THE PRODUCTION OF POWER: ENVIRONMENTAL AND ENERGY POLITICS IN YUGOSLAVIA AND SERBIA

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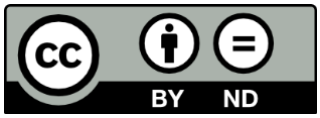

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, **Dragan Djunda**, candidate for the PhD degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology declare herewith that the present thesis titled "The Production of Power: Environmental and Energy Politics in Yugoslavia and Serbia" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 16 October 2025

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

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ABSTRACT

From the Iron Gates I mega-dam in the 1960s to small hydropower plants (SHPPs) in the 2020s, this dissertation maps the arc of energy and environmental politics from Yugoslavia to present-day Serbia. Both projects emerged from distinct geopolitical and economic contexts, reflected the logics of their dominant regimes, and transformed livelihoods and landscapes while reproducing socio-spatial hierarchies. The conflicts surrounding Iron Gates I and SHPPs provide the empirical departure points for this ethnographic and historical study. Building on these cases, the dissertation explores how energy infrastructure evolved and, in turn, how the *environment-making authority* and the *authority-making environment* reshaped one another over time. Through the concept of *environment-making authority,* the dissertation shows how political and economic institutions deployed energy infrastructure—constructing dams, importing oil, or building SHPPs—to realize development agendas and respond to global pressures. It identifies key political and economic actors, the shifting modes of institutional organization, and the ways of using energy sources. The notion of the *authority-making environment* examines how ecological alliances emerged and altered institutional functioning as they opposed various extractive projects. It asks which actors came to speak for the environment, which discourses and strategies they employed, and how the environment obtained its definitions and boundaries through their actions. The dissertation traces the co-evolving but unequal relationship between institutions and mobilizations, presenting energy infrastructure as a central medium through which environmental politics took shape and through which the condition of uneven development has persisted.

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INTRODUCTION

Energy infrastructure is a site of environmental politics—of shifting political and economic power relations and changing patterns of mobilization. In this view, environmental politics is about mutual yet uneven transformations between institutional and popular power. Institutions and capital employ extractive or developmental agendas over surroundings, while affected communities and ecologically minded experts respond with strategies that aim to alter how power-holders function. This dissertation follows energy deployment in socialist Yugoslavia and post-socialist Serbia to examine how energy infrastructure evolved and, with it, how the environment-making authority and the authority-making environment have reshaped one another over time. In this evolving but uneven relationship, power plants became the key medium through which environmental politics took shape.

This dissertation focuses on two main cases: the Iron Gates I mega-dam and a series of small hydropower plants, two different projects that shaped energy policies and ecological mobilizations during and after socialist Yugoslavia. The Iron Gates I dam construction began in 1964 through a joint initiative between Romania and Yugoslavia at the Iron Gates gorge, along their shared border in what is now Eastern Serbia. Completed in 1972, it became the largest hydropower plant on the Danube and Yugoslavia's most ambitious infrastructural project. Beyond its role as the country's leading electricity producer, Iron Gates I was framed as a leap forward in socialist modernization. For the construction, Yugoslavia obtained international expertise and patents that it later exported to members of the Non-Aligned Movement in an effort to strengthen its global position.

Yet the project also required vast social and ecological sacrifices. Thousands of people were displaced, villages submerged, and the gorge's agricultural economy was radically changed. One village on the Yugoslav side openly resisted the municipal government in charge of expropriation, refused to accept compensations, and protested both locally and in Belgrade to draw attention to their situation. What appeared to be a dispute over compensation in fact revealed more profound questions of environmental justice, even if the protest itself did not use environmentalist language. By following this case, I treat the Iron Gates dam not so much as a monument to techno-scientific optimism and state power, but as a site of struggle where modernization collided with displacement and ecological transformation. This case offers a window into how infrastructural development under socialism generated systematic tensions that can be read as early forms of ecological mobilization.

Three decades and a regime change later, during the late 2010s, small hydropower plants (SHPPs) became notorious once protests in the Stara Mountain of Eastern Serbia opposed their construction. In Serbia alone, more than 800 plants were under consideration, part of some 3,000 projects across the Western Balkans.[1] SHPPs consist of pipelines stretching several kilometers, diverting water to turbines and often leaving riverbeds dry and local communities without river access. The more water diverted, the greater the electricity output and the profit from subsidies for private investors. For villagers and environmental activists, these pipes came to symbolize greed, ecological destruction, and social marginalization.

The SHPP boom was embedded in a network of national elites, European banks, and state energy sectors responding to EU accession requirements. As part of the accession process, energy transition in the Western Balkans relied on market liberalization, inflows of international capital, and subsidies for renewable energy sources. These legal and economic

[1] For an overview of the policy context, financing, and ecological problems with SHPPs in the Western Balkans, see Bankwatch 2017, 2019.

reforms created lucrative opportunities for investors while making social and ecological costs secondary. The energy transition appeared less as a transformative shift than as a box-ticking exercise. The case of SHPPs thus provides a way to examine how energy transition in the region has functioned as a socio-environmental and technological fix, shaped by and reproducing both local and transnational patterns of uneven development.

At first glance, the Iron Gates gorge of the 1960s and the mountain villages of Eastern Serbia in the 2010s appear as unrelated sites of conflict. They are separated by more than fifty years, hundreds of kilometers, and state socialist and liberal capitalist regimes that often appear incommensurable. Yet energy infrastructures shaped both sites through a transformation of livelihoods and landscapes and a reproduction of socio-spatial hierarchies. The two projects produced electricity and promoted ideals of progress by treating peripheral spaces as expendable. The Iron Gates dam exemplified how socialist modernization displaced communities and reordered ecological relations in the name of progress. SHPPs, introduced decades later under the banner of EU accession, mobilized a similar kind of dispossession but with a different purpose. Framed as sustainability initiatives but largely serving to generate green investment opportunities, SHPPs required reallocation of water and the marginalization of rural places that had been impoverished and depopulated since socialist times.

Taken together, these cases invite us to view uneven geographic development as a persistent condition of energy policymaking. The dissertation investigates how this spatial condition of unevenness was reproduced through infrastructure, the distribution of harms and benefits, and the consolidation of institutional order. The negative consequences of energy investments do not result solely from inadequate policies; in fact, energy infrastructure itself is fundamentally uneven. Places where energy is produced and consumed remain distant, with the former usually bearing higher social and ecological costs. Power plants do not simply supply electricity and

provide local employment; they also organize space, redefine unequal rural–urban relations, and determine who counts as beneficiaries, who as contributors, and who as obstacles to energy development. The dissertation thus highlights how such energy-related unevenness persisted across regimes by situating socialist and post-socialist projects in a single historical frame. Energy infrastructures, in this perspective, operated both as tools of authority and sites of ecological and social contestation.

While all energy infrastructure is to some extent uneven (for new renewables, see Franquesa 2018), hydropower infrastructure is particularly problematic for several reasons. First, large dams require community relocation and repurposing of land often used for agriculture. Second, hydropower energy relies on the aura of renewable energy, but this raises questions as to whether the electricity produced is indeed renewable. Surely, water keeps flowing, unlike coal and oil, which get depleted, but even the regularity of precipitation and the availability of clean water have been decreasing worldwide. A more pressing question is to what extent water can be considered renewable if the landscapes that sustain flows, and the places where communities and species reproduce their lives, are so drastically and irreversibly changed due to dam construction.

The cases in this dissertation show how infrastructural projects simultaneously consolidated the power of the environment-making authority and prompted the rise of the authority-making environment. By the *environment-making authority*, I refer to political and economic institutions which "produce" the environment by: setting policy priorities; inventing methods of representation, extraction, and organization; and establishing hierarchies within and between the fields such as energy, heavy industry, and water supply, including the areas that surpass resource use, like ecological protection, agriculture, and labor. Authority consists of various state or supra-state political institutions and economic interest groups that formulate policies

that shape local sites of energy extraction. Such authority is never singular, with homogeneous internal organization, or with predefined functions. Its composition, relations, interests, and approaches to resources are always contingent upon broader political and economic systems. Thus, the dissertation employs the *environment-making authority* as an open-ended notion to investigate how the constellations of actors emerged, how they established their agendas, and how their methods of resource-use shifted over time.

By the *authority-making environment*, I consider an alliance or mobilization that steps up to protect the well-being of the surroundings and to sustain ways of life. Its goal is to defend the conditions of reproduction and alter how the authority uses resources. By doing so, it also changes how the authority functions. It does so through methods characteristic of social mobilizations – through protests and conflicts. The effects of environmental mobilizations range from the cancellation of projects and the regrouping of institutional actors and interests to struggles over political legitimacy and the redefinition of institutional and everyday politics. Like with authority, the organization and membership of the authority-making environment is contextual. It depends on prevailing political conditions and opportunities, ranging from local villagers to political activists and scientists. Thus, the dissertation uses *authority-making environment* as an exploratory notion to analyze which actors came to speak for the environment, which discourses and strategies they employed, and how, through their actions, the environment obtained definitions, boundaries, and scales that were characteristic of different periods. In that way, the dissertation identifies the seeds of environmentalism in Yugoslavia, its trajectory throughout the country's history, and its characteristics in contemporary Serbia.

This dissertation thus examines how governing institutions and investors influenced energy systems, how different alliances resisted them, and how these dynamics evolved over time. The following questions guide the analysis:

What power relations did energy infrastructure rely on and help establish within specific landscapes as planners pursued developmental goals?

Which power imbalances, and which facets of the prevailing order, did the environment challenge in its efforts to defend ecological well-being and rights?

How did the interplay between environment-making authority and authority-making environment unfold over time?

If infrastructure is a medium through which authority acts upon the environment, then this dissertation examines energy projects to trace dominant agendas, their modes of implementation, and their social and ecological consequences. If sites of infrastructure are also fields of struggle, then the empirical cases reveal not only motivations for resistance but also the organizational and discursive strategies that structured it. Construction of infrastructure typically consolidates power and interests, but struggles over social and ecological impacts can destabilize legitimacy and alter institutional organization. Moments of domination and resistance form a larger pattern in which state institutions, capital, and popular groups continuously act upon and reshape one another, though from unequal positions. Tracing this dynamic over time reveals the historical formation of environmental politics.

To approach the research questions, the dissertation treats energy projects as arenas of struggle and terrains where socio-ecological processes and structures are worked out and consolidated. Environmental and energy politics take shape around infrastructure. Beneath the reservoirs of socialist dams, across open-pit coal mines, and along the emptied riverbeds of small

hydropower plants, a recurring pattern appears: bureaucrats and economic actors assert their agendas through resource use and compete with one another, local communities experience enclosure and bear ecological costs, some experts facilitate construction while others join the opposition, some mobilizations win concessions while others stall or are co-opted. These episodes form the dissertation's analytical arc. Infrastructure channeled the influence of state and transnational alliances, prompting historically specific engagements in which residents and experts resisted, adapted, or acquiesced to the prevailing order. By linking these episodes temporally, the dissertation traces the co-evolution of institutional and economic power and ecological mobilization.

Conflicts around energy infrastructure serve as a diagnostic tool for political-economic order, with each form of authority opening or constraining the potential of environmental action. Without pairing the two, we miss how institutional arrangements determine the kinds of mobilization that are possible. Similarly, environmental movements signal institutional cracks. When we track authority and environment together, mobilization appears as an indicator of shifting economic and political power relations. The contestations included in this dissertation reveal how different forms of authority either opened or restricted the possibilities for environmental action. Whether in the initial expansion of hydropower after 1945, the rise and fall of oil in the 1970s, nuclear protests in the 1980s, or the return of controversial small hydropower projects in the 2010s, we can trace both openings and foreclosures in political engagements.

The dissertation proceeds chronologically, outlining major trends in energy and environmental politics in Yugoslavia and Serbia over the past 60 years. Chapter 1 focuses on the conflict surrounding the Iron Gates I dam, which was built between 1964 and 1972. The community of Tekija opposed the municipal state in charge of expropriation and relocation, objecting to low

compensation for flooded property and the plan to disperse the village across adjacent towns. Although partial concessions were made, they did little to prevent the loss of legitimacy and the gradual weakening of the local communist party. This chapter has several aims: to scrutinize the typical policies of environment-making that the modernist socialist state employed, to outline the emblematic mode of local protests, and to identify the seeds and redefine the genealogy of environmental politics in Yugoslavia.

Chapter 2 provides a bird's-eye view, fast-forwarding between 1945, when the Yugoslav state emerged, to the late 1980s, when political and economic cracks in the state became evident. The chapter interlaces several energy transitions, the country's changing geopolitical and geoeconomic integration, the rapidly evolving use of energy resources and technology transfers, and the gradual increase in protests. This historical analysis identifies three shifts in constellations of authority, alongside corresponding changes in environmental mobilization. Anti-nuclear protests of the late 1980s marked a decisive turning point by directly opposing the crumbling federal state. This was a major instance of "jumping scales" after decades of predominantly local actions. The chapter also investigates the instrumental role that the energy sector played in fueling inter-republic tensions.

