigate the phenomenon of “*state capture*’, whereby powerful individuals, institutions, companies or groups within or outside a country conspire to shape a nation’s policies, legal environment, and economy to benefit their own private interests at the expense of the public.” By analyzing grand corruption cases within the country, the authors conclude that state capture in Albania has significantly increased in the time between 2008 and 2019, with the privatization of the countries’ assets and services being a main driver, and insufficient institutional checks and balances contributing too to the problem (Transparency International 2021).

Williams and Dupuy (2017) reflect on the vulnerabilities of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) to various forms of corruption, like bribery, collusion, undue influence, and conflicts of

interests, in the Albanian context by examining their salience through a case study. The findings underlined the theoretical expectations regarding the heightened risk of corruption linked to the role of expert consultants who carry out the EIAs. Also, practices of “copy-paste” EIAs, where sections of text from old EIAs are re-used without alternation for new reports on different projects, as well as the absence of crucial technical data such as hydrological data or biodiversity data, and the inclusion of irrelevant or false information are highlighted as key findings.

The three main areas of concern in the current EIA procedure that the interview partners expressed are:

- Potential conflicts of interests in private EIA expert’s contractual obligations to the project proponent and their role as providers of technical-legal information on proposed infrastructure projects to the Ministry of Environment.
- Accountability and sanctions framework for private EIA experts and the approval process of EIAs. Around 70% of all proposed projects are approved. There are only a few, if any, reported examples of EIA experts being sanctioned after submitting an inadequate EIA.
- Processes for public consultations for EIAs were often insufficiently transparent. In practice, members of the public faced significant difficulties in opposing particular projects, especially when given false information (Williams and Dupuy 2017).

#### 4.1.3. EU accession and policy alignment

Since the end of communism in 1991, Albania gradually approached Western democracies and established economic and diplomatic relationships with the European Union. Over the last 30 years, the country consecutively implemented policies with the target of alignment with EU standards in regard to democratization and social and economic liberties. Democratic features like the rule of law, a freely elected government, democratic institutions, a free market economy, a free civil society were achieved within the years of transformation in the 1990s. However, those changes faced significant challenges in the first years due to the communist legacies and political forces that did not allow fast progress towards democratization (Gjergji 2011). Nexhipi and Nexhipi (2019) provide us with a detailed chronologic history of Albania’s efforts towards becoming a member of the European Union and the successes and challenges the country faced in this process

during the past 30 years. In 2014, the Council of General Issues of the European Union decided that Albania be given the status of an EU candidate ‘for appreciation for applied reforms, and encouragement as well as for increasing the flow of reforms.’ However, remaining challenges for EU accession were also highlighted, emphasizing that further reforms on the rule of law, economic governance and public administration should be implemented. Also, the EU’s estimation that corruption still remains a serious issue in the West Balkan countries, led to an anti-corruption strategy (2015-2020) and Action Plan 2015-2017, to laws on fighting organized crimes, and reforms in the judiciary system. Even though the European Commission attested further progress in Albania’s progress and set the path towards opening accession negotiations in June 2019, until today, negotiations for Albania’s accession into the EU have not started (Nexhipi and Nexhipi 2019; Taylor 2021c).

In its recent report on Albania, the European Commission acknowledges further progress made by the government in implementing reforms related to the EU agenda. However, the remaining issues, including corruption, the justice sector, and democratic processes, are also highlighted by the European Commission and the European Parliament (European Commission 2020; European Parliament 2021).

On the topic of environmental protection, the European Commission assesses that Albania shows “some level of preparation” in this area and that limited progress was made in further aligning the national policies and legislation with the EU-acquis. The main recommendations are:

- To align further with the key water directives and accelerate capacity development of the national agencies responsible for waste resource management and water supply.
- Take immediate measures to review and improve the Environmental Impact Assessments and Strategic Impact Assessments on existing and planned projects, plans, and programs. Especially in the hydropower, construction, tourism, and mining sectors.
- Implement a national strategy on climate change and an action plan for mitigation.

Scholarly work on Albania’s problems with aligning to the EU’s standards regarding environmental protection is offered by Pojani and Pojani (2011), Pacara and Kalemaj (2011), and Turkeshi (2015). Pojani and Pojani conclude that even though Albania has been successful in

adopting new policies and legislation based on EU standards, the implementation of those laws and policies has been weak and insufficient. Also, Pacara and Kalemaj recommend that Albania needs to implement the already approved laws on the environment and improve capacity building in this area. Comparing the scientific articles on Albania's issues in complying with environmental standards of the EU with the most recent declarations of the European Commission indicates that only little progress on this matter could be achieved over the past decade and that environmental concerns were mostly neglected.

#### 4.2. Historical examples for environmental movements in Albania

This section provides historical examples of environmental movements in Albania that were able to achieve their claims. Scholarly works imply that environmental movements in Albania arose from direct issues rather than from the general issues in environmental governance. The available literature offers some concrete case studies in which planned projects with potentially severe impacts on the local environment faced the emergence of such movements that ultimately could successfully prevent the initial plans. Those examples shall help to identify relevant factors that facilitated successful contention. A selection of historical environmental movements include (in chronological order):

##### Tirana Botanical Garden

The Protection of the Tirana Botanical Garden campaign is the first major experience of environmental protection in Albania. PPNEA organized the campaign in 1993 when the previous owners of the land made claims for the property on which the Botanical Garden rests. There was a high risk that the land would be returned to the claimants. A campaign with the target to protect the unique garden was organized and supported by several NGOs. As a result, the Botanical Garden was given a special status by the Government that prevented its destruction and stopped illegal constructions on the property. The campaign can therefore be perceived as the first successful environmental movement that also raised awareness about environmental issues on a larger scale (İnaltekin 2016).

##### Vlora Industrial and Energy Park

In 2001 the Albanian Government planned the construction of an "Industrial and Energy Park" in Vlora due to the severe energy crisis. The park was planned to host a thermo-power plant, an oil

pipeline outpost, and other oil industry components. The park was planned nearby the residential area of Vlora City and the Narta Lagoon, which is a protected area (İnaltekin 2016).

According to İnaltekin (2016), the protest movement against this project can be seen as one of the most important environmental movements in Albanian history. The protests lasted for several years, making them one of the longest-lasting protests in Albania, and were described as unlike any that had happened before. The movement managed to find various supporters, including environmental NGOs, scientists, opposition political parties, and local people. The protestors criticized a missing involvement in public participation and exclusion from the discussion and the decision-making process and appealed to the Aarhus convention. In addition, 14.000 signatures against the construction project were collected, significant media coverage about the protests happened, and legal actions were taken. In June 2008, as a result of the process, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, one of the Vlora Industrial and Energy Park investors, withdrew from the project. Since then, the project was not further developed (İnaltekin 2016).

This protest movement can be perceived as a milestone in the history of Albanian environmental movements because it was the first time a movement mobilized citizens, organized protests, produced publications, and attracted media attention. Genuine environmental concerns were the main drivers of the protests. Also, legal tools were used, such as collecting signatures, referendums, and appealing to the Aarhus Convention to apply international institutional pressure. Even though these protests lasted for about four years, the campaign against the Vlora Industrial and Energy Park cannot be described as a permanent environmental movement since no established movement arose in the long term from it. (İnaltekin 2016)

### Alliance against Waste Import

Another significant environmental movement arose in Albania in 2004 when the Albanian Government decided to allow an Italian company to build a waste incinerator near Tirana and import urban waste from Italy. This decision led to intense protests by a coalition of environmental and human rights NGOs. The aim of the campaign was the abolition of the planned waste incinerator project, as well as to stop the imports of waste for industrial recycling purposes. Back at that time, the campaign against the waste incinerator project was successful, and the Government canceled the construction. However, the import of waste for industrial recycling continued. The

main argument was that the growing recycling industry of Albania depended on foreign imports since domestic waste could not suffice the national demand for the recycling economy (İnaltekin 2016).

In 2011, the government approved a national bill to import various non-hazardous waste for recycling purposes, including a green list of 55 different materials. At the same time, the “Alliance against Waste Import” formed as a reaction to this bill and started protests. The Alliance was formed by activists and various NGOs and argued that customs and checkpoints were not capable of adequately controlling the imported wastes and determine whether the components were hazardous or not (İnaltekin 2016).

The Alliance managed to collect 64.000 signatures to seek a national referendum, which was set to take place on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2013. But before the referendum could take place, the new Government under Edi Rama banned waste imports at the first cabinet meeting in September 2013, fulfilling one of his main election promises. Nevertheless, this environmental movement was the first one that achieved a national referendum on environmental claims in Albania and succeeded in banning waste imports. From 2013 to 2016, waste imports to Albania were entirely prohibited (İnaltekin 2016; Baumann 2018).

However, later publications show that the topic around waste imports arose again in 2016 when three members of the parliament proposed Draft Law No. 92/2016, which aims at allowing the import of certain types of waste into Albania. When shortly after, Rama expressed his support of this draft law, waves of protests emerged again and continue. Concessions for waste incinerators and landfills were again granted in 2017 with the last available information that could be found on this topic date to 2018 (ExitNews 2018a; ExitNews 2018b; Baumann 2018)

### Syrian weapon dismantling

At a similar time as the first protests against waste imports occurred, a similar case caused protests in Albania. In 2013, the UN's request to dismantle Syrian chemical weapons in Albania was a highly contested issue within the country. The possibility of dismantling Syrian weapons in Albania, which has only recently dismantled its own chemical weapons, caused a large public reaction. Citizens feared severe impacts on the environment and subsequently on public health and

the tourism industry. The protests peaked in November 2013, with massive demonstrations in front of the Prime Minister's Office and in front of the American Embassy in Tirana and within the cities of Korce, Elbasan, Shkoder, Lezhe, and Gjirokaster. The notion against bringing Syrian weapons into Albania was also spread through social media and online petitions. Facing such protests, the Albanian Government under Edi Rama decided to oppose the US proposal for dismantling those arms in the country (Xhafa and Kosovrasti 2016; BBC 2013).

#### Fracking in Patos-Marinza oil field

In 2004, the Canadian company "Bankers Petroleum" acquired the concessionary right to the Patos-Marinza oil field near the village of Zharrëz in South Albania. The method of hydraulic fracking was first used by Bankers in 2008, with consequences being felt shortly afterward. Villagers reported the contamination of drinking water and agricultural water, as well as damages to their houses due to fracking-induced earthquakes. The constant tremors caused houses to crack and roofs to open. The local villagers engaged in protests many times, but the company co-opted them by hiring the outspoken villagers and their family members and rented their lands. A fragile compromise between economic needs and environmental concerns lasted until 2016. In 2016, the Bankers Company was taken over by the Chinese Company GeoJade. The Chinese corporation intensified fracking operations which were causing severe earthquakes in the area and provoked the anger of the local inhabitants. The villagers started to mobilize and gained support from a civil society organization called Nisma Thurje (Hashtag Initiative). Their target was to stop the fracking activities in their area and to be granted financial compensation for the induced damages already caused. The action started with a week-long hunger strike, followed by a second one after the Government did not intervene as promised. News articles and related videos about the issue became viral on Albanian social media. After seventeen days, more than 40 villagers organized a 130 kilometer march northwards into the capital city of Tirana to protest and squat in front of the Ministry of Energy until the Government fulfilled three requests: (1) The abolition and banning of fracking by executive order; (2) total compensation for the damages already done; (3) full rehabilitation of the environment. As the villagers from Zharrëz proceeded towards the capital, their plight was taken up by activists, public figures, and academics, who joined the march to raise awareness and show support. When the group reached Tirana, thousands of people joined them for support. After a four-day sit-in at the Ministry of Energy, the Government offered a moratorium

on fracking, full compensation and opened a process of arbitration with the Fracking Company (Tsimonis et al. 2019).