Chapters 3–5 focus on SHPPs, which became emblematic of energy and environmental politics after 2000, when the independent state of Serbia consolidated and began its still-unfinished EU accession. Although SHPPs first appeared in plans during the 1980s in response to energy shortages, they were only implemented after the regime change, under the guidance of accession. In this sense, SHPPs represent a bridge between the two regimes.

Chapter 3 examines the legal and economic contexts behind the return of SHPP plans. It investigates the competing macro-structural processes that shaped EU renewable energy policy in the early 2010s, and consequently, how these structured Serbia's legal framework for

SHPPs. The national government and its economic elites creatively relied on this particular technology to achieve several goals, such as partial compliance with EU decarbonization standards, a temporary delay of major liberalization reforms in the electricity sector, and the creation of opportunities for national capital in the lucrative field of renewables. Environmental and social justice, however, were sidelined by technocratic policymaking that guides the EU green agenda for accessing countries. This chapter thus shows how multiscalar the current constellation of authority over Serbia's environment is, how it shifts between competing power-holders, and how such authority reproduces key tendencies of uneven development characteristic of the EU's organization.

Chapter 4 also delves into the structural conditions that enabled SHPPs to emerge but scales down the focus to two villages in Stara Mountain, Rakita and Dojkinci. It explores the role of rural economic decline and depopulation in the recent valorization of the environment through extractive SHPP projects. It looks at the long historical process of multiscalar uneven development to identify how this condition was produced and reproduced by contextually characteristic constellations of state and capital, and how it reinforced the peripheral and frontier status of rural regions. The chapter explains how the conditions of economic decline and depopulation facilitated investments in SHPP, while also creating the possibility for local resistance through rural tourism. In Rakita, the protest emerged but was overpowered by the environment-making authority organized around infrastructural promises, leading to the building of the SHPP. In Dojkinci, in contrast, rural tourism provided an opportunity for the anti-SHPP protest to showcase an alternative development. Thus, the chapter aims to connect decades-long histories of spatial differentiation, the contemporary extraction and commodification of rural areas, and the way people act within the cycles of (de)valuation.

Chapter 5 centers on the protests against SHPPs that began in 2019 in the villages of Stara Mountain and spread to urban areas. As one of the most vocal social mobilizations in the country of that period, the resistance brought together a variety of groups. Participants ranged from villagers, residents of nearby towns and large cities, activists, scientists, and supporters across the political spectrum. The chapter asks: Which strategies and discourses allowed for such a geographically and politically diverse environmental front to emerge? And what consequences did the protest have for authority? It looks into the narratives of eradication that the protest advanced, which emerged from the context of depopulated villages but eventually gained country-wide traction. With the themes of national and ecological disappearance interlaced, the protest ensured that its engagement remained emotionally potent and politically inclusive until its primary goal of canceling SHPP projects was achieved. Its impact on authority lay not only in forcing retreat but also, unintentionally, in broadening possibilities for political action.

The dissertation provides a longitudinal perspective on energy restructuring across the two regimes. While socialist modernization and EU accession seem worlds apart, both placed energy infrastructure at the center of their development visions. The socialist regime relied on dams as symbols of sovereignty and means of modernization, while EU accession promoted renewables in the name of decarbonization and market liberalization. Despite their different purposes and beneficiaries, both Yugoslavia and Serbia (as an EU candidate) subordinated rural communities and ecologies to larger political-economic goals. Besides identifying systemic harms, the historical perspective of the dissertation suggests that energy transitions were and continue to be forms of transnational institutional restructuring. Below the surface of changing energy systems and switching sources lie the reproduction and transformation of institutional

organization, methods of extraction, power relations between the main actors, and ways of accommodating global pressures. If the dissertation focused only on one regime and one energy transition, it would have missed an essential point: even when the material organization of infrastructure changes and even when politics switches, certain transhistorical and global principles persist. The dissertation is after those very principles.

If energy restructuring reveals shifting forms of political and economic power over time, a longitudinal view of protests shows the evolving composition and strategies of mobilization. Peasant revolts of the 1940s, protests at hydropower sites in the 1960s, anti-nuclear campaigns of the 1980s, and anti-SHPP demonstrations of the 2010s did not consciously draw on one another; indeed, movements rarely ever referred to earlier episodes. Yet taken together, these idiosyncratic actions climbed on each other's shoulders to reach a scale at which they could effectively counter governing institutions. The pattern of action is not one of direct continuity but of implicit learning. What enabled the accumulated outcome was institutional openings created by reforms, competition, and fragmentation of power, and the global rise of ecological ideologies.

Across the period covered by this dissertation, ecological initiatives sought to challenge governing institutions at levels that seemed viable and effective. Their symbolic references ranged from grievances about livelihoods and the value of homes to critiques of policies and economic programs and warnings of national eradication. Their organizational strategies were equally diverse: navigating the Yugoslav Communist Party and decentralized governance, forging international alliances, and assembling ecological fronts that united actors of different political orientations. Central to these efforts was the way mobilized groups defined "the environment"—its scope and substance—on scales from local habitats to global concerns. Tracing these symbolic and organizational efforts reveals a growing ability of mobilization to

reach scales where it could effectively challenge power imbalances. This dissertation reconstructs that co-evolving path and, through ethnographic, archival, and critical policy methods, explains what enabled the gradual scalar convergence of authority and environment.

Infrastructure as a medium between capital, state, and society

In this dissertation, I conceptualize infrastructure as a medium through which institutions, groups, and individuals influence one another to enact durable social structures. As a medium, infrastructure enables or constrains actions by channeling power, with effects that depend on specific material forms, ascribed functions, and institutional embedding. Infrastructure is inherently uneven because its construction reflects the lasting conditions of uneven development; it reproduces institutional (in)visibility and reflects the unequal distribution of access, gains, and consequences. While infrastructure often reproduces state authority, technocratic expertise, and developmental ideology, it is also a field of struggle in which actors engage, contest, or redirect the use and meanings enfolded within it. These engagements are not symmetrical either. The capacity to act through infrastructural objects depends on broader political and geopolitical constellations, capitalist economic relations, and prevailing epistemic hierarchies. Thus, contestation is not external to infrastructure but internal to its function as a medium. In the context of this dissertation, this framework allows me to account for a range of responses to power plants and other projects in question, from compliance and consent to protest and modification. The approach highlights the role of class, ideology, and epistemic frameworks in shaping the design and implementation of objects from the outset.

Political and economic power relations behind infrastructure

My understanding of infrastructure as a medium is inspired by two bodies of literature: the theory of uneven development (UD) and the anthropology of infrastructure (AOI). I argue that both fields imply the mediating role of infrastructure and its embeddedness in multiple social, political, and economic relations. But the question is, which of these matters most in infrastructural planning? And how can we extrapolate their fundamental relational assumptions to the understanding of infrastructure-related politics? These questions form the guiding thread throughout the following literature review.

Both fields view infrastructure as inherently relational. AOI begins from the premise that "infrastructure is a fundamentally relational concept, becoming real infrastructure in relation to organized practices" (Star 1999, 380). Objects and projects provide fruitful empirical and conceptual openings for deciphering many socio-political arrangements: citizenship, biopolitics, modernity, socially shared desires and cultural imaginaries, aesthetic order in state politics, as well as circulation of people, materials, and ideas (for an extensive overview, see Larkin 2013). Due to this multitude of actors, objects, and arrangements, infrastructure has been defined as a "socio-material terrain" and a "dense social, material, aesthetic, and political formation" (Appel et al. 2018, 2–3).

UD theory similarly emphasizes the relational character of the built environment. In this sense, David Harvey (2005a) tasks UD with explaining how the rules of capital accumulation and circulation are articulated through and shaped by social, political, and ecological processes. Likewise, Neil Smith explains that "the uneven geographies of capitalist development are all premised on the relative stability of very specific *social* relations of production and reproduction" (Smith 2010, 274). Thus, the relational aspect unites the two fields and provides the conceptual grounding for the dissertation. By looking at infrastructure as both a product

and producer of social relations, we can move beyond material fetishism and functionalism to recognize them for what they are: sites of politics.

Despite these shared assumptions, forcing theoretically diverse fields into a unified framework can seem like a sign of an inconsistent analysis. However, since I have no interest in pursuing conceptual puritanism but rather in seeking constructive integration, I remain aware of their differences and treat them as sources for productive research where possible. While empirically exploring different infrastructural systems and objects, the main conceptual division remains the ontological status of and epistemological approach to materiality. This divide is like a continuum, ranging from materiality possessing actor-like influence to being merely a feature and expression of social life. Some authors more readily adopt the postulates of actor-network theory and stand closer to the former position (e.g., Ballestero 2019; Von Schnitzler 2013). Others approach materiality as a necessary feature of social organization. Material objects, like infrastructure, are made within political and economic systems, and therefore reflect the dominant social relations. A such, they become social facts that reinforce the existing power structures by shaping interactions through infrastructures (e.g., Dalakoglou 2017; Kappeler 2017).[2] This latter position is also prominent in cognate fields such as political ecology and human geography (Swyngedouw 2015; Swyngedouw and Boelens 2018), and this dissertation relies on it as well.

Besides the internal disagreement on materiality in AOI, the disparities between AOI and UD are even more evident. Their incommensurability originates from differing politico-theoretical traditions (new materialism and poststructuralist theories versus Marxist human geography), research strategies (ethnography versus theoretical and mixed methods approaches), and units

[2] Some authors shift along the continuum of ontological materialism. For instance, Larkin defines infrastructure in terms of enabling social, cultural, and economic flows, while also stressing that infrastructure is a system consisting of "built things, knowledge things, or people things" (Larkin 2013, 329). For an extensive critique of materialist postulates in AOI, see (Buier 2023).

of analysis (infrastructure versus general socio-spatial production). Nevertheless, I argue that the two fields can contribute jointly to this dissertation's approach despite their differences. What makes this integration fruitful is not just the shared object of study—the built environment—nor only their critical gaze, but also the different levels of abstraction they employ. While analyses in AOI can help the dissertation produce concepts and explanations corresponding to case-based, mid-level, concrete abstractions, UD provides insights into systemic mechanisms, regional variations, and collective struggles against capitalist production of space. In other words, the context sensitivity of AOI ensures empirically grounded building blocks, primarily ethnographic analyses of state-led governmentality and prevailing social orders, while UD broadens the scope by introducing scale-dependent capitalist logics as the chief drivers of Yugoslav environmental and energy politics.

Though AOI presents a multitude of actors and arrangements, this dissertation specifically relies on the field's take on governmentality.[3] From an etatist perspective, infrastructure mediates ties between populations and the state, sometimes including supra-state institutions and NGOs (Appel et al. 2018; Larkin 2013). Dalakoglou's work (2017) on statecraft through highway networks is particularly illustrative. The Albanian socialist regime built extensive roads to reach distant populations, discipline labor, and present itself as a modernizing force, but the ban on private cars rendered these roads underutilized, generating a paradox of immobility. Thus, infrastructure that had enforced order and state power gradually became a source of grievances and legitimacy failure, paving the way for the regime's later demise.

Anthropologists of infrastructure often find Patrick Joyce's pioneering historical work on the materiality of state power inspiring (e.g., Appel et al. 2018; Harvey and Knox 2016; Larkin 2013; Von Schnitzler 2013). Joyce (2003, 2017) identifies *logistical power* as a modality in

[3] This multitude easily gets overwhelming and conceptually blurred, not only when it includes material actors but also when it approaches people as infrastructure (Simone 2004).

which infrastructure brings the state and citizens into intensive and extensive contact. It enables impersonal and depoliticized (technocratic) rule over populations, neutralizing this rule by putting it in the realm of technology and planning and out of political debates and contestations. Historically, what drives the expansion of the built environment is the tendency of state institutions to enlarge the reach and potency of state power via infrastructure, through territorialization, urbanization, means of communication, and channels for imagining the community. This tradition often implies that infrastructural expansion equals state-building (Scott 1985) and the gradual sophistication of governmentality (Mann 2008). In this view, infrastructural power of the state operates as an "articulation of materialities with institutional actors, legal regimes, policies, and knowledge practices" that is constantly in formation across space and time (Appel et al. 2018, 12).

AOI usually approaches state power on several levels. First, it examines how infrastructure structures social fabrics, cuts across social divisions, and provides unequal access to natural, economic, and institutional resources (Appel et al. 2018). Governed populations remain fragmented, and infrastructural projects reproduce or inadvertently change their positions in the social order. In this manner, energy infrastructure operates both as a means of producing electricity and as a vehicle of political power. Power plants and grids guide people's daily experiences, conditions of reproduction, and possibilities for political representation and recognition (Boyer 2019). Second, the field approaches institutional representatives as heterogeneous actors. Their contribution to logistical power ranges from street-level bureaucrats to high officials, experts, and corporate actors. These representatives do not always share a unified agenda, interest, or perspective, even when acting as power-holders. Third, multiple actors employ various ideas and material means (calculations, narratives, devices, procedures), attaching conflicting agendas and visions to infrastructural objects, albeit often with the same concealing ideological effect characteristic of technopolitics (Ballestero 2019;

Günel 2019). For this obscuring ideological function, AOI draws on development critique in approaching infrastructure as yet another cog in the *anti-politics machine,* one that often fails to deliver on promises of progress but rarely misses the opportunity to expand the reach of the state (Ferguson 1994).

While offering a rich empirical toolkit for exploring the modes of political power operating through infrastructure, my key issue with the governmentality-centered relationality is its excessive focus on liberal political power that implies a linear model of infrastructural expansion: the more power an institution needs, the more infrastructure it creates. In contrast, studies of global economic restructuring in the field of UD (Brenner 2004), as well as more historical works on the production of nature under the *Capitalocene* (Patel and Moore 2018*)*, point to the centrality of capitalist growth and its environmental contradictions as the primary drivers of infrastructural booms and declines. Similar to strands of environmental anthropology informed by new materialism (Howard 2018), these works suggest that multiscalar economic structures remain undistinguishable, absorbed into other social hierarchies or obscured by attention to more-than-human actors. That is why this dissertation requires engagement with the literature on uneven development.

Where AOI provides the conceptual toolkit for dissecting political power, UD broadens the scope to forces of spatial capitalist relations. The idea that the uneven production of space is inherent to capitalist logic is central to UD theory. For its main authors (Harvey 2005a; Smith 2010), the history of the expansion of capitalist relations of production is the history of extensive production of the built environment, with unevenly developed geographies being both a product of capitalist relations and a necessary condition for their expansion.[4]

[4] For an informative overview of the field, see Peck 2016; Peck et al. 2023.

Capitalist society continuously enacts contradictory spatial tendencies in its pursuit of profit. Property relations and novel conditions for accumulation spread across the globe, becoming universal by overcoming natural, legal, and social obstacles, while simultaneously creating new regional divisions. The tension between universalization and differentiation closely relates to another—between concentration and diffusion. Accumulation proceeds through agglomeration of capital, labor, and the built environment in some areas, or through diffusion across the globe, and often both at once. Because of these contradictory tendencies, "the accumulation of capital and misery goes hand in hand, concentrated in space" (Harvey 2018, 600). New cycles of capitalist development create temporal ruptures in which today's pockets of privilege get wiped out (Sewell 2011).

Neil Smith (2010) extends Harvey's analysis by explaining how uneven geographic development arises from two contradictory tendencies. The *equalization* of production conditions across the globe (e.g., labor relations, exploitation of nature, infrastructural connectedness) is followed by *differentiation* that divides and excludes regions through multiple hierarchies, creating new conditions for future cycles of equalization. Through successive phases of investment and disinvestment, this differentiation–equalization process forms a *see-saw movement*. Capital moves between more and less developed localities, always looking for places with abundant economic, cultural, and natural resources necessary for further expansion (Smith 2010).[5] This movement follows the logic of "creative destruction," constantly devaluing the existing built environment used for the valorization of capital and building new ones. The see-saw movement is multiscalar, operating through hierarchies between classes and between places understood either in terms of core and periphery, city and

[5] David Harvey (2005) conceptualizes this as continuous "accumulations by dispossessions." Furthermore, Harvey's concept of "spatial fix" (2001) reveals capital's tendency towards fixing space (making it immobile through building infrastructure, buildings, machinery, etc.) in order to enhance the growth and mobility of capital, which is an inner contradiction.

countryside, or regional hierarchies of global development and underdevelopment. The spatial outcome is that some places become similar and connected through infrastructural investments, while others remain excluded and in dire conditions. The empirical task, then, is to analyze the infrastructural conditions of presence and absence, inclusion and exclusion, as mutually dependent (Brenner 2016; Gill and Kasmir 2016).

A commitment to systemic theoretical work can sometimes limit attention to empirical detail. The same trade-off appears in foundational approaches to UD that, because of a commitment to theory-building, often neglect mid-level, regional transformations and struggles (Peck et al. 2023). Correctives have come from historically grounded and more down-scaled studies focused on actors and politics. Among them, Doreen Massey (1995) insisted that the production of unevenness must be studied not only globally but also regionally. This perspective opens up an analysis of how local struggles, conflictual politics of the state at multiple scales, and pre-existing socio-cultural hierarchies all interact in the production of the built environment. Such a focus explores the particularities of places and their fixed capitals, demonstrating how "local politics, path dependencies, and material properties matter" (Eaton 2011).

For this dissertation, the work of anthropologists who engage with spatial differentiation and infrastructure outside the AOI field is particularly relevant, as it provides a compelling bridge between uneven development and ethnography. In those accounts, infrastructural projects figure as the sites of joint capitalist and state domination, as well as the condition of possibility for struggles defending various notions of autonomy (Buier 2022). Similarly, Jaume Franquesa (2018) shows ethnographically how the peripheralization of Catalan rural areas occurred through decades of investment first in nuclear and then in renewable energy. Peripheralization, according to Franquesa, is not merely discursive but an active, material process of exploitation of resources, degrading investment, and political exclusion through which people and places

become “residual, barren, marginal, discarded” (2018, 14). In response, communities defend their dignity, interests, and rights. Through attachment to land and shared ways of life, they assert alternative systems of value and act as politically relevant subjects. Similarly, recent historical–ethnographic approaches emphasize struggles and alliance-building (Gill and Kasmir 2016; Kasmir et al. 2024) and call for dealing with relations of production and reproduction, the dialectics between the symbolic and the material, and the historicity of social processes (Buier and Franquesa 2022) as key topics in uneven development theory.[6]

Politics of the built environment

After identifying key institutional and economic power relations, the next step is to conceptualize how politics takes place through infrastructure. Anthropological studies of energy infrastructure are particularly helpful in this task, as they scrutinize *energopower* as both a physical force that keeps the economy running and as a depository of social influence that “both enable and disable certain configurations of power” (Boyer 2019, 14). In fact, entire global political, economic, and social arrangements—such as Keynesianism, the welfare state, US hegemony, and financialization—depended upon methods of extraction, the materiality of distribution networks, and the excessive consumption of oil. Like a feedback loop, the physical properties of energy infrastructure mirror the changing political-economic priorities, and, in turn, structure future political relations by opening up certain possibilities while foreclosing others (Mitchell 2011).

Another way to grasp the spatiality of power is through the effects that the built environment exerts on justice. Infrastructural resources are unevenly distributed across racial, religious, and

[6] David Harvey also embraces a more ethnographic perspective in his later work on UD. Shared experiences of economic decline, according to him, are a fruitful avenue for understanding the how the prevalent “common sense” emerges from uneven development (Harvey 2005).

class-based neighborhoods, as well as between urban and rural areas, cities, states, and continents. Anthropological research (e.g., Appel et al. 2018) continues to document issues of distributional justice and reveals socio-cultural mechanisms that undermine recognition and procedural participation. Ethnographic studies remind us that, far beyond technocratic framing, disrupted or absent infrastructures reveal "contested and divided political, ecological, and social processes" (Graham 2010, 3)

Beyond injustice, another form of power emerges from people's symbolic, practical, and visceral engagements with infrastructural objects. Everyday experiences, such as infrastructural promises, yearnings, grievances, inclusions, and visions, bear significant ideological influences. The notions of *enchantments of infrastructure* (P. Harvey and Knox 2016) and the *poetics of infrastructure* (Larkin 2013) were early conceptualizations of this ideological dimension, and subsequent studies have shown how infrastructure operates as a vehicle for promises of modernization, prosperity, development, nation-building, or climate salvation (Folch 2019; Günel 2019; Harvey and Knox 2015; Kappeler 2017). Far from being characteristic only of infrastructure, UD scholars insist that ideology is an integral part of the material and symbolic production of space (Harvey 2014; Smith 2010).[7]

The production of scale is the final puzzle in the politics of the built environment. Scale denotes that the level at which power becomes effective often does not correspond to the level from which influence originates. To produce scale, then, means to maintain or alter the "vertical

[7] The poetics and enchantment of can inform us about how unevenness is politically approached on national and transnational scales in different periods of capitalist history. Although UD as a condition and dynamic is inherent to capitalism, its alleviation through modernization projects has been a continuous promise made by diverse politico-economic regimes (Peck 2016; Smith 1997). But these regimes tried to fulfill the promise in different ways—through up- or down-scaling of economic activity, or increased competitive regionalization (Brenner 2004). Changes in economic organization meant that the mode of infrastructural investment changed, along with the ways state and global institutions approached UD. So, in that way, it is possible to explore how benefits, costs, social functions, and symbolics of infrastructures became different as well. The ideological effects—enhancements and poetics—allow us to grasp symbolic and experiential implications of shifts in scalar organization of infrastructure.

ordering of social, economic, and political practices that defines scalar organization in any social formation" (Brenner 2004, 9). The hierarchical ordering of scale is historically specific and a product of contingent and contentious relations (Brenner 2004; Harvey 2005; Smith 2010). Upscaling and downscaling are strategies that states and international organizations employ because of continuously increasing global competition (Brenner 2004). However, while unequally available, scale-making is not solely a tool of capital and the state; Smith (2010) reminds us that social movements take an active role, too. Through the concept of *jumping scale*, he sheds light on strategies of bypassing different levels of sovereignty, or establishing multiscalar alliances, that amplify mobilizations that are otherwise contained to local places.

To conclude, with their emphases on institutional power and capital accumulation, the literatures on AOI and UD provide this dissertation with a comprehensive framework for grasping the multiple forms that authority takes. From AOI, this dissertation borrows the approach to the logistical power of the state. From UD, it takes the assumption that places, classes, and capital symbolically and materially co-produce one another, the results of which are visible in uneven constellations of the built environment. Furthermore, the two fields provide a toolkit for analyzing the political relations that revolve around energy infrastructure. AOI enables the analysis of ideological effects, redistribution and recognition, and the governance of subaltern populations through developmental projects. UD contributes with its understanding of the valorization of spaces and people and the contestations that profit-centered framing ignites. It also explains how production of scale arises both from the competition of powerful actors and from popular mobilizations. With this understanding of the politics of the built environment, I now turn to the history of environmental politics.

Global history of environmentalism

Environmentalism underwent significant transformations as the global spatial frontiers of extraction expanded, technological methods advanced, and social and natural boundaries grew increasingly fragile. Conceptions of where an environment was, what it represented for society, and how to advocate for its well-being shifted over time and remain open questions to this day. What began as an ideas-based response later developed into a full-fledged social movement.

The first wave of environmentalism appeared in late nineteenth-century Great Britain as an intellectual response to the consequences of the Industrial Revolution. Entire landscapes were swiftly transformed, particularly in the countryside and colonies, to sustain the growth of industrial cities and empires. Forests and swamps were turned into agricultural land for intensive production characteristic of monocultures and plantations. Common land became privatized, and former peasants filled factories while indigenous people were enslaved. Mining expanded, as did railways and shipyards. Environmental reactions were predominantly of an intellectual rather than popular character, ranging from romanticized calls for a return to the land to scientific resource management schemes that reflected fears of exhaustion, and to "wilderness ideas" that gave rise to the first national parks (Guha 2000a). This early environmentalism reflected moral and cultural responses to the capitalist and imperial treatment of the environment as a resource or sink for waste (Guha 2000a; Guha and Martínez Alier 2013).

The critical ideas of the first wave continued through the second wave of environmentalism—under the guise of conservation and sustainability—but they also reached crucial political milestones. Following two decades of post-WWII abundance, technological optimism, and fast-paced industrial growth, critical voices began to clash with the dominant political-

economic order. The epicenter of critique this time was in the US (Guha 2000a), which had become the hegemonic industrial power on the western side of the Iron Curtain.

Although scholars agree that ecological movements emerged in the 1960s, debates persist on what prompted the rise of the popular environmental front. Some attribute it to Rachel Carson's influential 1962 book, *Silent Spring,* which alarmed the public about the social and biological costs of pesticides (Guha 2000a). Others argue that even before the movement could appear, the environment as an object of governmental intervention and popular action needed to emerge—a process that began in the 1960s, when environmental policymaking materialized as a response to public concerns about frequent oil-related accidents (Bond 2022). Still others avoid pinpointing an origin, suggesting instead that it was the fertile context in the US and later in Western Europe that raised the tide of environmentalism as we know it today. Black, feminist, and pacifist New Social Movements; the protests of 1968; debates over public land and forests; concerns with increased pollution; anxieties over automation, technology, and nuclear testing—all created fertile ground in which environmentalism could place its roots (McNeill and Engelke 2016). Of course, globally resonant events like the oil crisis and nuclear accidents of the 1970s and 1980s gave the movement additional momentum, paving the way for the energy transitions that unfolded in the decades after (Michaël Aklin and Urpelainen 2018).