The outlined examples of environmental protests in Albania aim to provide a historical context of successful social movements. Even though environmental advocacy was not an established component in the political arena, occasional protests on specific issues did arise and were also able to achieve their set targets. However, the total number of environmental protests in Albania's historical past was still moderate and experiences, therefore, not too well established.

### 4.3. Hydropower in Albania

This section shows the current extent of hydropower development in Albania and the procedures that have been used to approve hydropower plants. This context helps to understand why the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign opposes the further expansion of hydropower in Albania in general and on the Vjosa River in particular.

Albania's territory is rich in water resources. The average rainfall in the country is 1400mm per year, from which 65-75% falls during the winter months (Xhitoni 2013). The country is rich in rivers with more than 152 rivers and torrents which form the eight main rivers: Drin, Buna, Vjosa, Semani, Mati, Shkumbini, Ishimi, and Erzeni (see Figure 1, Table 3). Although with relatively small flows, their considerable cascades provide the country with significant potential for hydropower development (Albanian Energy Association 2012).



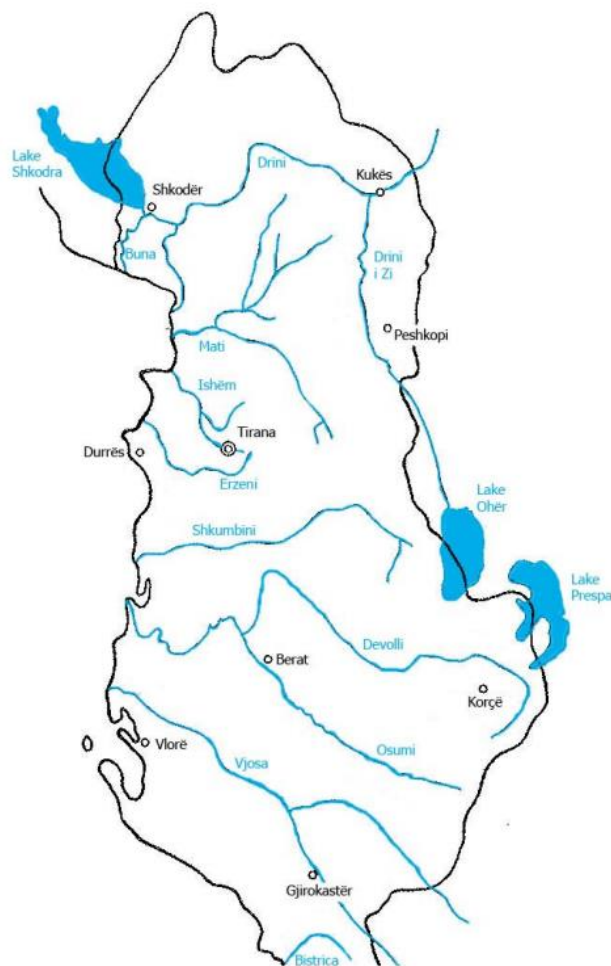


Figure 1: Albania's main rivers (Xhitoni 2013)

Table 3: Main hydrologic characteristics of Albania's main rivers (Albanian Energy Association 2012)

River	Length in km	Catchment area [km <sup>2</sup> ]	Average flow [m <sup>3</sup> /s]	Module of flow [l/s/km <sup>2</sup> ]	Ratio Max/Min flow
Buna	41	5.287	320	-	5,3
Drin	285	14.173	352	24,8	5,1
Mat	115	2.441	103	42,6	9,3
Ishmi	74	673	20,9	31,0	5,9
Erzen	109	760	18,1	24,0	11,2
Shkumbin	181	2.441	64,5	25,2	13,2
Seman	281	5.649	95,7	16,9	13,7
Vjosa	272	6.706	195	29,1	7,2

The hydropower sector in Albania began to develop in 1952 when the Selita hydropower plant with an installed capacity of 5 MW started operation. In 1958, the Ulza HPP was put into operation, with an installed capacity of 25 MW. Following the erection of the Shkopet, Bistrica I, and Bistrica II hydroelectric power plants and the Fier thermal power plant, the power generation per capita

reached 500 kWh. In the years 1971, 1978, and 1985, three of the largest HPPs were put into operation: Vau i Dejës (with an installed capacity of 250 MW), Fierza (500 MW), and Koman (600 MW). During this period, 90 other small hydroelectric power plants were also constructed. However, from 1985 to 2007, no further development of HPP projects has been marked (Albanian Energy Association 2012).

From 2008 onwards, Albania followed a proactive policy on the erection of new HPP alongside its rivers by granting concessions to private companies. Until 2013 the concession and operation of hydropower plants were regulated by Law No. 9663, dated 18<sup>th</sup> December 2006 “On Concession” and the accompanying regulation “On the evaluation and granting of concession”, approved by Decision No. 1701, on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2012. According to this regulation, the concessionaire finances the construction of the HPP and benefits from its operation and the sale of the generated electricity. The sale is guaranteed by Power-Purchase-Agreements between the operator and the wholesale public suppliers, based on fixed feed-in tariffs defined by the energy regulator (WWF Adria and Eco-Albania 2020).

In May 2013, the original concession law was replaced by Law No. 123/2013 “On Concessions and Public-Private Partnership” and the accompanying Regulations “For the evaluation and granting of concessions and public-private partnership” approved with Council of Ministers Decision (CMD.) No. 575 on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2013. In this attempt to harmonize the national law with the EU Directive 2004/18/EC10, the concept of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) was introduced. Also, the extension of rights, responsibilities, and allocation of each party during the concession period was defined (WWF Adria and Eco-Albania 2020).

The Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy may identify areas for concessions by reviewing unsolicited proposals from private investors or other government institutions and non-governmental organizations. Before announcing the concession opportunities of an HPP, the Ministry has to ensure that the technical feasibility as well as economic, environmental, and social impacts are in accordance with the applicable laws. Therefore, the project proposal undergoes a technical evaluation following the CMD- No 191 22 March 2007 “For the establishment of state technical opposition for the construction of projects of HPP under concession”. This evaluation is carried out by experts in the fields of hydro-energy, geology, and environment appointed by the

responsible Minister and approved by National Agency for Natural Resources (NANR) in accordance with Law No. 111/2012, dated 15<sup>th</sup> November 2012, “On Integrated Water Management” and Law No. 8402, dated 10<sup>th</sup> September, 1998 “On the control and regulation of construction works” (WWF Adria and Eco-Albania 2020).

As soon as project proposals turn into concession opportunities, the Ministry has to invite all interested applicants to a tender procedure published through a contract notice, following Law No. 9643 dated on 20<sup>th</sup> November, 2006, “On Public Procurement”(WWF Adria and Eco-Albania 2020). Figure 2 provides an overview of the granting and monitoring procedure for the concession of HPP in Albania.

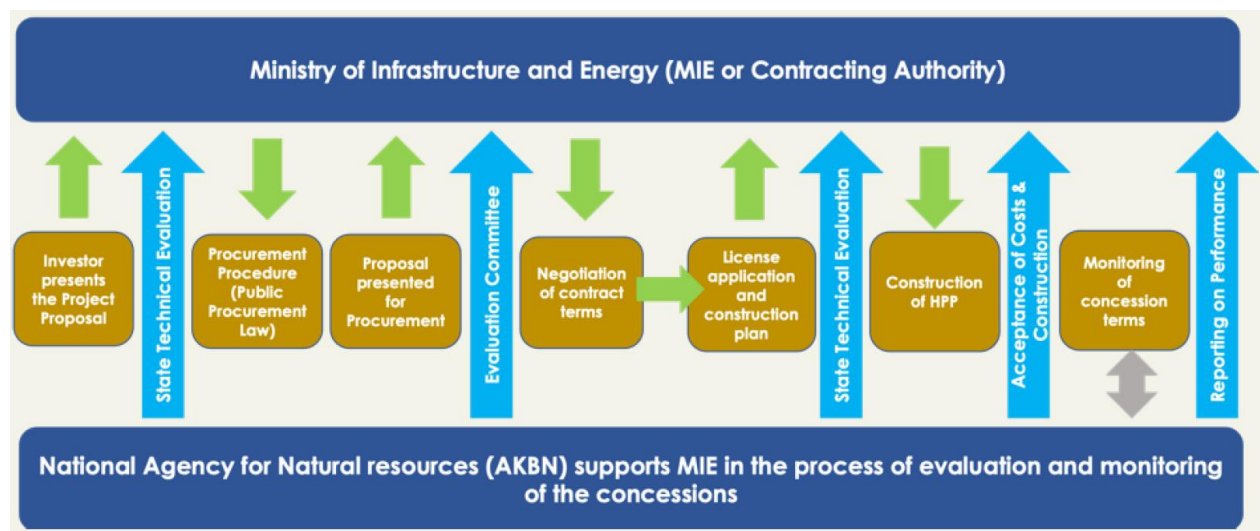


Figure 2: Granting and monitoring process of HPP concessions (WWF Adria and Eco-Albania 2020)

In addition to the existing concession laws, in 2015, the Decision of the Council of Ministers 822/2015 “On the approval of procedures for building new capacity with are not subject of concessions” was adopted. According to this decision, hydropower plants with an installed capacity below 2MW are allowed approval without passing a competitive concession procedure (Rama 2019; WWF Adria and Eco-Albania 2020). The procedure for issuing small HPP under 2 MW is thereby a reduced version of the one described in Figure 2. The process does not go through public procurement and therefore starts with the proposal of the project by the private developer to the public authority. The permission is issued only by a document of approval by the Minister of Energy and Infrastructure (WWF Adria and Eco-Albania 2020).

Currently, a total number of 290 hydropower plants are operating in Albania (Schwarz 2020), with a total installed capacity of 2.193 MW (IHA 2021). In addition to that, 410 new HPP are planned at the current time, and 24 new ones are under construction. From those power plants already in operation, only around 10% account for an installed capacity that is higher than 10 MW. Similarly, around 92% of all HPPs currently planned are categorized as small hydropower plants with a capacity smaller than 10 MW. Considering all stages of HPP projects, a total sum of around 724 hydropower plants is currently approved in Albania (Schwarz 2020). The highest numbers of new concessions and awarding correlate with election years in the country - 2009 (149 concessions), 2013 (106 concessions), and 2017 (19 concessions and 60 approvals). Until 2019, already 223 HPPs have been approved outside the concession system (Rama 2019; WWF Adria and Eco-Albania 2020). Figure 3 shows the extent of HPP development in Albania so far.

The country's focus on HPP development can also be perceived in its electricity mix. In 2019, the country generated over 99% of its domestic electricity by hydropower (ERE 2020).

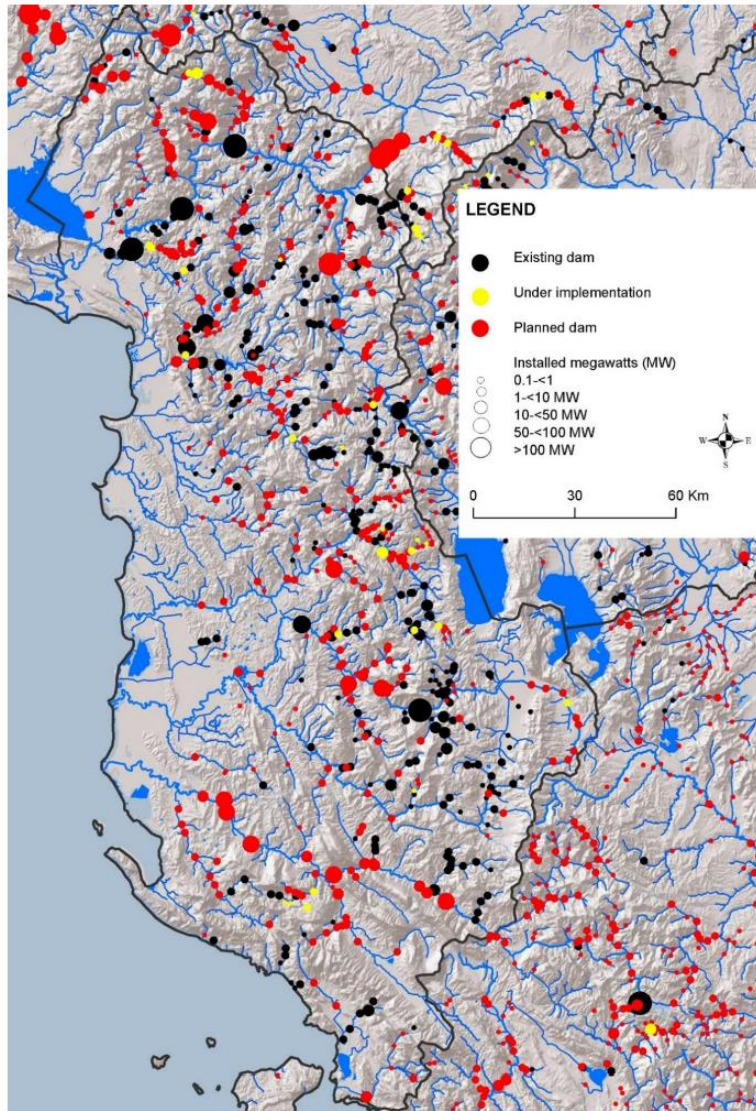


Figure 3: Distribution of HPP in Albania (Schwarz 2020)

#### 4.4. Opportunities and challenges of HPP in Albania

Large single projects or the accumulation of many smaller projects will significantly influence the economic, social, and natural environment of a country. In this chapter, I want to review some opportunities and challenges that the intense focus on hydropower as the main source of electricity holds for Albania and the trade-offs that come with this strategy.

##### 4.4.1. Opportunities

Albania, being a country that only recently transformed into a democracy, coming out of a centralized system, has faced several economic and governance challenges over the past decade. A small market poses problems in creating sufficient economies of scale. Facing economic

competition from other Western Balkan states and an informal economy, Albania needed to find a niche in the market to guarantee economic development. Further problems in the national economy and governance include a low export rate, decreasing remittances, and low efficiency in tax collection, which led to a poor public finance situation. The introduction of Private-Public Partnerships (PPP) offered an opportunity to incentivize foreign investments into the national economy. The high potential of hydropower development is one opportunity Albania made use of to attract foreign investments and to improve the national energy infrastructure (Kraja 2014).

Hydropower is generally considered a source of renewable energy without the emission of climate-harming greenhouse gases. For this reason, projects for the further expansion of HPP in Albania were also funded by Development Banks like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC). The major foreign private investors come from Austria, Israel, Italy, Norway, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (Sikorova and Gallop 2015).

The country is facing an increasing domestic demand for electricity and follows its target to increase its influence in the regional energy market and its national energy security and to avoid electricity blackouts. Therefore, the development of further HPP offers a reliable and stable source of energy, which is less fluctuating than other renewable sources of energy, like solar and wind, and is also offering the most economical and efficient way of producing renewable electricity. (Dërmyshi and Hoxha 2017; Peters et al. 2021).

#### 4.4.2. Challenges

However, the excessive development of hydropower plants that currently takes place in Albania and the technology in general also comes with significant trade-offs that need to be taken into account when assessing their development.

First of all, following an energy strategy that only relies on a single source of energy can impose long-term insecurities in the security of supply. While it is true that hydropower offers a less fluctuating source of energy compared to other renewables, it still depends on the seasonal change in the availability of water. Seasons with low precipitation will negatively affect the annual domestic energy production. Varieties in energy production are already very high when comparing

the monthly generation throughout the year, where electricity output in the summer months is significantly lower than in the winter months. Also in the long term, comparing consecutive years, a significant fluctuation in energy output can be observed (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). Effects of climate change, causing less precipitation and more prolonged droughts, are expected to make these fluctuations in energy production even worse (Pacara 2016; ERE 2020). By over-relying on hydropower, Albania is making itself vulnerable to climate change. A higher diversification to other sources of renewable sources of energy like solar and wind, which both also offer great potential due to Albania's Mediterranean climate, would benefit the countries energy security in the long term (IRENA 2021).

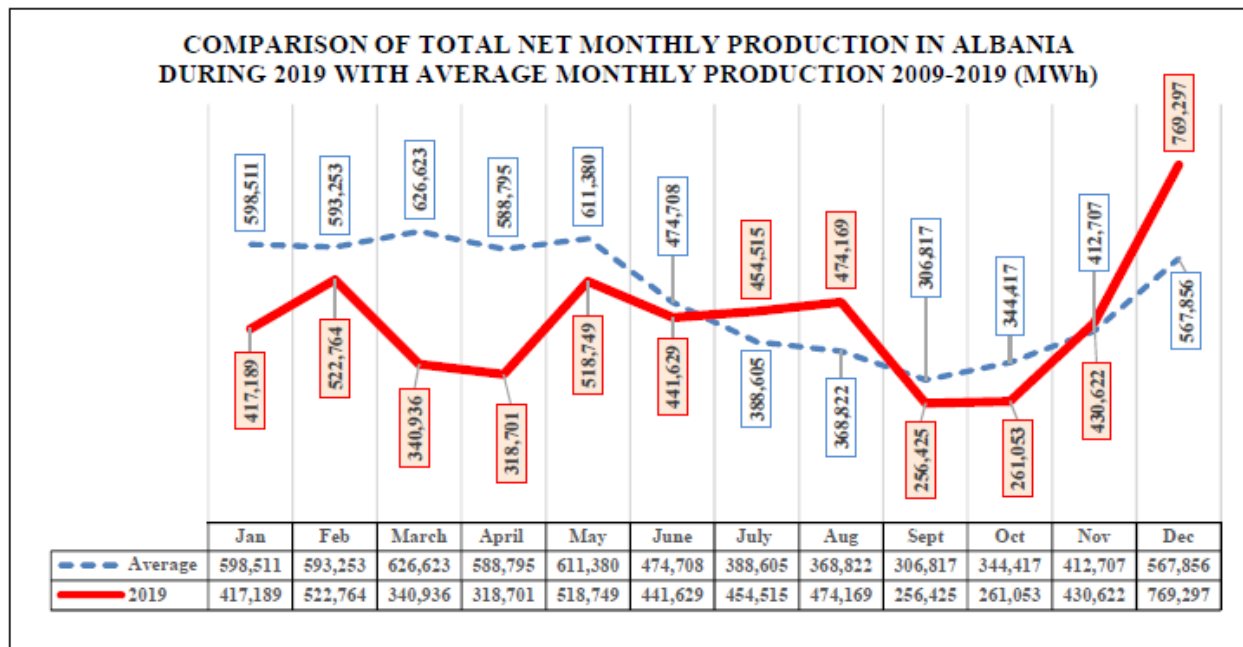
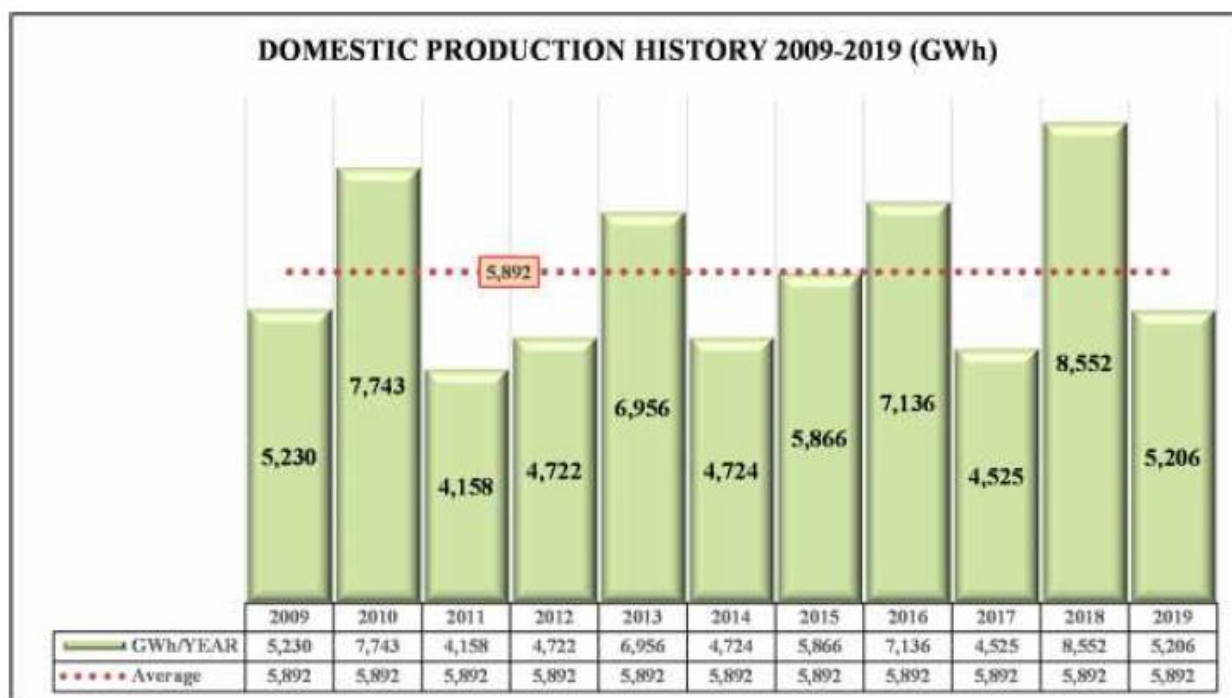


Figure 4: Albania's domestic electricity production for 2019, compared with the long-term average 2009-2019 (ERE 2020)





*Figure 5: Albania's domestic yearly electricity production 2009-2019 (ERE 2020)*

Secondly, even though hydropower is a renewable source of energy, there is an increasing opposition to the view that it also offers a sustainable source of electricity. The main arguments of environmentalists opposing the development of hydropower plants on rivers circle around the major impacts hydropower plants have on the local ecosystems in which they are erected. HPP development is often accompanied by severe ramifications on flora and fauna and impacts the functioning of riverine ecosystems. Water and sediment connectivity are disturbed, fluvial geomorphology is altered, biodiversity is threatened due to habitat reduction and fragmentation, and disruption in inherent processes like energy flow and nutrient cycling occurs (Peters et al. 2021; Ru et al. 2020). These effects are not exclusive to large HPP, but studies show that the cumulative effects of small HPP exceed the impact of single large HPPs when normalized to capacity (Peters et al. 2021).