Movements in the US differed in their approaches and social bases. On the one hand, middle and upper-class advocacy groups like the *Sierra Club* became particularly popular and influential with their conservation initiatives. On the other hand, anti-systemic initiatives like that of *deep ecology* put forward more radical ontological reformulations of the human–nature relationship. Finally, the *ecological justice movements* were less concerned with a variety of wilderness ideas and more with the everyday consequences of waste dumping in racialized and

low-income neighborhoods. These groups mobilized in defense of community health and livelihoods. Unlike other movements of the well-off, ecological justice protests typically represent minorities, with female caretakers often having a decisive say (Guha 2000a).

In Western Europe, environmentalism gained momentum through anti-nuclear campaigns in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. The movement was particularly strong in West Germany, where it formed the base of the Green Party. Initially opposing the proliferation of atomic weapons, it soon called for the cancellation of nuclear energy projects following the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl disasters (Guha 2000a). While the front predominantly consisted of intellectuals, leftists, anarchists, pacifists, and feminists, it also had a firm footing among farmers who feared the local consequences of nuclear projects. Apart from Germany, similar fronts were successful in Austria and Italy (van der Heijden 2014).

Eastern European environmental mobilizations benefited from exchanges with Western European groups. Sometimes because of shared international experiences, though more often because of direct exposure to the radiation from Chernobyl and proximity to Soviet plants, numerous instances of anti-nuclear resistance appeared in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Armenia. These initiatives often succeeded in canceling planned projects and the closure of existing power plants. Scholars have argued that these movements contributed to the fall of state socialism, either by serving as safe channels for articulation of liberal ideology or as a vehicle of ethnonationalist revival (Guha 2000a; van der Heijden 2014; McNeill and Engelke 2016). A rare exception to this interpretation is a critique arguing against this *nature as a proxy* account, because it is too instrumentalizing and concealing of more than human relations (Gille 2009).

Except for the ecological justice movement, most accounts referenced thus far treat the environment as an entity to defend for the sake of humanity and nature itself. However, such

abstract references tend to obscure many mobilizations in the Global South that were ecological but only implicitly referred to nature. As reactions to resource grabbing or elitist conservation, these actions fought for livelihoods that directly depended on the immediate environments and consequently defended those local ecologies. These were instances of "environmentalism of the poor"—local, often peasant resistances that relied on traditional networks and cosmologies rather than professionalized and political groups (Guha 2000; Martinez-Alier 2002, 2012, 2014). Such subaltern struggles were politically related to environmental justice movements, as both united class, racial, and ecological issues in their grievances about livelihoods and local destruction (Guha 2000; Martinez-Alier 2002, 2012, 2014).

This dissertation adopts several analytical takeaway points from this abridged overview of global environmentalism. First, the scale of ecological resistance is not predefined. The environment of the first wave focused on imagining the distant and wild, while environmental justice and environmentalism of the poor address proximate spaces—neighborhoods and villages, families, and bodies. Nuclear accidents revealed the permeability of all social, political, and physical boundaries to radiation, which climate protests took further when presenting the systemic biophysical and social consequences of global warming. Thus, at what scale a mobilization defines the environment and with what content is a matter of historical opportunities and struggle.

Second, environmentalism is a distinctive phenomenon that remains deeply rooted in social and political structures. Ecological movements are often grounded in localities, composed of classes with specific epistemic repertoires, and draw on available local, national, and international resources and strategies. Politically, ecological movements present themselves as pan-ideological, anti-establishment, and anti-systemic, allowing them to appear less divisive and to mobilize broad support. This social and political embeddedness means that the history

of environmentalism oscillates between incorporation and radicalization: from radical New Social Movements that later turned into professional groups and NGOs, and from institutionalized parties to contemporary youth movements and local sovereignty initiatives. Yet, the literature on environmentalism of the poor warns against reducing social embeddedness of environmentalism to narrow social movement frameworks, arguing instead for situating ecological actions within wider relations of production and reproduction (Martinez-Alier 2002; 2012; 2014).

Third, "environmentalism of the poor" provides a multiscalar perspective that this dissertation also favors. On the local scale, it highlights the struggles of peasants, workers, women, and racialized groups. On the global scale and systemic level, the notion situates the livelihood-based struggles within global capitalist patterns of ecologically unequal exchange. Ecological debt results from the systemic transfer of "cheap nature" from the Global South and internal peripheries of the North to the core (Martinez-Alier 2002). In this sense, "environmentalism of the poor" links production and reproduction embedded in the local environment and global economic inequality. With these takeaway points at hand, I turn now to the dissertation's key concepts—the environment and authority.

On authority-making environment and environment-making authority

Authority-making environment and *environment-making authority* are the two central heuristics of this dissertation. Rather than pointing to single actors or isolated settings, they serve to highlight patterns and constellations of relations. Asking *what, who, and where the environment is* helps identify the contents, boundaries, and scales of social and ecological settings in different historical periods. Likewise, asking *what, who, and where authority*

is directs attention to the most influential economic and political actors, the durable connections and modes of operation they establish, and the ways key actors compete over power and resources. Each chapter treats these questions as historically specific inquiries into how boundaries, constellations, and modes of operation within and between the two sides shifted over time.

What is the environment? This dissertation begins with the assumption that people and the ecology they inhabit form a long-lasting, emotionally charged, and existentially central spatial unity—that is, the environment. As a unity of interdependent relations, the environment emerges from natural and social processes. It is especially dependent on the dominant political-economic order that sets parameters for both human and natural integrity. The encompassing definition draws on a range of authors who diagnose the issues of the world we inhabit through problematizing the divide between culture and nature. Common to these authors is a dynamic, holistic view: society and nature as mutually constitutive.

The "dwelling" perspective captures how humans produce a landscape through their everyday behavior, while geographical and biological characteristics of an area also influence those practices. A landscape, then, represents both a testimony of codependence and a repository of belonging and identity (Ingold 2000). However, authors in the Marxist ecological tradition insist that dwelling does not happen in just any habitat, but in spaces historically conditioned by capitalist production (Howard 2018). Marxist geographers and historians seek not only to bridge the gap between culture and nature but also to connect ecology with political economy, or more precisely, with capitalism. Neil Smith (2010) and Jason Moore (2015) both start from Marx's understanding of *metabolic labor relations*: people produce nature by acting upon it and using its resources, while humans themselves are natural beings whose biological evolution and cultural practices have been shaped by their influences on the natural world. Smith and

Moore extend the metabolic-dialectical perspective into a systemic understanding of the production of nature under capitalism. Clearly, capitalist relations of production are unimaginable without an ever-widening use of raw materials to keep the profit cycle running.

To enable the physical use of *cheap nature* (Moore 2015), nature is defined and transformed through a variety of socio-cultural activities: discourses about its character and purpose, scientific knowledge, technological means, and property relations, to name a few. Once externalized, portioned, and calculated, nature becomes an economically unaccounted source of value. Natural resources are regularly exhausted, socio-ecological crises become acute, and new frontiers for cheap nature continually emerge. Applying capitalism-centered analytical lenses to the environments of Yugoslavia, I argue that even state socialist energy production followed the logic of capitalism. I show that major ecological transformations relied upon valuation and devaluation strategies, were embedded in global capitalist relations and events, and that energy policies often had tangible negative effects on how communities dwell and ecologies reproduce. To think of connections between socialist and capitalist production of nature, then, means understanding the *Capitalocene* and the *Socialocene* as co-constitutive (Gille 2025). Instead of gauging which system was ecologically less detrimental (e.g., Jancar-Webster 1987), we should rather look at how uneven market exchanges and ideological and military competition across the Iron Curtain jointly produced the world we inhabit (Gille 2025).

A temporal perspective on the environment is equally important. The nature we inhabit mirrors our past relations, practices, and ideas. The landscape around us is a product of numerous interventions, exhaustions, and crises. But not only the physical world—our very conceptions about what the environment is, ought to be, and what is to be done with it are historically contingent. In this sense, David Bond (2022) shows how our present conception of ecology as something endangered yet salvageable through proper institutional measures originated from a

specific historical context. The idea of an environmental crisis did not simply arise from observing recurring, widespread degradation; rather, it appeared in the 1960s, when oil extraction accelerated and, with it, problems such as spills and pollution multiplied. The institutional response in the US was a range of policy mechanisms and calculations for managing the problem. Once "invented," the idea of environmental harm paradoxically co-opted critiques through safety rules and standards that promised orderly extraction more than they managed to reduce oil consumption and accidents related to it (Bond 2022). Thus, my dissertation adopts Bond's premise that the environment is a political category and historical creation by investigating how actors in socialist and post-socialist times mobilized the idea of the environment for either the extractivist status quo or insurgency against degradation.

From the brief overview of the "production of nature," we can see that creating infrastructure and producing the environment result in a single outcome: the built environment. This outcome broadens the meaning common in urban studies that defines the built environment primarily as urban and industrial space. To think more broadly means that all raw materials, power plants, rural labor, and other resources—often physically distant from cities and conglomerations—constitute the very core of the built environment. Every infrastructural intervention thus becomes an act of creating a built environment, that is, of changing space, communities, and natural habitats. Such a broad conception follows scholarship in human geography that treats the unequal relationship between town and country as a fundamental dynamic of capitalism (Brenner 2016).[8]

Where is the environment? My premise is that the environment represents a unity built upon relations of production and reproduction, as well as upon shared identity, which always has a

[8] Of course, Raymond Williams' (1975) work on rural-urban relations from a cultural perspective is an important addition to resource-focused approaches. John Berger's fiction, particularly the *Into Their Labours* (Berger 1992*)* trilogy, is exceptional in depicting the ecological, social, economic shifts in the mountainous countryside, which occurred with proletarianization of rural labor in the Alps.

particular place as its anchor. I could therefore easily point to localities as primary instances of the environment, such as the villages in the Iron Gates gorge or around Stara Mountain. Indeed, these two places serve as my main vantage points for understanding environmental politics.

However, my comparative-historical approach goes beyond narrowly defined events and locations of mobilization. The framework's aim is to grasp historical currents and shifts. In this sense, the environment represents any ecology, at any scale, that people identify with, live with, and defend. Such a space can refer to a country, nation, continent, or the globe, and the scale often shifts as a result of historically specific contestations. The environment can thus range from places of immediate interaction with a landscape to imagined communities that rarely interact directly but inhabit the Earth together. As a spatially and temporally unique bundle of ecology and society, the environment represents a contingency that sets the preconditions for struggle. As such, it significantly shapes the course of articulation. This dissertation traces how the scale of the environment has continuously broadened since 1945 as a result of contestation.

Who is in the environment? Or perhaps the more pressing question is: who does not belong, who remains outside? From a dynamic, holistic, and spatially encompassing perspective, everyone is part of the environment, including capitalist actors. Yet I adopt a more restrictive meaning to ask which groups belonged to, spoke or claimed to speak for, and stood for the environment in different periods. In the cases of the Iron Gates and SHPPs, those primarily part of the environment were communities with established connections to the surroundings that the infrastructure endangered. The analysis becomes far more interesting if we go beyond immediate local dependency. Consider carbon footprints, droughts, floods, and interventions on international rivers, such as the Danube, or on oceans. Belonging expands when people perceive their immediate lives as dependent on wider ecological conditions. The question then becomes: through what political actions are environments defined as national, continental, or

planetary units? This thesis examines the discursive production of ecology in Yugoslav and Serbian history—as a local habitat, a European project, or a matter of national survival. Chapters 3 and 5 trace why such production did not succeed in cases where locals did not recognize water as threatened, or when threats to the nation and energy system overshadowed representations of an endangered ecology.

How does the environment make authority? Once we understand it as a social construct, it is essential to sketch how the environment "makes" authority. Contestations are the primary methods that pressure institutions to revise policies, mitigate consequences, accept concessions to popular and expert demands, or even cancel intended projects if the pushback is strong enough. Yet, the most interesting effects, analytically speaking, take place below the surface of specific policies and projects and reach deep into political affairs. First, contestations can alter the institutional organization by forcing stakeholders to regroup or realign between the conflicting sides. That is how the authority-making environment emerged in both the Iron Gates and the Stara Mountain from the collaboration of experts and local leaders with the protesting communities. Second, conflicts, unfulfilled demands, enforcement, and the disappointed trust change how constituents relate to their political representatives. In those instances, challenges to political legitimacy and attempts at regaining it become the means of environmental politics, as happened in the Iron Gates gorge.

Finally, the environment establishes authority through more indirect means by changing how the political arena functions, specifically who takes part in it and what counts as a political issue. With their anti-establishment orientation, ecological actions can attract social groups that are otherwise disinterested or disappointed in institutional politics. They broaden the meaning of the political to include questions of social and ecological reproduction. Thus, they blend broad categories like the nation, the body, kinship, and nature. As a result, popular movements

and green parties can emerge, or at least, ecological questions can rise high on the political agenda, making it difficult for representatives of the authority to implement their policies without encountering discontent. The latter scenario happened with the protest against SHPPs in Serbia.