Thirdly, besides their impacts on the local ecosystems, hydropower plants also impose significant consequences for local communities and people profiting from riverine ecosystem services. Therefore the construction of hydropower plants is often a cause of protest from directly affected or concerned citizens. Sometimes those protests can shift into conflicts that lead to arrests, detentions, or casualties. An assessment study by Quendro et al. (2017) mapped 18 cases of



hydropower conflicts in Albania during the years between 2012 and 2016. During this period, 34 people were detained as a result of arising conflicts. Also, six casualties have been registered in connection to HPP projects (4 work accidents; 1 conflict borne; 1 murder attempt) (Quendro et al. 2017). When addressing water- and environmental conflicts, different social groups and communities face varying degrees of difficulty in accessing, controlling, and maintaining their cultural and economic values associated with the impacted water resources.

In all of the analyzed conflict cases by Quendro et al. (2017), the most vulnerable groups are usually rural communities, small villages, or communities whose lifestyles are inextricably linked to water resources for their sustenance. Especially the transformation and appropriation of the local territory and ecosystem by energy companies displace and strips their traditional rights and threatens their social structure and cohesion. Water sharing rights and irrigation water were identified as the most serious threats to those rural Albanian communities in relation to HPP projects. Also, the lack of information and public consultation within the process have been recognized as a common cause for conflict. The major impacts rural communities feared from the erection of HPP were the loss of landscape and biodiversity, as well as deforestation and reduced hydrological connectivity, surface water pollution, food insecurity, and flooding. However, the study, unfortunately, concludes that in none of those 18 analyzed cases, the involved parties (private concessionaires, community, and public authorities) reached the stage of a formal cooperative agreement after the emergence of protests and contestations by local people (Quendro et al. 2017).

Pacara (2016) also highlights the lack of information towards local communities and the flaws in conducting the standard procedures set by national laws before environmental permits for the erection of small HPP were granted in protected areas. Often, communities learned about an HPP being built just after the construction started. For example, Pacara describes the case on the Shebenik-Jabllanicë National Park, where small hydropower plants were erected, as follows:

*“There has been no public hearing and informing about the project and on the risks it brings to the environment and to the economy of the communities affected. Documents which claimed that public hearings had been conducted were signed by local community councilors who did not understand or know what the project would be about and what its impact would be on them.” (Pacara 2016:77)*

Besides the fact that no hydropower permits should be granted in a National Park at first, already erected HPPs did not also follow the criteria of the environmental permits. In many cases, the river's entire flow has been deviated into tubes to drive the turbines, leaving the riverbed dry – although the environmental permits require small HPPs to allow at least 30% of the water in the riverbed. It

is described that as a result, the National Park ecosystem has been damaged, and the crops and livestock of local farmers have suffered due to water shortages (Pacara 2016).

## 4.5. The Vjosa River

This section introduces the Vjosa River, the main object of contention in the assessed case study. Here, the geographic characteristics, the variety of ecosystems, and the biodiversity of the Vjosa catchment are described. This shall illustrate why environmentalists and scientists value this riverine ecosystem so highly and fight for a Vjosa National Park declaration.

### 4.5.1. Geography

The Aoos-Vjosa River flows over 270 km from its source in the Pindos Mountains in Greece through the South of Albania into the Adriatic Sea. During its course, it follows a Southeast – Northwest direction. The river's first 80 kilometers are located in Greece, where the river is called Aoos. In Albania, the river is known under the name of Vjosa. The total catchment size is around 6.700 km<sup>2</sup>, of which 4.365 km<sup>2</sup> are on Albanian territory. Figure 6 provides an overview of the catchment of the Vjosa River and its main tributaries. In Greece, the Aoos flows through the Vikos-Aoos National Park, a landscape characterized by deep gorges. A major tributary, the Sarandoporo, combines with the Aoos at the Albanian border to form the Vjosa. Over its course, the channel pattern of the Vjosa changes. In the upper section, the river follows a sequence of steep canyons between Permet, Kelcyra and Dragot interspersed with areas of large alluvial fans and islands. After Dragot, the river valley widens, except for the gorges of Kalivac and Pocem. Wide gravel and sand bars created by the braiding river dominate the fluvial landscape after Tepelena, both before and after the confluence with the river Drino. After the city of Selenica, the watershed slope decreases, the valley widens, and the river starts meandering. The Vjosa discharges into the Adriatic Sea north of the Narta Lagoon, which is a managed “Natural Reserve.” The main tributaries of the Vjosa are the Sarandoporo, Lengarica, Drino, Bënça and Shushica (Schiemer et al. 2018).



Figure 6: Map of the Aoos-Vjosa catchment (Schiemer et al. 2018; legend from Miho et al. 2018)

#### 4.5.2. Ecosystems

Due to the uninterrupted flow of the Vjosa from the mountains of Greece to the Adriatic Sea and its various fluvial topographies, the river provides a myriad of dynamic, near-natural ecosystems, with clear streams, deep gorges, and extensive alluvial zones and floodplains and therefore grants ideal conditions for a richness of species. So far, scientific knowledge about the biodiversity of the river is still limited, but ongoing research continuously discovers more and more species within the river catchment. Existing studies underscore the importance of the river valley's ecosystem as Albania's, as well as Europe's, biodiversity hotspot. It provides an ideal habitat for numerous species, including ones that are endemic to Albania and species that were once abundant in Europe but are now listed as endangered in the IUCN Red-List. Furthermore, recent scientific assessments demonstrate an excellent conservation status of the riverine ecosystem of the Vjosa. (Meulenbroek et al. 2021; Miho et al. 2018; Bego and Hysaj 2018; Frank et al. 2018; Shumka et al. 2018). Therefore, scientists emphasize the ecological and scientific value of the Vjosa ecosystem because it provides a healthy and minimally anthropogenically influenced ecosystem that has been lost for most of the European rivers due to intensive water management measures. Therefore, the Vjosa can function as a scientific reference site for dynamic floodplains in Europe and as a natural laboratory for interdisciplinary research (Schiemer et al. 2020).

#### 4.5.3. Biodiversity

Until now, a total number of 1175 species have been documented within the Vjosa River ecosystem. They include 299 species of vascular plants, 5 non-vascular plants, 109 mollusks, 516 arthropods, 9 amphibians, 19 reptiles, 157 birds, 37 fish, and 24 mammals. Out of those 1175 species, 39 are listed in the IUCN Red List of threatened species, and 119 are on the Albanian Red List. In addition, 15 of the IUCN-listed and 74 of the Albanian-listed species are categorized as threatened (Critically Endangered (CR), Endangered (EN), or Vulnerable (VU)) (Meulenbroek et al. 2021). Those species which are categorized as “critically endangered” by the IUCN are all in the taxonomic group of fish. One species categorized as CR by the IUCN found in the Vjosa catchment and emphasized in the studies is the European Eel (*Anguilla Anguilla*). The studies stress the excellent conditions the European Eel finds within the Vjosa River due to its free-flowing ecosystem and highlight the viable population and high abundance of this species that could be verified within the River. Available habitats for the European Eel in Albanian inland waters have been significantly affected and reduced in Albania during the past years, mainly because of the erection of hydropower plants alongside the rivers (Meulenbroek et al. 2021; Shumka et al. 2018).

#### 4.5.4. Socio-economic and cultural values

For the people who live along its banks, the Vjosa plays a central and crucial role in their daily lives. The river terraces provide the local villages with fertile land for agricultural activities such as crop production and livestock farming. The abundance and diversity of fish represent a significant economic factor vital for local fishermen's well-being. Recreational tourism on the Vjosa River and its tributaries is becoming increasingly important, especially in recent years, when water sports such as rafting, paddling, and swimming have become more popular. The existence of numerous small businesses and ecotourism enterprises depends on the river. In addition, the river has an emotional value for the people of Albania and especially to the people of the local villages: the Vjosa is perceived as a cultural heritage and the people from the rural villages feel strongly connected to the river. The river is associated with childhood memories and as the main provider of livelihood for the past generations, as well as for the current generation. Many girls today are even named after the Vjosa. For the parents, the name represents the beauty and the pristine nature of the river (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2020; Patagonia 2019; arte 2018).

## 5. The “Save the Blue Heart of Europe” campaign

The Albanian energy strategy and development strategy is, as previously elaborated, highly committed to utilizing its natural water resources for the development of hydropower plants. The Government’s development plans for additional hydropower plants also include projects on the Vjosa River and its tributaries. At the current state, there are around 40 planned HPP projects within the Vjosa River catchment. Out of those, only seven small-scale HPPs have already been constructed on three tributaries of the Vjosa (Lengarica, Shtika, and Çarshova), leaving the river system largely in a natural state until now (Mitre 2020; SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2021). For environmental NGOs, the accelerating speed with which hydropower development continues in Albania, and the Balkan region in general, is alarming.

Intending to protect the Balkan rivers from further exploitation and to preserve them as a European heritage, the environmental NGOs “Riverwatch” from Austria and “Euronatur” from Germany launched the “Save the Blue Heart of Europe” campaign in 2014. In cooperation with local partner organizations, the campaign focuses on four particularly valuable areas: the Vjosa River in Albania, the Mavrovo National Park in Macedonia, the Sava River along its flowing course in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, as well as the rivers in Bosnia & Herzegovina to protect them from further dam constructions (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2021a).

In the Vjosa case, the campaign is cooperating with the Albanian environmental NGO “ECOAlbania.” Under the notion to “Protect Europe’s last Wild River”, the three NGOs contest any new HPP planned on the river since 2014. Among the many planned HPP projects alongside the Vjosa catchment, two large hydropower projects that were scientifically assessed to impact local ecosystems severely were the most contested ones during the past years (Pacara 2016; SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2018a).

In the following sections, the contested hydropower plants alongside the Vjosa River and their history will be introduced. Following that, the campaign’s vision of “Europe’s first Wild River National Park” alongside the Vjosa catchment will be presented. Finally, the last section will briefly overview the protest history and the main events that occurred during that time and partial successes that could already be achieved.

### 5.1.HPP Kalivac

One of the two central hydropower plants that were planned to be constructed on the Vjosa River is the HPP Kalivac. In this area, the middle flow of the Vjosa, the river landscape expands up to 2 kilometers in width. Only between the gorges near the village of Kalivac, after which the project is named, a bottleneck arises. Here, the construction of a large HPP was planned. The Kalivac project was the first HPP project on the Vjosa River, with the concession for building and operating already granted in 1997 to the Italian “Becchetti Energy Group.” The original installed capacity was supposed to be 100 MW with an annual electricity output of 350 GWh. However, the project start was delayed multiple times due to changes in the concessionary agreements, and construction did not start until 2007 when Deutsche Bank bought 45% of the project shares. A few years later, the government of Albania and Deutsche Bank opened a court case against the Becchetti Group for contract infringement. As a result of the continuous interruptions of the project development (including the years 2013-2017), the level of completion of the Kalivac hydropower plant was only at around 30%. The main progress was made on the river banks, keeping the river flow mostly untouched. In May 2017, the Albanian Government cancelled the concession contract with the “Kalivac Green Energy” company, a sub-company of the Becchetti Group. It restarted the procedures for the tender for the construction of the Kalivac HPP. In October 2017, the Ministry of Energy and Industry granted the concession to the joint venture of the Albanian “Fusha sh. P.k.” and the Turkish “Ayen Energji.” The newly licensed HPP was planned with an installed capacity of 111 MW and would have a dam of 47m height and 500m length, covering around 1700ha within its reservoir (Mitre 2020; SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2018a; Quendro et al. 2017).