To summarize, the environment is an open category that is historically specific and a product of political action. It emerges through relations of production, practices of belonging, and shifting scales of identification. This framing guides the dissertation's analysis of how ecological conditions were produced, contested, and transformed in Yugoslavia and Serbia.

Now that we have defined the authority-making environment, the next step is to turn to the environment-making authority.

What is authority? In my conceptualization of authority, I aim to identify historically specific compounds of actors with key influence over energy infrastructure. I rely on and extend Christian Parenti's (2015) argument about the "environment-making state." As in his original conceptualization, I am interested in laws and policies governing property relations, conditions for profit-making, and knowledge production, among other domains vital to the development and operation of infrastructure. However, my choice of the term *authority* over *state* reflects the fact that the central state was seldom a homogeneous actor, with Yugoslavia and Serbia having quite different institutional architectures. But as Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate, the Yugoslav state had a far more complex structure consisting of governing and party institutions at local, republic, and federal levels—an organization that could hardly be described with a singular term. Moreover, the institutions discussed across the dissertation frequently operated on scales above and beyond the central government: international institutions, transnational

political-economic forces such as market conditions, and local institutions whose roles often diverged from those of central state actors.

Beyond this scalar complexity, the term *authority* signals that my thesis is not concerned with fixed institutional functions, as in Parenti's account (2015). Instead, I use it to capture how power is expressed by different actors in a given period, through their relations and shifting balances, that decisively shaped energy infrastructure. Thus, beyond Parenti's question of *who* governs the environment and how, my analysis also explores in depth the shifting relations among key institutions. Consequently, the conflicts and tensions I highlight are not only between authority and the environment but also within each of them. I build upon the historical materialist policy analysis that approaches policymaking as a competing, hegemonic, class-based project (Brand et al. 2022). Accordingly, I also explore how actors producing authority compete, struggle, and attempt to establish a balance of influence through energy infrastructure.

While the state in Parenti's analysis affirms the role of national institutions in the exploitation of nature, *authority*, in my case, is an explorative and open-ended term. Authority captures constellations of political and economic actors that varied in different periods, changed over time, and clashed with the environment in the course of exercising power to produce and manage energy infrastructure. The term asks how a dominant balance of influence forms, why it shifts, and what modalities of power it takes when materialized at the Iron Gates in the 1960s and in the villages of Stara Mountain in the late 2010s.

Who is authority? As my literature review argues, the built environment is a co-product of state power and capitalist expansion. This dissertation follows the work of institutional actors such as national and international representatives. Economic actors like small investors or lobbies in the energy industry also factor into the analysis, but their position between the state and capital remained ambiguous, as Chapter 3 shows. All these groups of actors together contribute

to environment-making—albeit to different degrees, through different means, and with different stakes. Even when working together, capital and institutions remain in a tense relationship. The state provides the essential conditions necessary for the extraction of "cheap nature," but it is also the first institution communities turn to when seeking protection from capital. Due to the need for popular legitimacy, bureaucrats and political representatives often have significantly less room for maneuver. The fact that state organization ranges from the communal to the federal level multiplies possible points of conflict and pressure.

Supra-state organizations are other important actors, as discussed in Chapter 4 on EU accession. These organizations create agendas, standards, and rules that vary in binding force but still set important conditions for environment-making. Sometimes, transnational political organizations represent arenas in which capital and states clash. At other times, these international organizations can more independently set agendas that others follow. The EU is a perfect example: its power reflects the influence of lobbies and member states (Gille 2016b), yet it is rarely just the sum of these forces. Like the Yugoslav federal state, the EU's complex bureaucratic organization and internal relations set important contradictory parameters for environment-making. It acts simultaneously as an enabler of extraction (through green capitalist profit-making) and as an ecological guardian (through enforcing sustainability rules).

Drawing on Erik Wolf's (1990) distinction between forms of power, I investigate how the production of the environment also results from indirect forces operating through the activities of states, lobbies, and international institutions. Economic and political influences on the environment, as well as on other political and economic actors, can take the form of impersonal *structural* rather than actor-centered *organizational* power. Effects on the environment arise through lasting conflicts, patterns of exchange, and global events. Structural capitalist forces, as relations of uneven development, appear in the form of durable patterns that institutional

practices continually reproduce. My understanding of authority, therefore, is more open-ended, multiscalar, and relational than a simple institutional or state-centered approach.

Where is the authority? The "where" refers less to a fixed location than to shifting boundaries and positions. Like the environment, authority is not static but the product of multiple factors and political activity. The relations that constitute authority are particularly evident with scientists and the local state (or with environmental movements that become co-opted). Natural scientists and engineers are key producers of knowledge on hydropower infrastructure; they render energy within ecology legible, quantifiable, and extractable. They can broaden the horizons of what is possible and create the means to achieve it. Experts, therefore, hold a special place in environment-making authority. In this dissertation, I show how expertise facilitated the maximization of energy production at the Iron Gates and shaped responses to energy shortages through the expansion of domestic sources. Alternatively, ecologically oriented scientists can also be part of the environment, producing arguments that define the boundaries and scales of what is to be defended. This decisive role was especially evident in the protests against SHPPs in Stara Mountain, as the final chapter shows, where experts provided the empirical arsenal for a discourse of national eradication. Their role is never singular: because conditions of knowledge production, status, influence, and purpose vary, experts occupy multiple and shifting positions.

The local state also occupies an in-between position. Like scientists, communal representatives can act on both sides. The local state can belong to the environment and play a decisive role in challenging authority on behalf of the community. This dual role exists because local representatives are intrinsically dependent on the local ecology. Their legitimacy as leaders depends on their relationship with their constituency, while their ability to act autonomously depends on higher-level state structures. In the Iron Gates project, communal leaders

sometimes acted as intermediaries; in the Stara Mountain case, their dependence limited them. Village leaders could be key interlocutors for authority, and as Chapter 5 argues, they could also thwart environmental mobilization if they mediated the influence of municipalities and investors. Whether local leaders belong to one side, the other, or both as mediators is always a matter of contingency and politics.

To sum up, authority in this dissertation is not a fixed or singular actor but a historically contingent constellation of state, supra-state, and local institutions whose balance of influence shaped energy infrastructure. Like the environment, it is relational, multiscalar, and continuously reassembled through conflict and negotiation. This conceptualization extends insights from UD by showing how structural capitalist forces materialize in institutional constellations that govern extraction, distribution, and ecological transformation. By tracing when and how these constellations shifted, the dissertation identifies the power modalities through which authority both enabled and contested environment-making.

Methodology

At its inception in 2019, my research proposal focused on a twin case of mobilization against SHPPs and EU policymaking. I intended to explain why the policy for renewables unfolded as it did, what structural power relations it reproduced, and how villagers and activists mobilized to oppose the projects. Standing at the crossroad of critical policy and social movement studies, I planned for the history section to merely introduce the temporal context for the ongoing events. In the meantime, the historical context overgrew the envisioned mold, spread across half of the dissertation, and redefined the focus and arguments therein. To some extent, the turn occurred due to the typical overabundance characteristic of archives. Historical threads flourished, meandered, and overwhelmed me with their richness, contingency, and

unexpectedness. What was it that I would have missed had I remained at the initially planned crossroad of policy and mobilization? More importantly, what did the combination of ethnographic, archival, and policy methods enable that each method alone could not?

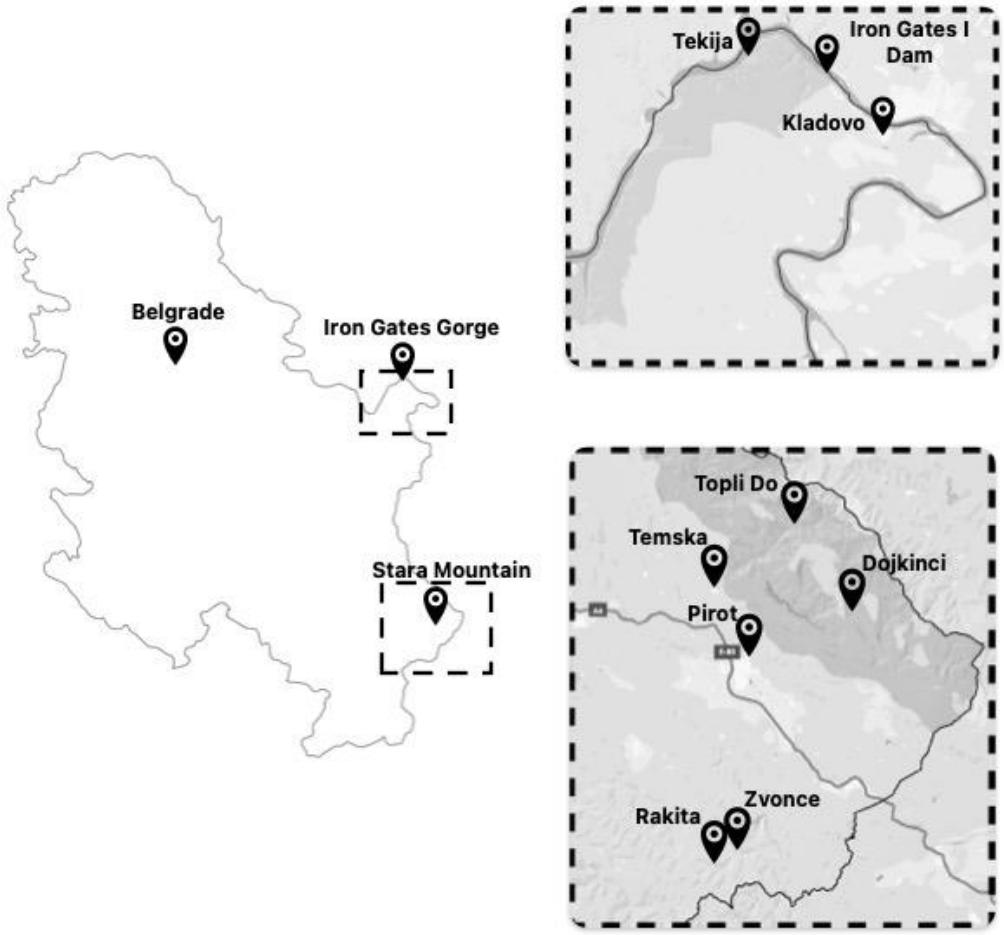
This multi-method approach allowed me to develop a longer historical, more global, and more situated perspective. In conceptual terms, the thesis employed the *extended case* method (Burawoy et al. 2000), which seeks to bridge the gap between ethnography—a locally bounded method—and globalization studies that examine transnational flows and influences. This method extends the usual objectivist social science inquiry into participant observation, maintaining the observation over time and place, moving from micro processes to macro forces, and drawing upon and contributing to theory.

Rather than treating policymaking and resistance as isolated events, the extended case method enabled me to construct a trajectory of evolving energy and environmental politics. I could explain not only how energy policies and social resistance appeared as idiosyncratic phenomena but also how they unfolded uniquely in different localities while still following recognizable patterns—how policies and local actions were embedded in national and international contexts, and how they gained new forms over time, generating path dependencies for novel episodes of environmental and energy politics. With the extended case method at hand, I could bypass the false dilemma between global and local scales, as well as between the systemic and abstract against the particular and idiosyncratic in social theory (Gille 2016a). I could argue that unique institutional decisions and local reactions were structured within global and historical trends. Conversely, I could also apprehend those general trends via ethnographic access to localities and the examination of concrete policies.

I employed various ethnographic methods to become a participating observer of my interlocutors' worlds and to trace their activities across space and time. Villages in and around

Stara Mountain—Temska, Topli Do, Dojkinci, Rakita, and Zvonce—were my central sites. My fieldwork was intermittent due to logistical constraints and limited accommodation. First, I visited Temska, Topli Do, and Dojkinci for two weeks in December 2019. Once the pandemic subsided somewhat, I spent a month in Dojkinci in 2021, where I returned again in 2022 and 2023 for shorter follow-ups. In the summer of 2022, I also spent a week between Rakita and Zvonce, though the lack of rental accommodation prevented me from staying longer. Observations of everyday life, participation in various activities, and interviews with locals and visitors were my regular activities. Between villages, I also interviewed activists in Belgrade and Pirot, attended several protests in Belgrade, and conducted online interviews with academics engaged in the movement.

Each village provided me with a unique perspective. Temska and Topli Do were essential for following the resistance at its height, as locals were particularly engaged in this area. Temska was the largest village and the closest to the nearby city of Pirot, with a long history of anti-hydropower activism, making it crucial for the initial wave of resistance. Residents of Topli Do were particularly effective with their months-long barricade and intensive renovations for rural tourism in the aftermath of the protests. Rakita and Zvonce were the only two villages among the five where an SHPP was successfully built, despite the intensive demonstrations that occurred in Rakita. Therefore, while the first group of villages helped me understand what made the mobilization successful, the latter group was a counter-case for explaining the limits of mobilization. My stay in Dojkinci was particularly fruitful for immersing myself in everyday village life and exploring topics beyond the immediate concerns of SHPPs. Personal and family trajectories, collective histories of sheep herding, depopulation, and the nascent development of rural tourism as an alternative to SHPPs were the main topics I explored there.



Map 1. Main locations of the conflict in the Iron Gates gorge and key field sites in Stara Mountain

The locations of my archival research also varied depending on the focus. The Archive of Yugoslavia was particularly useful for topics related to electrification during state socialism and the initial planning of the Iron Gates I project. The National Library of Serbia held collections of all major newspapers, which were crucial for understanding the public perception of the country's largest dam. This library was also an indispensable source of secondary literature and expert materials on energy planning. The local Archive of Negotin housed a

valuable, underexplored collection of documents produced by municipal institutions during the expropriation and compensation process for properties lost to the dam's construction. Minute meetings, decisions, policy drafts, and PR reactions were the most common materials I encountered there. Finally, the Open Society Archive provided me with sources—media and policy reports—on energy policy and ethnic tensions in the 1980s.

However, the materials in these archives were neither a treasure trove to be simply collected nor objective repositories of undistorted truths; *reading along the archival grain* was integral to my analysis. Such reading necessitated attentiveness to the institutional origins of the documents and to the silencing such origins enforced (Stoler 2010). The best example was my analysis of Negotin Archive's holdings, which presented only the perspective of the municipal state. To remedy this limitation, I turned to media reports on protests organized by Tekijans, which were covered in major national newspapers. Surprisingly, such reports provided ample space for local voices in the Yugoslav media landscape of the 1960s.

Reading along the archival grain also meant not taking the materials at face value but understanding the role of curators and their institutional mission (Stoler 2010). In the case of the Open Society Archives, the materials I encountered focused on the failures of the late Yugoslav state and inter-ethnic tensions that exploited energy infrastructure. That such topics were in the focus of those collections was understandable, considering that the archive devotedly documented problems of state socialism from a liberal political and economic perspective. Placing the Open Society Archives' sources within a broader perspective of Yugoslav policymaking helped me shift my focus from failures to a more complex picture of Yugoslav global integration and internal dynamics.

I employed policy analysis of SHPPs and relied on diverse methods to comprehend the global and systemic forces that led to their emergence. This methodological extension helped me

move beyond the national focus and allowed me to bypass the usual tropes of corruption. I analyzed primary legal sources, including the EU directive on renewables, national energy laws, and the compliance reports of the Energy Community, which oversees the transposition of the EU framework. Furthermore, I interviewed various stakeholders to gain the perspectives of actors involved in SHPP policymaking. Most notable were the current and former secretaries in the national Ministry for Energy, three intermediaries between commercial banks, EU funds, and investors, and two SHPP investors.

Equipped with multiple methods and supplied with diverse empirical sources, we can begin this extended exploration of energy and environmental politics, starting from the construction site of Yugoslavia's most exemplary dam, the Iron Gates I.

CHAPTER 1: THE FOUNDATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN IRON GATES I

Introduction

Even before the inauguration of the Iron Gates I in 1972, experts had already imagined the environment of the gorge itself as *the* national electric energy hub. The range of methods hydrologists and engineers employed—cartography, calculations, and modeling—was essential to the creation of a legible energy sources that planners measured, divided, extracted, and appropriated in order to supply the economy with *cheap energy* (Moore 2015; Patel and Moore 2018). The dam was first envisioned in the systematic survey of hydropower potential, published as *Waterpower Resources of Yugoslavia*. Bold blue lines representing rivers are the main geographical elements in the hydrological maps of the *Waterpower Resources of Yugoslavia*. The thicker the lines, the higher their hydroenergy potential. The most noticeable spots are the areas in the Danube's Iron Gates gorge, where the thickness turns into two irregular zigzags to emphasize its exceptionality. Here, the density of waterpower and potential for generating cheap energy were the greatest, and it is where the two Iron Gates dams were eventually built.

The Hydrotechnical Institute Jaroslav Černi published *Waterpower Resource of Yugoslavia* in 1956. It was the holy book of hydrological knowledge in Yugoslavia, in which experts presented morphological, hydrological, and topographical measurements of the country's 26 most significant rivers. The book was the first systematic registry and survey of water potentials, with detailed measurements rendering water as a calculable resource and making it legible for energy-related purposes. The study began by elaborating on "the law of electricity

production growth in the world and Yugoslavia," situating hydro energy within the country's overall energy system. It further differentiated between hydro potentials that were theoretically, technically, and economically viable. Each river was presented as a root system, with quantified amounts of water coming from precipitation and from streams feeding its basins. The chief aim of this survey was to calculate the "economically utilizable hydroelectrical energy" and establish an agenda that would later guide all major investments in hydropower. *Waterpower Resource of Yugoslavia* laid out the model of hydrological knowledge that defined water as electrical potential with an imperative of its maximized deployment.

Imagining the trajectory of a single molecule of water flowing through the envisioned system of four power plants is a good way to grasp the logic behind the maximization principle that became the defining feature of *abstract social nature* (Moore 2015) in the gorge. A molecule would be used at least four times: first to cool the nuclear reactor, then to spin the turbines at Iron Gates I and II. In the fourth step, during the night when consumption is low, our molecule arrives at the reversible dam. It is pumped uphill to the reversible accumulation by the electrical power from the dams and remains stored for the peak hours. When demand rises, the molecule continues its journey through the turbines of the third dam and then further to Iron Gates I and II. And the cycle would continue. Along its journey, the molecule would pass through multiple transformations between water and electricity. These multiple utilizations and transformations depict how the four planned plants would leave no water idle or wasted.

Among planners, the Iron Gates held the status of "the most precious source and the cheapest producer of electricity in the Yugoslav system," [9] and the main question was how to continuously increase its production. While the concrete at Iron Gates I was still drying, the second dam was already being promoted. Engineers mobilized the technical discourse of

[9] *Tri dunavska diva*, 16.11.1981. Open Society Archive, HU OSA 300-10 Balkan Section: Albanian and Yugoslav Files

"peak" and "flowing" energy to explain that the second dam would be especially useful during periods of high demand. Similarly, in the early 1980s, when Iron Gates II was under construction and power shortages had become acute (analyzed in Chapter 2), the media announced plans for two more power plants in the gorge: a reversible hydro plant and a nuclear power plant. However, neither Iron Gates III nor the nuclear plant was ever realized because of the booming debt and inflation of the Yugoslav economy, sparked by the oil crisis. The gradual transformation of the gorge into an energy hub illustrates one aspect of the environment-making authority's work: widening the *zone of appropriation* over historical nature, with the goal of expanding abstract nature and securing cheap energy—a goal central to both state socialist and capitalist systems (Moore 2015).

Iron Gates I was built through a joint initiative between the governments of Yugoslavia and Romania, which equally shared costs and benefits. It provided both partners with a substantial amount of electricity (1200 MW each). Its ship locks also eliminated the centuries-old problem of the gorge's turbulent waters by enabling safe sailing to the Black Sea. Moreover, the dam addressed the country's growing hunger for energy, increasing national electricity production by 10%. Once the smaller Iron Gates II was added,[10] the two dams created a reservoir of 27,000 hectares—stretching all the way upstream to Belgrade.

The Danube flooded several towns and villages in both countries, displacing around 22,000 people and transforming the landscape, micro-climate, and biodiversity of the gorge. The Yugoslav government relocated about 7,000 people as the towns of Donji Milanovac, Sip, Veliko and Malo Golubinje, Mosna, and Tekija ended up at the bottom of the newly formed lake. The old town of Tekija had 2,200 residents, among them peasants, fishermen, small merchants, and sailors who used to be famous for their skills in navigating the dangerous waters

[10] The second dam was built in 1986.

of the gorge. Tekija's economy flourished due to the strategic location between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, but the subsequent regional and world wars diminished its importance, and the construction of the dam erased it entirely (Trifunoski 1976).

While residents of Sip, being closest to the Danube, were the first to move, Tekijans delayed the expropriation, dissatisfied with the offered terms. In 1964 and 1965, during preparatory works and the establishment of the construction site, the municipal state of Kladovo attempted to relocate Tekija. The plan assumed dispersion to surrounding areas rather than relocation to a new settlement, which Tekijans strongly opposed. As the construction site expanded, foundations were laid, and the main part of the river diverted, the community continued to resist, holding a referendum in 1966 or 1967.[11] Eventually, decision-makers accepted the demand for relocation, but that was not the end of the conflict. Tekijans continued to object well into 1969, distrusting Kladovo's promises regarding the new settlement and rejecting inadequate compensation for lost property and land. Their struggle took various forms throughout the construction process—from individualized clashes that the municipal party-state tried to contain, to a protest addressing federal institutions, and finally to 1970, when both residents and the commune abandoned the party unit in Tekija. All these acts were more than local grievances; they provided the essential cues for understanding the dynamics between authority and the environment.

Iron Gates I is not a story of an almighty socialist state that simply subjugated communities and landscapes to its modernization mission. Rather, this is a story that presents the dam as a field of struggle in which the parameters of environmental politics in Yugoslavia became most apparent. The case of Tekija opens a valuable perspective on the *authority-making environment*—an environmental front mobilized around livelihood concerns, aiming to protect

[11] The exact year is uncertain because the referendum was not mentioned in the minutes, but only in newspapers reporting on the protest held in 1967. So, the referendum took place either that or the previous year.

the community and its way of life, and, consequently, to maintain the integrity of the gorge's environment. Tekija is particularly relevant because, as my archival data show, Tekijans were the only ones in the gorge who organized overt protests.

Through the construction of the dam and relocation of Tekija, this chapter tells the story of how the Yugoslav state paradoxically undermined the political conditions for realizing its own promises in the very communities hosting the infrastructure. However, the case of the Iron Gates cannot be reduced to unilinear, top-down violence supposedly exercised by a homogenous, totalitarian regime, as is often suggested in critical analyses of *high modernism* (Scott 1998). Nor were the locals in Tekija merely victims of a modernist project seeking ways to maintain their traditionalist lifestyles. Against this view, I present a relational and processual account of the Iron Gates as a field of struggle. I trace the struggles around devaluation and political legitimacy, showing how local resistance gradually switched from silent dissent to organized discontent against the municipal state. Being deeply embedded in the socio-environmental landscape of the gorge, the local communist party in Tekija became the epicenter of conflicts between the community and the municipal party-state in Kladovo, eventually imploding and disintegrating. The locals' ability to crosscut and surpass the unity of the local party meant that legitimacy remained sought but beyond the municipal party-state's reach.

Analyzing the Iron Gates as a field of contestation—looking at the reasons, methods, and outcomes of these struggles—also allows me to revise the genealogy of environmentalism under state socialism. Against common accounts that locate environmental struggles in antinuclear movements or Cold War international activist exchanges (Guha 2000a; McNeill and Engelke 2016; van der Heijden 2014), I argue that environmental struggles are at least as

old as infrastructural investments themselves. In other words, local struggles around infrastructure, which I argue were inevitable due to systemic devaluation, should be understood as instances of *environmentalism of the poor*. This kind of ecological resistance originates primarily from the economic consequences that environmental interventions impose on the livelihoods of peasant, working-class, and subaltern communities (Martinez-Alier 2012). Such struggles are environmental because they integrate socio-material reproduction and ecological well-being, even if they do not explicitly invoke abstract notions of nature as other movements do (Guha 2000a; Martinez-Alier 2012). Although Tekijans' protests did not use ecological language, their collective distress due to the transformation of the environment was pervasive and voiced through grievances concerning distribution, participation, and worthiness.

The chapter first situates the case within the literature on the high modernist state.It then traces the mechanisms of the environment-making authority, particularly the media's production of sentiments for the construction of the dam, the expropriation and reshaping of property relations, and the transformation of regional production and reproduction strategies. The final section elaborates on the political consequences of the authority-making environment, consisting of local resistance and the collapse of the municipal party's legitimacy. It follows how the dissent in Tekija grew from the *weapons of the weak* (Scott 1985), including individual conflicts, to *jumping scale* (Smith 2010) when community representatives bypassed the municipal state to address federal institutions, culminating in the disintegration of Tekija's communist party once the construction of the dam and relocation were complete. The conclusion proposes an alternative genealogy of environmental struggles during state-socialism.