### 5.2.HPP Pocem

The currently second-largest hydropower project on the Vjosa River is the Pocem HPP. This project foresees the construction of a dam around 50 m in height and 200 m in length. Its installed capacity is planned at 102 MW. The dam would create a reservoir of 2400 ha, of which 2000 ha are currently agricultural land of the Selenica and Mallakastra municipalities (Quendro et al. 2017; SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2018a). The concession for this HPP was given in May 2016 to the “Kovlu Energji” joint venture of the Turkish “Ayen Energji” and “Cinar San” companies. However, it is reported that the company did not conduct public hearings with the affected communities and the local government units. Even though a public consultation meeting was held in February 2016 in Fier, with 50 participants, none of those were from the affected area (Selenica

and Mallakastra municipalities). Furthermore, there was no information given to those municipalities about the public hearing. Environmental NGOs further criticized missing documentation about the public hearing, stating that no public comments or objections were documented. Therefore, no feedback from the companies on these comments was available. Also, the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which was submitted in 2015 to the National Agency of Environment (NEA) to request the environmental declaration, was heavily criticized. Firstly because the information about the EIA was not made publicly available before September 2016, after the commission for the HPP was already granted, and secondly, because of the quality of the EIA itself, not providing a sufficient scientific basis on which a considered decision for approval of the HPP could be made (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2016a). After a series of protests, in December 2016, residents and NGOs filed a lawsuit against the HPP, requesting the annulment of the contract for the Pocem hydropower project. In May 2017, the Administrative Court of First Instance in Tirana decided to declare the nullification of the concession contract, due to a series of procedural law infringements, namely the lacking public consultation and an inadequate EIA (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2017a).

### 5.3. The vision of a Vjosa National Park

Because of the imminent threats that planned and proposed development projects impose on the Vjosa River, the environmental NGOs involved in the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign seek a long-term solution to secure the river catchment from unsustainable usage. Their vision on how to achieve a long-lasting protection status of the river's ecosystems is the establishment of a national park. In their position statements, they demand that the Vjosa River shall become Europe's first Wild River National Park to safeguard the ecosystem in its completeness, including the main river, its tributaries, the watershed and floodplains, as well as the inhabiting wildlife. In their perception, only this designation would permanently protect the river system from further dam projects and other development projects within the protected area (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2021c).

They propose establishing a National Park in compliance with the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) protected area category 2. An area in this protection category is shortly described as:

*Category 2- protected areas [National parks] "are large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the*

*area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities” (Dudley 2008).*

In their proposal for a National Park, NGOs refer to the Albanian law “On Protected Areas 81/2017” that defines the designation, protection, administration, management, and sustainable use of protected areas and their natural-biological sources. Article 16 of this law describes the National Park (category 2). It states that a National Park can be declared on: *“extensive areas, usually not less than 1,000 hectares, unique for their national and international values, protected and managed for the protection of ecosystems, species, education and recreation (leisure, entertainment) and where the sustainable use of resources by humans is regulated.”* (EcoAlbania 2021)

Besides the abolition of hydropower projects, which are described to impose the most severe threat to the riverine ecosystem of the Vjosa, the declaration of a National Park would also protect the river from other imminent threats, like the discharge of urban and rural wastewater, industrial development, gravel mining in the riverbed, water extraction for irrigation, unsustainable tourism, and oil exploration activities (EcoAlbania 2021; Sovinc 2021). Figure 7 displays the proposed size of the Vjosa National park. Highlighted in red is the central core zone (Zone 1), which is covering 263 km<sup>2</sup>. This zone includes the narrow riverbed with seasonally regularly flooded areas in the lowest floodplain areas. The core zone aims to fully protect and conserve biodiversity and ensure an undisturbed natural area. Therefore, no human settlements, infrastructure, or agriculture shall be implemented within this area. Recreational activities based on the waters of the Vjosa, on the other hand, are allowed and should be encouraged (EcoAlbania 2021). In yellow, the zones for recreation, traditional use, and sustainable development (Zone 2) are indicated. These zones shall have total coverage of 203 km<sup>2</sup>, adding up to a total area of 466km<sup>2</sup> for the proposed Vjosa Wild River National Park. The zones for recreation and traditional use aim for a low-disturbed natural area with traditional and ecotourism activities. They also serve as a supporting infrastructural base for recreational activities within Zone 1 (for example, access points for water sports). The sustainable development zone aims to preserve nature and biodiversity in harmony with socio-economic development. This area includes infrastructure for local residents and businesses as well as intensively farmed areas. The buffer zone to the National Park is displayed in purple and should extend over 874 km<sup>2</sup> (Zone 3) (EcoAlbania 2021).





Figure 7: Map of the proposed boundaries for the Vjosa National Park  
(EcoAlbania 2021; Mini-map from Schiemer et al. 2018)

Since the IUCN guidelines also include visitor education and recreation as an essential part of national park management, the national park authority should be actively involved in the management of tourism in the broader region around the national park. With careful planning, tourism activities can be in compliance with the IUCN standards for category 2 protected areas, in that they are (Dudley 2008):

- Based on appreciation and respect for nature and its intrinsic values and providing learning experiences without significantly harming natural assets
- Based on appreciation of landscapes and local cultures
- Not harmful to nature and do not pollute the environment
- Not disturbing wildlife, vegetation or habitats

Sustainable tourism has become an essential part of successful national parks worldwide. By learning from best-practice examples from across European National Parks, sustainable tourism can play an essential role for the national and local economy. The national park label is an increasingly recognized brand that attracts tourists from around the globe and thereby generates revenue for protected area management and the communities surrounding them (Sovinc 2021).

#### 5.4.Campaign activity

The protests for protecting the Vjosa River and against the construction of hydropower plants alongside its main flow and tributaries started in 2013. From 2014 until now, the development of the campaign is well documented on the website of the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign (Mitre 2020; SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2020). The protests originated from the Albanian Government's proposal to grant the erection of over 30 HPPs alongside the Vjosa River and its's tributaries. Especially construction works on the HPP Kalivac, which were already interrupted due to financial issues at that time, and the development of a small HPP on the Langarica, one of the Vjosa's tributaries, were hereby contested. Furthermore, the construction of the Langarica HPP also happened in an area that was already designated as a nature reserve (ZIB 2015; Bethge 2014).

Raising public awareness and creating a substantial scientific basis for underlying their arguments was a strategy that the campaign adopted early on. By inviting scientists from national and international institutions to study the Vjosa catchment, the campaign aimed to increase the knowledge about the, until then, only scarcely explored Vjosa ecosystems and the impacts that HPPs would have on the local flora and fauna. (Botzenhardt 2014; Mitre 2020). From the very beginning, the campaign's target was the establishment of a national park alongside the Vjosa River. This claim was also supported and openly expressed by the local villages' mayors near the Kalivac construction site as well as local business people and residents (EcoAlbania 2014).

During the following years, efforts in informing the public about the issues of HPP on the Vjosa were intensified. The NGOs continued conducting meetings in the Vjosa Valley with local people and the local governments to raise awareness about the issue and their vision of a National Park. Public meetings and information events were held in the cities of Tepelena, Selenica, and Tirana within the "Vjosa Tour" and the "Vjosa Day" in 2015 (EcoAlbania 2015). After the Government granted the concession for the Pocem hydropower plant to a Turkish company in 2016, international protests were organized alongside the banks of the Vjosa, as well as in the capital city of Tirana (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2016b; SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2016c). In addition to public protests, the campaign also facilitated the Albanian legal institutions and, in collaboration with local residents, launched a lawsuit against the Pocem hydropower project. This action achieved a nullification of the concession contract (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2017a). Only a few months later, in October 2017, the Government announced the resubmission of the Kalivac

dam to the same Turkish joint-venture that was initially commissioned with the development of the Pocem HPP (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2017b).

As a reaction to those developments, the campaign enforced its original strategy to close knowledge gaps about the Vjosa ecosystem by collaborating with national and international scientists and publishing numerous studies about the Vjosa ecosystem and the potential impacts of HPP on it. In addition, concerts involving popular national artists were organized in Tirana to reach out to the people on an emotional level (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2021c). Nevertheless, the campaign also discovered and utilized new alternatives. Especially lobbying work and legal actions on an international level were utilized in the recent years of the campaign.

In 2018, the Bern Convention decided to open a case file against Albania and called on the Government to halt the hydropower projects on the Vjosa River after EcoAlbania filed an official complaint (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2018b). During the annual meeting in December 2019 in Strasbourg, the Standing Committee once again urged the Albanian authorities to suspend all preparations towards the Pocem and Kalivac projects until a strategic environmental impact assessment and social impact studies have been carried out (EuroNatur 2019).

In 2019 the campaign also involved a complaint against Albania's practices on the Vjosa at the *Energy Community*. Albania is part of the Energy Community since 2006. The international organization consists of the EU, represented by the European Commission, and Southeast European countries. It aims to extend the EU's internal energy market to Southeast Europe and the Black Sea region. The member states of the Energy Community are obliged to follow the Community's rules, including the European Unions' EIA Directive (Directive 2011/92/EU). The complaint was the first one filed within the Energy Community regarding hydropower developments in Albania and addressed violations of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directive regarding the Kalivac and Pocem HPPs. In September 2020, the Secretariat opened a dispute settlement procedure against Albania for a non-compliant EIA of HPP Pocem (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2019; Energy Community 2020).

In addition to the previously mentioned actions that the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign made during their protests, another promising opportunity arose from the collaboration with the outdoor clothing

company “Patagonia.” The global corporation strongly focuses on sustainability within its company’s mission statement and supports the claim of a Vjosa National Park. Together with the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign, Patagonia produced two movies that outline the issues with dam projects on the Balkan Rivers in general and the Vjosa in particular (Patagonia 2018; Patagonia 2021). As of the end of May 2021, each of those movies has already been watched over 1 Million times on the video-streaming platform Youtube. Those movies played an essential part in making the Vjosa River and its ecological pristineness well-known outside of Albania’s national borders.

On an international level, the campaign also started a social media campaign. It introduced the hashtag #VjosaNationalParkNow for everyone who wants to openly share the claim for a Vjosa National Park, support the campaign, and increase the pressure on the Albanian Government. Together with the produced movies about the hydropower issue, this social media campaign was also shared and distributed by highly influential figures of popular culture. Those claimsmakers also significantly impacted making the Vjosa-case publically known and kicking off further media coverage about the topic. Famous supporters of the campaign to be highlighted here are the Hollywood movie actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Edward Norton and Pop-Music singer Ellie Goulding (DiCaprio 2021; Norton 2021; Goulding 2021).