The archival material for this chapter consists mainly of meeting minutes from the local party in Tekija and its superior municipal party in Kladovo.[12] The minutes reveal a multitude of voices and tensions, but although named, it is difficult to trace the voices back to the individuals and their organizational and communal positionality without proper in-depth oral-historical research in the community, which I could not conduct due to practical constraints related to organizational and material resources. Despite this limitation, the meeting notes remain a potent source, providing a time machine-like impression of how the pressures from the Tekija community and Kladovo party-state refracted within the local party. Doubts, balancing, taking sides, anxieties, disenchantment, and encouragement are among the frequent tones of the meeting notes. Apart from their emotional and attitudinal depth, the minutes also provide a temporal scope at the legitimacy-making of the municipal party-state, from its emergence and enforcement to its failure.

Environmental politics beyond "high modernism"

Iron Gates I is a foundational yet underexplored case of environmental politics in Yugoslavia. With its size, rhetoric, technology, and scale of socio-ecological transformation, the dam exemplified the ambitions, exclusions, and unintended consequences of socialist modernization, and it easily fits the ideal type of a megaproject (Bodnar and Veres 2013; Flyvbjerg 2003; Gutierrez et al. 2019). Previous analyses of the dam (Creţan and Vesalon 2017; Jovcic 2016; Remus et al. 2023; Vãran and Creţan 2018)—from geographical and visual-ethnographic perspectives—have emphasized the socio-environmental consequences of this megaproject. With an emphasis on loss, memory, and violence, these works have portrayed the

[12] The material is available in the Historical Archive of Negotin, in the section on Construction Committee SKS HE "Đerdap" 1964-1969 [Gradilišni komitet SKS HE "Đerdap" 1964-1969]. If not otherwise indicated, all the references to documents and minutes that follow throughout the chapter belong to this collection.

consequences of construction for both the relocated communities and the transformed natural surroundings. They rely on the established perspective of critical analysis of "totalitarian high modernism" that traces the harshness of social policies, aesthetics of the built environment, extraction of natural resources, and knowledge production back to the power of the modernist state (Scott 1998). Since James Scott depicts some of the most extreme examples of high modernism as being in the era of state socialism, it is no wonder that earlier accounts of the Iron Gates reiterate Scott's conclusions when claiming that the dam was nothing but a consequence of a totalitarian state that sacrificed both people and nature in its questionable promise of progress.

If my research strategy were limited to the usual topics of the high modernist perspective—scientific optimism, the imperative of progress, aesthetics, and violence and victimization—then that approach might suffice. But its potential remains limited precisely on the topic for which it is supposed to excel, namely, state-society relations. Despite many similarities, my case cannot be confined empirically or methodologically to the usual narrative of high modernism because it reveals dynamics between the state, the party, and the population that are far more complex than Scott's account. Perhaps a reason could be that Yugoslavia does not fit neatly into the category of a socialist totalitarian state due to its exceptionality. Or perhaps the reason lies in the overly general, linear, and macro-scalar character of Scott's framework, which cannot do justice to archival material that requires a historical-anthropological sensitivity and multiscalar perspective (Cucu 2014; Herzfeld 2005; Li 2005; Verdery 2002).

Even at the empirical level, my evidence concerning protests, negotiations with the municipality, and failed legitimacy cannot be reduced to totalitarian, state-orchestrated violence. In that sense, I agree with critics of the high modernist perspective who have pointed out the issues inherent in its homogeneous, top-down portrayal of the modernist state and its

overly simplistic treatment of the agency of those governed by it (Herzfeld 2005). Additionally, the high modernist perspective tends to squeeze out politics, whereas this chapter demonstrates that space for local politics was abundant even within the Yugoslav one-party state—indeed, even in a case of mass relocation where totalitarian violence appears, at first glance, to have erased any potential for politics.

I rely on a set of propositions rather than an overarching theory of the state. First, the state occupies a central role in the environment-making process. In my case, that role is most evident in its production of knowledge, physical infrastructure, and property relations that enable and facilitate resource extraction (Parenti 2015). The state also operates as a "guarantor and coordinator of value," establishing "equivalences of value" that form hierarchies of values, people, and places (Buier and Franquesa 2022). Second, the state is not a thing; it does not act as a unified conglomerate or a coordinated orchestra, even if we consider a one-party state in which the party and the state are supposedly identical. The fact that the state appears as a unitary subject is only a *state effect* (Mitchell 2009) that conceals its constitutive processes and relations. Third, the state is a relation and a process, meaning that it reflects the dominant balance of social, political, and economic interest groups. It also implies that the state is a set of conflictual institutions, and that its representatives occupy multiple, sometimes contradictory, roles (Poulantzas 1979). Since my archival material concerns mostly the local scale, I am particularly interested in changing balances, relations, and roles in the struggles between the local party, the municipal party-state, and the residents.

This chapter, therefore, analyzes what the Yugoslav state did with the people and the ecology when constructing the dam, as well as the consequences those interventions had for the state itself. Following Marxist dialectical analyses of the nature-society metabolism (Moore 2015; Smith 2008), I propose that if the state is essentially an environment-making agent, then the

question is how that restructuring of the socio-physical environment affects the relations between institutions or with the population. Extending Parenti's (2015) suggestion that the character and constellation of the capitalist state itself transform through processes of primitive accumulation, I approach the Yugoslav state as an environment-making authority and, consequently, inquire into the authority-making effects of the altered socio-physical environment.

The making of the gorge's environment

Scientific reports like that presented at the beginning of this chapter were not enough to spread expert knowledge; in fact, media reports played an equally essential role in making the environment. Coverage of the dam's construction can be summarized as a struggle against a giant beast occurring in three acts. At first, the Danube, in the role of the beast, was an unpredictable and frightening river; then it was gradually dammed until it became a "peaceful lake," and finally, when the turbines started spinning, it became an "electrical energy giant," providing 12 billion kWh per year. The ceremonial opening of construction in 1964 was depicted as an "attack on the Danube by thousands of workers and experts" who were about to embark on a "seven-year-long building battle." Without breaks, in three shifts, on weekends, New Year's Eve, even in harsh weather conditions, "the giant electrical plant grew out of sweat, anxiety, and sleepless nights." Despite the continuous progress, the media reminded the public that "the Danube was still capable of making unpleasant surprises." In July 1969, the river retaliated, flooding the partially equipped machine hall with several generators and turbines. Reporters directed the readers' attention to the figure of an anonymous savior who suddenly appeared at the scene: he closed a giant entrance on the construction, saving not only the valuable machines but also his colleagues' lives. They depicted him as a modest hero, without

revealing his identity. Victory was portrayed as imminent despite occasional challenges: "The bulldozers deposited huge amounts of soil and concrete blocks in the river" and "the water was flexing, seeking new ways." When the Danube and the dam faced one another, "the tamed beast… obediently and securely flew—directed and bounded by the human hand and mind—through the ship locks and new riverbed towards the Black Sea."[13]

Such continuous, detailed, and picturesque reporting on the dam's construction had two main ideological effects. First, it depicted the persistence, poise, and courage of construction workers in mastering nature. Instant, almost live reportages made the advancing of the dam tangible, and heroic workers easy to identify with. Certainly, such an ideological effect was not a novelty in Yugoslavia, considering how important early post-war youth work actions were as embryos of the socialist promises, as places where the post-war generations demonstrated their strength, hope, and decisiveness. Those ubiquitous early collective actions conveyed a recurring feeling that the new society was emerging almost out of nothing, a sense nurtured by the postwar destruction and largely intact nature. Mastering nature was an expression of the socialist will and equaled the struggle against the pre-modern backward past (Matošević 2017; Pogačar 2020; Thompson 1948). Thus, I understand the figure of a heroic professional builder on the dam's construction site to be a discursive extension of the figure of a barehanded volunteer from the youth work actions.

Second, while youth work actions symbolized the triumph of will and collective strength, the media framed the Iron Gates as a transition towards a victorious socialist science, technology,

[13] These and other quotations can be found in daily press *Politika*, published on September 6 1964 and September 7, 1964. Some titles about the ceremony of construction launching were: *Vision of the future glorious construction above the water* (Vizija buduće veličanstvene građevine nad vodom) and *Presidents Tito and Dej are opening today works on hydropower plant Iron Gates* (Predsednici Tito i Dež danas otvaraju radove na hidrocentrali Đerdap). Extensive media reports about the ceremony of the dam opening available in the daily *Politika* from May 16 1972. An encompassing collection of newspaper articles, interviews, and testimonies about the Iron Gates I construction available in **The Land at the Bottom of the Lake: Development through nature in Yugoslav (post-)socialism**.

and expertise. The emphasis on the details of the construction process, on the aesthetics and magnitude of the dams, provoked admiration, pride, and a sense of technological advancement. "Installed cables can circumvent the equator ten times." "Used concrete equals two hundred Brotherhood and Unity highways." "The fifth biggest dam in the world." The victory of Yugoslav techno-science continued with every new record of electricity production at the Iron Gates. "Enough power to light a bulb for every Yugoslav," as one of the main engineers proclaimed.[14]

Depictions of heroism and progress, coupled with the imperative of maximizing water's potential, provided a clear sense of what was valuable, distinguishable, and admirable in the gorge. Unsurprisingly, much less emphasis was placed on what was not considered as such, like peasant populations and their traditional subsistence practices. However, the fact that the peasantry was not openly identified as an antipode to the dam does not mean it was entirely absent. As the underdeveloped "other" (Ferguson 1994), peasants were indirectly present but more like in a rearview mirror, with a focus on the path ahead rather than what was left behind. This perspective appeared in documentary films following the construction that visually narrated the transition from traditional society,[15] in ethnographic writings describing relocated households embracing tourism in their new houses (Trifunoski 1976), and in press coverage that seemed to express empathy for locals' sacrifices while simultaneously framing them as a necessary step towards a more affluent society.[16] The point was not to label the starting point in negative terms, but to make development interventions seem necessary (Ferguson 1994) by presenting the energy hub as a feasible, concrete, and widely beneficial goal to all.

[14] *Sijalica za svakog Jugoslovena* (A bulb for every Yugoslav). May 14, 1972, Politika.
[15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUkJCAIS6oU and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5xxwgkSmSk Accessed on Nov 12, 2024.
[16] Rokić, Vasa. 1967. 'Tekijanci samo traže Tekiju'. (Tekijans only want Tekija), *Borba*, 10 November 1967.

Changing regional ecology of production and reproduction

To construct the energy hub and enhance sailing, the regional structure of production and reproduction also had to be reconfigured—another way of making the environment in the gorge. Certain livelihoods and settlements needed to be disassociated from the space and relocated to areas where they did not interfere with the novel purpose of energy generation. The relocation of several towns and villages with almost 8,000 inhabitants was not only about a location change but also about changing the ways those people lived, worked, and cohabitated with the regional landscape.

Determining which agricultural land to flood or defend, which settlements to preserve, relocate, or disperse, and what industrial base to maintain in the region around the gorge depended on the balance of maximizing electricity production and minimizing the costs of flooding and defense. My archival analysis shows that one of the main dilemmas planners faced when trying to maximize electricity production concerned the expected rise of the Danube. Decision-makers weighed the amount of power production against the extent of flooded land—the greater the former, the larger the latter. They looked for an "optimal height" of the Danube to achieve the highest output that would not drastically increase the costs of expropriation or flood defense. A water level of 69.5 meters would have produced more electricity but also flooded more arable land than 68 meters, thus increasing the budget for compensations. Their next decision concerned which areas to flood and which to defend. The economic costs of both were planners' main criteria: if the anti-flood system comprising embankments and canals was too expensive, they opted for flooding the area and reimbursing the owners (on problems with compensations, see the following section). Ultimately, the defensive system and budget for

flooded areas were set for a height of 68 meters.[17] As with technics for producing an abstract, productive nature, the imperative of agricultural production guided the search for the optimal cost. The priority was making construction and energy production cheaper, and this could only be done by removing the conditions for agricultural production.

Economic calculation also determined which towns would be collectively relocated and which would be dispersed into existing settlements, with little regard for agricultural production. The initial plan to disperse Tekija's residents to nearby Kladovo was based on the estimation that too few locals depended on agriculture, that its contribution to the local economy and subsistence was minimal, and that the relocated people therefore did not need another settlement with access to fields and gardens.[18] This reasoning, however, angered Tekijans, and they requested to be relocated collectively and with access to arable land.

The devaluation of existing economic activities and revaluation of new ones did not stop at agriculture; entire sectors became obsolete within a few years. The rise of the water level reduced the availability of fertile land and altered the local climate, which had once been especially favorable for almond production. The dam created a giant lake, which drastically transformed traditional fishing practices. Some locals derisively called the lake a "swamp." The construction blocked native fish migration and thereby put a halt to the caviar production for which these communities were once famous. The introduction of fish stocking, intended to compensate for disrupted migratory routes, shifted the species composition in the gorge's waters. The "swamp" also became a dumping ground for sludge, sewage, and garbage from across the country and region, resulting in significant changes to the water's physical and chemical properties. Finally, the installation of ship locks rendered obsolete the specialized

[17] Prodanović, Đorđe. 1969. Zaključci o neposrednim zadacima u vezi sa izgradnjom hidroenergetskog i plovidbenog sistema Đerdap. Archive of Yugoslavia, registry number TBA.
[18] Unknown author. 1966. "Informacija o dosadašnjoj aktivnosti, problemima koji su se javljali i daljim zadacima u vezi sa preseljavanjem Sipa i Tekija."

sailing practices and local knowledge once necessary for navigating the gorge's treacherous passages toward the Black Sea (Račić n.d.).