The possibly strongest political ally within the Albanian polity field was state president Ilir Meta, who also publicly supported the Vjosa Wild River National Park declaration. On September 24<sup>th</sup>, he hosted a scientific round table discussion for international scientists to present their findings about the impacts of HPPs on the Vjosa River. One day later, he inaugurated the Vjosa Research Center together with representatives from the Universities of Tirana and Vienna and the local mayor in Tepelena (Meta 2021; EuroNatur 2020). Shortly after those events, an official statement of Prime Minister Edi Rama was published on September 25<sup>th</sup> on the social media platform Twitter:

*"I agree with Ilir Meta that the future is not destruction, but how good it would have been if he had protected Valbona from destruction when he was deputy head of Sali Berisha's government, just as he protects the Vjosa today from the imaginary danger of hydropower plants that are not built. Our government has declared the Upper Vjosa a national park. Our Ministry of Environment has officially refused to give permission for HPP projects in the lower Vjosa that will be integrated with the park! The devastating wave of the old government over the rivers as a whole has long since receded! (Rama 2020)."*

However, it needs to be clarified that the Upper Vjosa is, in fact, not a National Park following IUCN category 2 and, therefore, not protected from further construction projects. Furthermore, a

few months later, after continuous claims for establishing a Vjosa National park, Rama corrected his original claim and stated that classifying the Vjosa Valley as a national park would be “a bit too much”. Tens of thousands of residents would then no longer be able to pursue their jobs in areas ranging from agriculture to eco-tourism. Rama, therefore only wants to declare the area a Protected Area, which would only reach an IUCN category of 4 or 5 (SN 2021; Dudley 2008). On December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the National Council of the Territory (KTT), chaired by Rama, approved the boundaries of the Protected Area. Maps of the designated area, published by ExitNews, indicate that the spots where the Kalivac and Pocem HPPs were planned to be built were left out of the Protected Area (Rama 2021; Taylor 2021a). Rama, however, repeatedly stressed his original statement that no hydropower plants will be built on the Vjosa but that the designation of a National Park would be harmful to the local economy (Taylor 2021a; Tirana Post 2021).

It is true, however, that the Minister of Environment has rejected the request of the Turkish investors for the issuance of an environmental permit for the Kalivac Project. The Turkish investors contested this decision of the Environmental Ministry in court. On May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the Administrative Court of Tirana rejected the lawsuit by the companies against the Ministry of Environment. The campaign members (Riverwatch, EcoAlbania, and Euronatur) were also listed as joint plaintiffs against the HPP projects and supported the Ministry of Environment in this case together with 38 locals (ExitNews 2021). By this court's decision, the imminent threat of a hydropower construction project on the Vjosa River seems impeded in the medium term.

At the same time, however, in April 2021, oil exploration activities were reported at the Vjosa River, between the cities of Permet and Berat. GEOTEC, on behalf of the Shell company, planned to conduct a geophysical survey of the area after having signed a contract with the Government in 2018 for the allowance of exploration in this part of the country (Taylor 2021b).

In order to guarantee the long-term protection of the River and prevent further exploitation, the campaign continued to express its claim for a National Park. A notably important phase for the campaign was during the period of the Albanian parliamentary election campaign in April 2021. The attempt was made to make the Vjosa case an election issue for the nominees. Ramas Socialist Party secured its third consecutive mandate in the election, winning 74 out of the parliament's 140 seats (AlJazeera 2021).

Even though positions between the Albanian Government and the environmental campaign regarding a Vjosa National Park seem deadlocked for now, the campaign's efforts will continue. The declared goal of Europe's first wild river national park, according to IUCN category 2, is still targeted to guarantee long-term protection of the riverine ecosystem from industrial exploitation. The most imminent threat of HPP projects seems prevented as of now, but in the eyes of the campaign, only the declaration of a National Park could guarantee this for the long term.

## 6. Discussion: Albania's national Political Opportunity Structure

In this chapter, I will display Albania's Political Opportunity Structure, which the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign faced during their engagement against damming projects on the Vjosa River and in their mission for the designation of a Vjosa River National Park. In the following sections, I will discuss the major dimensions that, according to the academic literature, define the political structure that contesters face within a nation-state and put them in reference to the communicated perceptions of the involved stakeholders. For that purpose, primarily the information obtained from the conducted personal and written interviews is used.

Starting with the degree of centralized political power in section 6.1, I will follow on the openness and closeness of the polity system in section 6.2. Next, section 6.3 discusses possible reasons for the persistency with which the national government pursued the target of the erection of HPPs alongside the Vjosa River. Finally, sections 6.4 and 6.5 show those areas in the national political structure where opportunities arose for the campaign, incorporated in political allies and the judicial system.

### 6.1. Centralized political power

An essential aspect of POS is the distribution of political power and decision-making authority within the country. A political structure defined by a high degree of competence distribution offers a higher amount of political opportunities for contesting actors since elite political allies are more numerous. A political system with a high concentration of power, on the other hand, only offers few approaches for political influence (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

In the Vjosa case study, the majority of the interviewees described the political distribution of power as highly centralized, with the Prime Minister (PM), Edi Rama, obtaining the ultimate decision-making power about the erection of hydropower plants. As a result, the respective ministries and agencies were seen more as executors of the PM's political will instead of having their own authority for the corresponding agendas.

Respondent 1 recalls a phase between 2014 and 2015, at the start of the Vjosa campaign, when he was able to conduct personal meetings and discussions with the former Minister of Energy and Infrastructure. Those discussions were described to end with the minister stating, *"You might be*

*right, but the Prime Minister has decided.*” Likewise, respondent 2 observed that, even though officially the Ministries of Energy and Environment are responsible for the HPP infrastructure projects on the Vjosa, their political weight is not great and that “*there are the ministries, there are the ministers - but above them is Edi Rama.*”

Similar to the high concentration of power within the national government in favor of the PM, decentralization towards increased autonomy of local governments is still only hardly implemented (see also Isufaj 2014; Guga 2018). For example, decisions on the construction of the hydroelectric power plants were made exclusively on the national level, without the involvement of the affected municipalities (see section 6.2). The interviews with political actors in Albania support the statements made by the representatives of environmental NGOs and underline the prime minister's high degree of power of disposal (Respondents 5, 6, 7).

## 6.2. Public participation (being excluded)

This section describes how external parties and municipal governments faced difficulties accessing the political system and the decision-makers and compares those situations to the theoretical framework. A lack of transparency and public participation indicates a closed political structure for contesters.

One of the dimensions McAdam (1996) identifies when describing the “structure of political opportunities” is the “*relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system.*” McAdam is hereby referring to meaningful access points into the political system and the party system, as well as the openness or closure of the polity. When interviewing the involved stakeholders of the Vjosa case, the general theme around this factor is one of a closed political system where hardly any access points to the polity and party system were available for the contesters.

Representatives of the NGOs involved in the environmental campaign highlighted their experiences of exclusion and being ignored on the part of the government. Most of the respondents would even describe this structural condition as the greatest obstacle they face during the campaign. For example, respondent 1 stated that their biggest shortcoming was “*the direct communication with the politicians and the decision-makers [at the higher levels]. That is with the rulers and the*



*ministries below them*”. The unwillingness of governmental representatives to enter into a dialogue with the environmental NGOs is a recurring theme during the conducted interviews. Likewise, respondent 2 describes the issue about not being able to enter a dialogue with the political elite as the most significant obstacle and recapitulated about the cause for this:

*“I see that as one of the great difficulties. That we simply did not manage to enter into this dialogue [about the value and protection status of the area]. And we could take a critical look at what part we played in this, or at what point it was no longer possible at all, and why. That would perhaps be quite interesting to analyze. But at the end of the day, I think it has a lot to do with the way Edi Rama sees himself as a politician and the way he acts.”*

The theme that the government is ignoring their voices and demands is a consistent one during the conducted interviews with members of the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign. However, this condition was not only perceived by the environmental NGOs but also by representatives of the affected municipalities.

The notion of a closed political structure at the national level did also directly translate into the general problem of lacking public participation and information when it came to the decision about permitting the construction of HPPs on the Vjosa River in the first place. Respondent 6, the representative of a municipality alongside the Vjosa River, describes how they found out that the HPP in Pocem was planned to be built:

*“We have been informed by the media and by an environmental association that operates in Albania. Regarding the construction of the Pocem HPP, there has been a marked lack of transparency and information on the part of the government and its subordinate institutions. The purpose of all this has been to act in the hidden so as not to have reactions that oppose the plan.”*

In his perception, the government remained guarded over its plans for the HPP projects until the start of the construction on purpose in order to avoid public contention (see also section 6.3).

Respondent 6 further describes that after receiving the media news that the hydropower plant in Pocem was projected nearby their municipality, they demanded information about the construction procedure and requested a meeting between government representatives, the construction company, and local government representatives. But those requests were also overlooked by the national government. Also, filing an open letter to the prime minister, asking the government and its subordinate institutions for transparency and information, did not improve the situation for the affected municipality. Therefore, openness from the national level towards the municipal level has not improved.

The partial information that was made available to respondent 6 indicated to him that the former procedures were not held correctly, especially concerning the public consultation process held with people who were not citizens of the affected zones (Respondent 6).

The general conditions that both NGOs and local government bodies faced on the part of the national government in the course of the Vjosa issue are defined by insufficient information dissemination, transparency, and opportunities for participation and consultation. Information was not provided to the affected bodies prior to projecting the HPPs, and proactive requests for documents and meetings were ignored for the most part.

McAdam (1996) includes another dimension of political opportunity, which is “*the state’s capacity and propensity for repression*” (see also section 2.1). In this light, it is important to highlight that none of the interviewed stakeholders experienced any kind of violent repression on the part of the government during the entire campaign history (in this sense, political oppression of the movement and other contesters). However, political repression did occur in the form of not letting political opponents participate in the decision-making process, not allowing a political discussion around the issue, and actively withholding relevant information from them.

The following section will discuss possible reasons for the perceived lack of transparency and the political rigidity on the side of the national government around the Vjosa case.

### 6.3. Political motives

As outlined in the previous section, the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign and affected municipalities faced a closed political structure when it came to receiving relevant information and accessing the political decision-makers on the national level. This section discusses the possible reasons for that. By summarizing the perceptions and experiences of interviewees, a more holistic picture of the decision-making process on the national level shall be provided. However, since official information on this topic is hardly available and the decision-making processes happen informally, even though the statements from the conducted interviews support similar themes, they could not be officially confirmed.

In section 6.2, respondent 6 sensed the lack of transparency from the national government as purposefully so that no public reaction could oppose the set plans timely. The decision that the hydropower plants should be built on the river was made on the national level, more precisely by the Prime Minister (see section 6.1). Statements from the involved NGOs back up the perception that the missing involvement of the public had the goal to push the already set agenda through and to prevent a public discussion about the issue.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to reconstruct how the informal processes on the national level take place exactly. One plausible explanation provided by respondent 1 was that the projected hydropower plants also functioned as catalysts to improve the economic and political relationships with Turkey. Since both, Kalivac and Pocem, were granted to the Turkish investor group “Ayen Energji” without public tendering (see sections 5.1 and 5.2), the assumption is that this was intended to improve direct relations with Turkey.

Turkey showed to be a reliable partner for Albania in the past years and provided foreign capital for the erection of infrastructure projects like schools and hospitals, and significantly supported Albania with vaccines during the Covid-19 pandemic (Respondent 5). In light of that and of growing frustration about the continuously postponed accession procedures on the part of the EU, and the obstacles Albania still faces in the process towards EU accession (see Taylor 2021c), the decision about dam projects on the Vjosa can also be understood as a strategic political one. Therefore, an approach towards the EU would require Albania to comply with the respective environmental directives that would oppose the damming of the Vjosa under the conducted procedures. In contrast, economic rapprochements with states such as Turkey, China, or from the Arabian Peninsula would require fewer adjustments to the current political structure (Respondent 1 stated that many infrastructural projects in Albania nowadays receive foreign capital from these countries).

Naturally, also direct economic benefits of such infrastructure projects for the local and national economies are major deciding factors. Respondent 4 describes the struggle environmental advocates face when demanding the abolition of environmentally harmful infrastructure projects in the Balkan region, because discussions about how such infrastructure projects benefit the

national and local economies, while environmental protection measures are said to impair the economic development, are omnipresent in countries of the Balkan region.

Some of the respondents also implied the possibility of private enrichments that political elites might obtain from such infrastructure deals, which might fuel the persistence with which their implementation is followed (Respondents 1, 3 – see also section 4.1.2).

Again, the overall issue is the lack of transparency and the informality of the decision-making process that hinders the assessment of political intention for the Vjosa. Respondent 4 also expresses the possibility that historical contractual obligations towards private companies impede the scope for action of the government to declare a National Park alongside the Vjosa River. Just recently, an existing contract with the Shell Company, signed in 2018, was revealed, granting the exploration for oil in the Vjosa catchment (Taylor 2021b). Also, respondent 7 highlighted that some of the existing concessions for 8 smaller hydropower plants in the Vjosa Valley were already admitted by the previous government, which was in office before 2013, and that termination of such contracts might lead to cost-intensive legal procedures for the respective government.

#### 6.4. Political allies

According to the scientific literature, “*the absence or presence of elite allies*” is also a main dimension in assessing the POS social movements face (McAdam 1996). Having elite allies that support the matter might grant entree to challenging groups, while the absence of such endorsement most likely hinders movements in realizing their claims.

The conducted interviews with members of the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign did not reveal the presence of elite allies on the national government level. The prime minister, as well as the responsible ministries, behaved dismissively towards the NGOs (see section 6.2).

However, the campaign could join forces with political allies that influenced the course of the discussion for the Vjosa River. On the one hand, there were the mayors from the municipalities that openly contested the plans and processes around the HPP projects that would have impacted their communities. Even though those actors did not hold the political power to influence the decisions made on the national level (Respondent 3) and in some cases would not take too

prominent stances against the national government (Respondent 1), their involvement directly contributed to disseminating information and awareness about the issue amongst the communities by providing public meetings and seminars. Also, their local influence and open contention of the HPPs supported the formation of local citizen alliances against the damming of the Vjosa (Respondents 1, 6, 7).

On the other hand, State President Ilir Meta was often described as the most influential political ally that supported the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign and the claim for a Vjosa River National Park. The state president openly and regularly advocated for the declaration of a National Park and hosted meetings and seminars with scientists to present their findings of the impacts of dams on the Vjosa River. In the perception of respondents 1, 2, and 3, the engagement of Ilir Meta in September 2020 was ultimately the catalyst for Edi Rama's tweet that no HPPs shall be built on the Vjosa River (see also section 5.4).

However, interviewees mentioned that the state president's political motivation may not have been solely for the good of the Vjosa River itself, but that this case was also used as a political means to an end to counter his political rival Rama (Respondents 2, 3).

### 6.5. Judicial institutions

Another opening into the Albanian institutionalized system proved to be the judicial institutions. Ultimately, the successful filing of a lawsuit against the HPP Pocem led to the nullification of its concession in 2017. Similarly, in 2021, the Administrative Court of Tirana rejected the lawsuit of the Turkish Investor Group against the Ministry of Environment after it had rejected the issuance of an environmental permit for the HPP Kalivac (see section 5.4). According to Eichelmann (2020), the abolition of the HPP Pocem by the Administrative Court in 2017 was the first time in Albania that such a big lawsuit was decided in favor of the environment. Respondent 2 also acknowledges that in the case about the HPP Kalivac, *"It is worth noting that now also the judiciary in the country did not rule in favor of the money, for better or worse, but actually ruled in favor of the facts on the Vjosa."* and that to some degree, the historic decision about the Pocem HPP in 2017 might have been a blessing for the decision on Kalivac in 2021, because the verdict might have functioned as a precedent.

According to the interviewees, however, the victories achieved in court cannot be considered stand-alone successes. Instead, they see those achievements as the result of their work at various levels that ultimately set the foundation for the court's decision (e.g., scientific research, international lobbying, and media attention).

The findings of this chapter indicate that the Political Opportunity Structure of Albania showed to be a closed one on the national political level when it came to the contention of hydropower plants on the Vjosa River. However, the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign did find ways to circumvent the existing obstacles they faced during the campaign period. Ultimately, openings in the institutional settings (mostly incorporated in political allies and the judicial system) could be utilized accordingly. The following chapter shall discuss what additional ways around the existing political structure could be identified and utilized by the NGOs in order to lend weight to their demands and create new opportunities within the encountered structure.

## 7. Discussion: Utilizing opportunities

The findings presented in the previous section indicate that the national political structure of Albania was mostly closed towards the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign. Facing a highly centralized distribution of political power as well as the exclusion from the decision-making processes, relevant information, and consultation, the environmental campaign was required to find ways around the predefined structure. On the other hand, some openings in the national political structure, like political allies and the judicial system, could be harnessed to advance the campaign's mission. This section analyzes the additional tools that the campaign was able to utilize outside of the national political structure to shape the encountered political structure and open up new opportunities.

### 7.1. Protecting the Vjosa River - Perceived Opportunities

When applying the more classical definition of POS, provided by Tarrow (1996), as *“consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements”* (:54), one could assume that the national signals to the environmental NGOs were rather discouraging than encouraging and that under the encountered political situation the formation of a lasting environmental movement would not have happened.

When inquiring the respondents about the start of the environmental campaign in Albania and why the campaign formed initially and decided to fight for the preservation of the Vjosa, none of the interviewees indicated considerations about the political structure and the chances such an environmental campaign might find within this structure. So when asking how the campaign formed in the first place despite the discouraging Political Opportunity Structure, the application of the concept of Perceived Opportunities seems more fitting. Within this concept, it is assumed that for a protest to emerge, activists need to believe that the opportunity for action is given and that they have the power to bring change. It is therefore essential to analyze activists' understandings of available opportunities through their perception in order to recognize potential opportunities for their political agenda (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

As described in chapter 5, the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign was initially founded to protect the rivers of the whole Balkan region, focusing on particularly valuable areas like the Vjosa River in

Albania and the Sava River in Slovenia. The decision that increased resources should be invested into the protection of the Vjosa River was made when it was observed that the original plans for the construction of the Kalivac dam under the Becchetti group were not realized and that the HPP remained unfinished for a long time (see section 5.1).

*“So then he [Becchetti] did not show up there anymore - and that's when we saw the great opportunity and said: 'Look, they have started, but nothing has happened to the river because they have only done a bit of work on the left and right. And that is why the opportunity is there.' And then we also said relatively quickly that something like this is so special that you have to give it a special protection status.” (Respondent 1)*

The establishment of Europe’s first Wild River National Park and the sustainable protection of the Vjosa River itself are perceived as the main opportunities and motives that are worth fighting for. Here, emotional factors and the felt obligation to preserve this pristine ecosystem from exploitation obtain a significant share in the overall motivation to start and continue the campaign. The environmental NGOs were aware that they face a fight “David vs. Goliath” (EuroNatur 2016).

## 7.2. Scientific foundation of claims

In order to lend force to their claims, the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign started early to back their demands up with a scientific foundation. For this reason, they invited national and international scientists to examine the Vjosa River and assess flora and fauna and the different ecosystems and their current conditions. Biologists and hydromorphologists determined dire consequences for the local ecosystems if the planned HPPs would arise in the Vjosa catchment. In addition to publishing their findings in academic journals and articles, the respective scientists were also encouraged to be publicly outspoken about the issue of HPPs and to directly participate in meetings, press conferences, public events, workshops, and round tables to convey the scientific findings directly to the people (Respondent 3; Mitre 2020). The campaign, therefore, contributed significantly to increasing the scientific knowledge about the Vjosa Catchment, an area that until then was scientifically mostly unexplored. Most of the scientific work about the Vjosa River referenced in section 4.5 emerged from these activities.

Another essential purpose of the scientific work on the Vjosa was to contest the conducted EIAs and show the poor quality of those documents. Scientists criticized the EIA for the HPP Pocem and described it as inadequately conducted. When the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign filed the lawsuit against the HPP Pocem in 2016, the scientific foundation of their claims, opposing the narrative of



the existing EIA, was described to be one crucial factor of success that ultimately led to the court's decision for the nullification of the concession contracts because of an inadequate EIA (Respondents 1, 4; SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2017a).

Involving science has turned out to be one of the key elements of the campaign. Assessing the current situation and closing the knowledge gap helped the campaign build up trust amongst the communities that their claims are justified. The campaign was, therefore, able to attract more and more people (Mitre 2020). Ultimately, new scientific findings supported their claims in front of courts and provided a second assessment opposing the results from the existing EIAs that have been widely accepted until then from the official bodies.

### 7.3. Creating attention: Media presence and framing

Another strongly highlighted theme in the discussion on what led to the campaign's successes is the intense focus on media presence and issue framing. When facing a political structure where a contesting party is not able to access the political decision-makers directly, it has to find ways around in order to make its voice heard. This section will look at how the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign managed to transport its message for a Vjosa National Park on the local, national, and international levels.

On the local level, the campaign started the information-sharing process with face-to-face meetings with the communities and stakeholders. Under the name of "Vjosa-Tour," this series of meetings took place in almost all of the villages of the Vjosa valley and helped to establish a connection to the people and form first alliances (Mitre 2020).

In the Vjosa case, it is described that it has been difficult in the very beginning to gain the media's attention to the issue, especially the national media's. To overcome this situation, the campaign tried to approach big international media to cover the topic of the Vjosa in newspaper articles and media reports. When first successes could be achieved in this tactic, the situation changed in benefit of the campaign, and national media started covering the Vjosa issue as well (Mitre 2020).

In the following years, there has been a wide-ranging coverage of the Vjosa case by national and international media. Respondent 4 describes the importance of their media work in its potential to form the public and political attitude towards an issue:

*“I would say that the media work is really crucial because television and also online media have a large share in the formation of opinion in the population. But also because what changes in the population has some kind of influence on the political level, of course.”* (Respondent 4)

Respondent 4 also perceived in the recent months of the campaign that national media is also supporting the preservation of the River for the most part and that good connections to the important media channels could be established.

In addition to just conveying the message, another vital aspect that the campaign realized is that it needs to communicate its message on an emotional level so that the targeted group can identify with the issue. This process of framing can work on different levels, depending on the target audience. For one, emphasizing the natural pristineness and uniqueness of the river was one method to underline the value of the Vjosa valley. By providing aesthetic pictures and movies of the landscape, combined with the warnings about what impacts the construction of HPP will have on this ecosystem, the campaign directly appealed to one's desire to preserve the unique nature from harm.

Additionally, they highlighted the possible severe impacts that the realization of HPPs might have on the local communities, which are highly dependent on the availability of land and fishery. Dams could significantly impact those sources of income for the local people. Also, the traditional values of the river to the local communities were stressed when presenting the issue to an international audience.

Third, the campaign presented the Vjosa issue as a misconception of how Albanian elites understand politics and democracy. In this sense, the political actions on the Vjosa River, including the lack of public participation and missing information, were seen as exemplary for the government's understanding of how to do politics and that those conducts should not be ignored and accepted.

In addition, in order to convey the correct and relevant messages, it also proved to be important who is distributing that information and might find viable access into people's minds. Therefore,

the campaign also sought alliances with artists and celebrities as claimsmakers that publicly support the protection of the Vjosa River. In Tirana, a concert was organized in 2017, under the motto of “Mos ma prek Vjosën!” (Hands off the Vjosa!). In front of more than 4000 spectators, prominent Albanian musicians sang for the protection of the Vjosa River and against the planned dam projects (SaveTheBlueHeartOfEurope 2017c).

An influential international social media campaign under the hashtag #VjosaNationalParkNow was also conducted as part of the campaign activity. Here, especially the involvement of famous actors, officially advocating for a national park, proved to have crucial influence as Respondent 1 describes:

*“If Leonardo di Caprio, for example, posted something at the beginning, then it was in every main broadcast in Albania. And that also has the effect that people think ‘how can it be that this guy from Hollywood even knows what Albania is and what our Vjosa is and we don't respect our Vjosa - we want to build on it, and they from California want to protect it - how can that be?’ And this creates an appreciation of one's own. Through the reflection from the outside. That is why media work from the outside is also important, which has also led to the media in Albania taking a closer look.” (Respondent 1)*

In the light of the theory of Discursive Opportunities, it can be seen that the openness or closeness of political institutions is not the only factor that affects social movements, but also the extent to which the movements manage to align their claims with the prevailing discourses and to secure visibility through media attention or influential social media campaigns. By framing the issue accordingly, involving national and international media, artists, and other influential people, the campaign was able to reframe the discourse of the Vjosa River and reach many people. Thereby they opened up new opportunities. Political actors were confronted with public and journalistic requests about the Vjosa and were required to respond accordingly and could not ignore the issue (Respondent 4).

#### 7.4.Lobbying on an international level

When the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign faced a closed political structure on the national level in Albania, it also tried to circumvent this situation through lobbying work on the international scale, thereby increasing the pressure on the Albanian Government. This lobbying work includes meeting and persuasive efforts with representatives of neighboring countries and the European Union to obtain additional allies and political leverage. A second strategic track was to file complaints at the international institutions and treaties that Albania has signed into. These include the Energy Community and the Bern Convention.

Political allies that could be obtained during these efforts were the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic of Kosovo, who also publicly expressed their support for a Vjosa National Park (Respondent 3). In addition, conversations with the Greek ambassador in Albania and the Greek Ministry for Environment are sought. Since the overarching goal would be the transnational National Park Vjosa-Aoos, communication with the Greek side is also seen as essential. Additionally, damming projects on the Vjosa in Albania will also affect the Aoos, which is located upstream, especially when it comes to fish migration. Respondent 4 describes that the Greek stakeholders (Ambassador and Ministry) are in principle in favor of the idea of a transboundary national park but that these political actors have not yet publicly expressed themselves on this issue towards the Albanian national government.

Also, Albania's current status as an accession candidate to the EU is tried to be utilized by the campaign. Hereby, a series of lobbying meetings and several special events have taken place in the European Parliament regarding the Vjosa in particular and the Balkan rivers in general. This has contributed to increasing pressure on Albanian decision-makers not to pursue dam construction plans any further. As a result of lobbying, the Vjosa is regularly mentioned in the country's accession report as one of the concerns and a task for Albania to align its national legislature with the respective EU directives dealing with environmental topics (Mitre 2020).

However, most respondents do not feel that the European Union is currently playing a strong political role in supporting the claims of a National Park. At least not until serious accession negotiations start and environmental topics, including the Vjosa, will be thoroughly discussed in this frame. Only when the bilateral commitments of Albania's EU accession will be established, EU's political influence on this topic could contribute more significantly (Respondents 1, 3).

On another level, only conditionally dependent on Albania's EU accession, the campaign is trying to convince the relevant institutions and investors like the European Investment Bank (EIB) to approve financial contributions to establish a National Park. Since this project entails high costs for planning and implementation and will take several years until its completion, the transfer of know-how and financial support from the EU shall lower the barrier (Respondents 1, 4).

Lastly, the campaign also applied pressure on the national government in the form of filing official complaints at the Energy Community and the Bern Convention (see section 5.4). These actions are also seen as important measures that were taken, utilizing the available legal opportunities on the international level. Hereby, the complaint at the Energy Community was perceived to be the more influential one, since it has more significant political influence for Albania:

*“We then filed a complaint against the power plants with the Energy Community. And here, for the first time in their history, they actually opened a case against a member country, Albania, because of a hydropower plant. This has never happened before. And that was also done by the Bern Convention, but the Energy Community is more helpful because it is more influential.” (Respondent 1)*

Respondent 3 also described those measures on the international legal level and highlighted the unprecedented rapid processing of these cases, but also remarks their limits since those are not legally binding measures that can be enforced on the national level. He, therefore, perceives that the campaign was already able to achieve the maximum benefits of the potential of these conventions.

### 7.5.Parliamentary election

In April 2021, Albania held parliamentary elections. On this occasion, the campaign saw one of its main opportunities to present the case of the Vjosa to the public in order to make it an election issue. Basically, the campaign aimed to intensify all activities during the election campaign period to take advantage of the rare opportunity. In the weeks before the election, politicians had to face questions from journalists and outline their plans for the river. In addition, with the support of sporting goods manufacturer Patagonia, the campaign was able to run television commercials. In the last five days before the election, a 30-second spot ran five times in the evenings before primetime on 4 top stations, calling for “#VjosaNationalParkNow” (Respondent 1).

Even though the election did not change the political composition, since the Rama administration was re-elected with the majority of the seats, the environmental campaign could utilize this opportunity to place the Vjosa issue in the public eye as Respondent 3 describes:

*“It was one of the first and few environmental cases to be discussed on the political table during an election campaign because the environment as a topic has always been seen as a low priority, and it is still the same. But the Vjosa this time was something totally different. It has been discussed on the prime-time public debates where the high-level politicians were invited. All of the top politicians have been faced with questions regarding the Vjosa from the journalists and from the activists... So Vjosa has been discussed politically. It has been a real issue at the election campaign.”*

Interestingly during those public debates, all of the invited politicians, including the current government as well as the opposition, supported the idea of putting the Vjosa under a protectoral regime and abolishing HPP projects for good (Respondent 3).

Comparing the Vjosa case with the historical examples of environmental movements in Albania (compare section 4.2) makes it seem as if bringing up environmental issues just before parliamentary elections is a good move. Similarly, protestors' demands against the fracking activities in the Patos-Marinza oil fields and against waste imports were agreed to just before the elections in 2017 and 2013. Then, however, a revision from past promises can occur, as the example of waste imports show (see section 4.2).

## 8. Conclusion and prospect

This research investigated the Political Opportunity Structure that the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign faced in their engagement against the erection of HPPs on the Vjosa River and in their demand to establish a National Park alongside the whole Vjosa valley. Under consideration of the centralized political power and a low number of available direct access points for contesting parties to the polity system, the Political Opportunity Structure on the national level can be considered a closed one. As a result, contesting parties face significant difficulties in participating and influencing the decision-making processes. However, openings in the political structure could be identified, incorporated by the existence of elite political allies and a judiciary system that facilitated the filing of legal claims against encountered EIA misconduct. In addition, supplementary measures on the side of the environmental campaign, such as the involvement of scientific research, media presence, and lobbying on the international level, had a positive impact on their situation and resulted in a stronger position within the national political playing field. Through these actions, the environmental campaign found ways to shift the public perception of the Vjosa River and its value as the “last wild river in Europe” and thereby influenced the set political agenda on the national level. As a result, the erection of HPPs on the Vjosa River is currently stopped, and the Vjosa valley is planned to be designated a protected area where no HPP shall be built.

While the classical dimensions of Political Opportunity Structure showed to be suitable for assessing the initial challenges and obstacles that an environmental campaign like the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign faced in the political environment of Albania, they would not suffice to explain the campaign’s successes to date. The involvement of more recent schools of thought, like the approaches of Perceived Opportunities and Discursive Opportunities, help to understand the emergence of this environmental campaign, their involvement in Albania, and the tools they were able to facilitate within their course of action. The findings of this case study also support the conclusions from previous research that highlight the importance of issue framing (in this sense utilizing Discursive Opportunities) to make anti-dam movements successful (Benford and Snow 2000; Kirchherr 2018; Schapper et al. 2020).

As mentioned before, the construction of further HPPs on the Vjosa seems abolished for now, and none of the interviewed respondents think that the issue will return to the political agenda within the following years. However, respondents highlighted the volatility in decision amendment. They

feared that in some years, the issue might start from the beginning due to a change in government with a new political agenda or due to new applications for HPP constructions and a revision from previous political pledges. This is why the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign will continue its fight for a Vjosa National Park so that the granted protection status guarantees the river a sustainable safeguard regardless of the governing parties and short-term decisions. Also, similar promises about declaring the Vjosa a National Park and stopping HPP development have already been declared by Rama in 2015, without following up words with deeds (Respondents 3, 4).

Overall, the campaign did feel improvements in its position within the Albanian political and public structures. For example, respondent 4 mentioned that their representatives are now being invited and consulted as experts regarding river-related issues in meetings and public media. Respondent 2 even described their influence in building up capacity at the Albanian authorities when it came to providing knowledge about what tasks, duties, and corresponding rights these authorities actually inherit.

Finding, creating, and utilizing new opportunities were undoubtedly the major success factors of the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign during their political encounter in Albania. The fact that those opportunities could be made available and that the political elite and controversial decisions could be challenged, however, also shows a promising development in the further democratization process of Albania as a nation-state.

This research might bring relevant insights for other environmental- or social movements that act or plan to become active in a similar political structure and face difficulties accessing the political structure. Also, this study can serve as a basis for comparative analysis when conducting a study of POS within the Balkan region. Members of the SaveTheBlueHeart campaign indicated that the difficulties they face in their work in Albania are similar to the difficulties they face in the other countries of the Balkan region. A potential approach for further research could be comparing Albania with other countries in the Balkans regarding the political structures that environmental movements encounter in these countries. Where and why do environmental movements face a more closed political structure regarding their environmental demands, and which countries account for more open structures?



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## 10. Appendix – Interview protocols

### Example of Interview Protocol with NGO representative:

- 1.) Can you tell me how the campaign to protect the Vjosa started?
  - a. What or who gave the impetus to start the campaign?
- 2.) How did you get involved in the campaign at the time?
- 3.) How is the campaign going so far? How would you rate its success?
- 4.) What was most helpful in pursuing your goals - what tools and opportunities could be used?
  - a. Follow up on institutions, people, situations
- 5.) How would you describe the Albanian government's response to your campaign?
- 6.) Where did you encounter the most significant obstacles/challenges to the campaign?
  - a. What has been the most frustrating part of your work?
  - b. Could you identify a barrier that, if not present, would have brought success already?
- 7.) How do you feel about Edi Rama's tweet last September that no more hydropower plants should be built on the Vjosa?
  - a. What tipped the scales that this was published at that exact time?
- 8.) Could you perceive any political debate in Albania around the case of the Vjosa? How would you describe it?
- 9.) On the political level, who were/are the main allies and opponents of the campaign?
- 10.) What role do they think Albania's status as an EU candidate country plays in achieving your goal?
- 11.) Do you think that hydropower plants on the Vjosa will become an issue again in the foreseeable future?
- 12.) What will be the next steps?

Example of Interview Protocol with representatives of local municipalities:

- 1.) How did you find out then that hydropower plants (Kalivac, Pocem) would be built in Vjosa?
- 2.) Can you tell me how the campaign to protect the Vjosa started?
  - a. What or who gave the impetus to start the campaign?
- 3.) How were the reactions to the open letter you wrote to Edi Rama in 2017?
- 4.) What do you think about the development of the campaign since then?
  - a. Are you satisfied with the successes achieved?
  - b. What could have gone better?
- 5.) What did the protest movements do well? What tools can be used that were successful?
- 6.) Could you perceive any political debate in Albania around the case of the Vjosa? How would you describe it?
- 7.) Do you think that the hydropower plants in Vjosa will be an issue again in the foreseeable future?