Devaluation in some places was followed by the valuation of economic opportunities for others. The significance of the megaproject brought numerous infrastructural improvements to the region, such as a road along the entire gorge that connected all regional towns and many villages. As one of the key centers, Kladovo underwent significant industrial expansion and gained new tourist, health, and educational infrastructure.[19] Its administrative power also grew, as the municipal party-state became the main realizer of relocation and expropriation. Meanwhile, the local workforce that previously faced underemployment found jobs at the construction site. With new training and experience, many became skilled builders who would later migrate to Western and Northern Europe, where construction workers from this region gained a strong reputation. Unlike the agenda-setting peasant question characteristic of the first postwar years (Melissa K. Bokovoy 1998), changes in the gorge represented a subtler form of depeasantization that depended on the ratio between flooding and electricity production rather than on a more direct, overarching policy like collectivization. But even then, the result similarly appeared in a new regional pattern of production and reproduction.

Changing property relations through expropriation

Expropriation of land and houses is an indispensable part of hydropower megaprojects. While an initial step in physical construction, it typically comes last in the process of switching values within the making of the environment—after identifying resources, developing proper technologies for resource use, defining spatial, economic, and industrial plans, and ascribing

[19] Rokić, Vasa. 1967. "Tekijanci Samo Traže Tekiju (Tekijans Only Want Tekija)." Borba, October 11.

new purposes to places. Megaprojects in general often obtain their contours and become social and political facts well before they reach those whom the construction concerns most. By the time they do, their say becomes negligible and largely irrelevant, with negotiations concerning merely practical matters such as the terms of expropriation. The fact that those who sacrifice the most are the last to have a say reveals a major injustice related to megaprojects. As this section argues through the cases of expropriations in Tekija, the injustice lay not only in the temporal order of procedures but also in the distributive inequities caused by insufficient compensation for the expropriation. Undercompensation was a systemic feature of infrastructure-led development in Yugoslavia, confirming that rural and peripheral places bore the heaviest burden of development, thereby becoming internal peripheries in national and international emancipation efforts.

Grievances over compensation did not disappear even after the federal expropriation law was improved in 1965, specifically for the Iron Gates I project. Residents of Tekija claimed that the municipality conducted the estimation arbitrarily, thus reducing the amount they received for houses, land, and forests. The municipality, for its part, defended its decisions as lawful, and therefore realistic and just. The local communist party backed the residents, urging the municipality to reassess the property again and as realistically as possible, explaining that "the citizens did not request Belgrade-level prices but only realistic market estimations, prices corresponding to the real value of their property."[20] The municipality again defended its assessments, claiming that it was only the privileged, self-proclaimed representatives of Tekija who were greedy and tried to enrich themselves on expropriation.[21]

[20] OO SK pri Đerdapskoj rečnoj upravi Tekija. 1967. "Zapisnik Sa Godišnje Izborne Konferencije Osnovne Organizacije SKJ Pri Đerdapskoj Rečnoj Upravi Tekija." p. 5
[21] OK Kladovo. 1967. "Povodom Članka 'Tekijanci Samo Traže Tekiju'; Povodom Članka: 'Izmislili Svadbu Da Bi Prevarili Opštinu.'"

The problem was not so much in the assessment of property in practice but in what the expropriation law recognized as valuable and thus compensable. Despite its gradual improvement, the 1965 law maintained a restrictive material definition of value. Compensation was determined according to three parameters: 1) labor costs for demolishing and rebuilding a house, 2) compensation for damaged or non-reusable materials, and 3) a fixed compensation for moving.[22] In other words, owners had to reuse materials from their old houses and were compensated only for the material value consisting of missing construction materials, labor, and transportation. If this definition of value seemed restrictive, the preceding law was even more drastic to owners whose property was expropriated. In fact, the 1965 law was amended in order to address the problems in the 1957 law, in anticipation of delays in the construction due to local resistance had the expropriation in the gorge followed the earlier law. This is because the earlier law entailed an even stricter material definition, foreseeing compensation only in two cases. First, if owners decided to demolish houses on their own, they were reimbursed only for the labor costs required to destroy and rebuild a house of the same size. Second, if they opted to just abandon their property, they were compensated for reusable materials and the labor costs of rebuilding the house. In both cases, they could receive accommodation.[23] While both laws stipulated that owners should receive a house of the same properties, the earlier law provided even fewer resources for meeting that goal because costs for transportation and missing materials were not included. Owners were perpetually at a loss as they incurred additional costs for constructing new houses.

Regardless of these differences, the 1965 law maintained the restrictive material definition of houses. The primary issue was in the definition because the level of compensation reflected

[22] Unknown author. 1966. "Informacija o Dosadašnjoj Aktivnosti, Problemima Koji Su Se Javljali i Daljim Zadacima u Vezi Sa Preseljavanjem Sipa i Tekija."
[23] Unknown author. 1966. "Informacija o Dosadašnjoj Aktivnosti, Problemima Koji Su Se Javljali i Daljim Zadacima u Vezi Sa Preseljavanjem Sipa i Tekija."

what counted as valuable. To grasp this, consider for a moment the distinction between a house as a *building* that is merely a physical space and a *home* as a totality of physical, social, economic, and spiritual relations. Both expropriation laws recognized only the former, and its physical characteristics as the only relevant aspects when determining the amount of the compensation. Both relied on the premise that the owners should be able to construct a house of the same physical properties, that is, the same size. The premise was that a house of equivalent size equated to just compensation. In this sense, the law rendered *homes* in their totality commensurable with and reducible to physical buildings as fungible.

Such a narrow understanding of the value of homes reflected the coercive legal and administrative power of the central state. The equation for compensation that it put forward reduced the costs of constructing the dam while simultaneously appearing objective and replicable, as all laws strive to be. Unlike material costs, owners did not have any other means to bargain or contest the assessments they received, as they could not legally refer to the "subjective" value of their homes. Parameters like lifestyles, aesthetics, emotions, heritage, proximity to roads and fields did not count in the hard materialist formula of the expropriation law—perhaps they were identified with capitalist "nonobjective" value that inflated and fluctuated real-estate prices. While owners could appeal to the courts, they could not argue for "extra-material values" since they were not legally recognized. Even before the courts, the question was how successful their cases would be considering the lack of knowledge, resources, and connections that rural populations struggled with in legal procedures during state-socialism (Verdery 2002). Ignorance for "non-monetary and non-subsistence attachments to the landscape" was also characteristic of expropriation for other hydropower projects in early Yugoslavia, resulting in the undercompensation and displacement of peasants (Kušić 2025, 11).

That the power of the central state was so prominent does not mean that it lay solely in the hands of central institutions or that it effortlessly transferred to other state actors. On the contrary, the power of different state actors came to the fore, led by different agendas and in the context of constraints specific to their positions. The commune played an important role in expropriation as well. Its employees operated as street-level bureaucrats making estimations, negotiating, convincing, or struggling with locals. The municipality made the decisions in the field but also bore the political cost of public anger over expropriation. Likewise, the investor – the company representing the dam – acted as a state actor, for instance, when requesting the constitutional court to allow it to use an amended expropriation law, which would later become the basis for the new one. The investor initiated the change due to pressure from angry locals, anticipating that their reluctance to participate in the expropriation procedure could delay the construction.[24] The investor's motives lay with the timeline and image of the megaproject, which were not to be hindered considering the infrastructural and reputational importance ascribed to it by Yugoslavia's highest leadership.

In exercising state power, these actors doubtlessly drew on the "peasant question" that the Yugoslav state failed to "solve" after WWII (Melissa K. Bokovoy 1998). It was thus hardly a coincidence that the 1957 law, along with those that preceded it, was so limiting and ignorant of any characteristic of private property that could be associated with peasant life. Nor did the law attempt to reinstate rural practices and livelihoods in new locations. The clear peasant bias was even more apparent in the construction practices themselves. The archival material shows that construction companies conducted numerous cases regarding the destruction of locals' property in Tekija and Sip.[25] They often trespassed and began their work even though the

[24] Unknown author. 1966. "Informacija o Dosadašnjoj Aktivnosti, Problemima Koji Su Se Javljali i Daljim Zadacima u Vezi Sa Preseljavanjem Sipa i Tekija."
[25] OO SK Sip. 1965. "Izveštaj o Radu OO Saveza Komunista Sela Sipa Od Prošlih Izbora Do Danas Sa Osvrtom Na Aktivnost Članova u Društveno Političkim Organizacijama."

property was still in the process of expropriation, often destroying crops in gardens and fields. The local party, whose members were also expropriated and were used to mediating between their neighbors and Kladovo, denounced the "disproportionate and premature start of the works that resulted in large damages to private agricultural property", finding reasons for this disregarding behavior in "the size of the project, as well as in the consciousness of some comrades-workers who care the least."[26]

To conclude this section, I argue that the various vectors of authority involved in the Iron Gates I project produced an environment made legible for energy production. Their methods ranged from expert knowledge and popular sentiments to the reorganization of productive and reproductive strategies through the relocation of residents and the alteration of property relations through undervaluing expropriation procedures. By doing so, the institutions involved formed "chains of equivalences of value" between economic activities, ecologies, and social groups (Buier and Franquesa 2022) that equalized energy production with scientific advancement and heroic industry, while at the same time implicitly or explicitly reproducing uneven development at the city-country level. Consequently, the creation of an internal periphery appears not incidental but systemic to the work of environment-making authority during the Yugoslav socialist era. The devaluation of previous productive and reproductive activities laid the groundwork for a form of environmental mobilization emblematic of Yugoslav infrastructure-led modernization. This type of mobilization corresponds to what has been described as the environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier 2012). The resistance in Tekija represents a case of such environmentalism because the main motives included reduced access to land, loss of communal connections, and devaluation of property and traditional ways

[26] OO SK Sip. 1965. "Izveštaj o Radu OO Saveza Komunista Sela Sipa Od Prošlih Izbora Do Danas Sa Osvrtom Na Aktivnost Članova u Društveno Političkim Organizacijama." p. 4

of life that all resulted from a radical restructuring of the gorge's ecology. The next section turns to those contentious actions as instances of the authority-making environment.

The emergence of the mobilization in Tekija

The power of authority explored in the previous section is multifaceted, multiscalar, and exercised by multiple actors. As such, it might appear pervasive and overwhelming, indeed incontestable, just as the proponents of high modernism envisioned totalitarian state power. To avoid these analytical pitfalls, I draw on the work of Tania Li (2019), who, through a Gramscian framework, outlines a conceptual toolkitfor understanding both *articulated* and *counterfactual* politics. She argues that an analysis of politics, resistance, or the absence of dissent should account for critics' framings of a particular formation of power, how their critique is articulated through discursive and alliance-building strategies, and which aspects of that formation the critique makes visible and contestable. Conversely, such inquiry should also address how political articulation becomes interrupted by looking at the counterfactual: silences around crucial issues, insufficient voicing of others, absent forging of certain connections, and affective states maintaining the status quo.

Li's analytical toolkit provides clues for this section. In it, I trace the formation of the authority-making environment, with a specific focus on the shifting composition and strategies of the environmental front. Through the language of claims and rights, Tekijans mobilized the local unit, whose in-between position shifted from mediating authority to becoming a constitutive part of the environment. The success of this constellation of the authority-making environment depended on the community's ability to crosscut and interrupt the party line of influence.

The local party at the epicenter of the struggle

Minutes of the local party meetings indicate that with the start of the construction, locals began expressing dissatisfaction, either due to the misconduct of the construction companies or disagreements over property assessments. Sometimes, individual owners had isolated physical conflicts with workers who trespassed, temporarily halting planned building activities.[27] Some local representatives also sporadically interrupted community meetings with the investor and municipal authorities, demonstrating a collective disagreement with the ongoing procedures.[28] Most often, however, locals avoided overt confrontation and instead simply refused to enter the process of expropriation[29]—that is, to sign the papers, which was a legal precondition since expropriation had to be agreed upon.[30]

While difficult to estimate the frequency and intensity of these engagements, it is clear that during the first year of dam construction, locals relied more on strategies akin to Scott's (1985) notion of "weapons of the weak"—silent, individualized forms of discontent rather than politically salient, visible, and organized actions, which appeared in passing in the meeting notes and in the media. They were nevertheless effective: by delaying construction, they made claims and pressured the investor by pressing local and municipal authorities, thereby endangering the timeline of the significant megaproject. Concerned about these delays, the investor pushed for changes to the expropriation law and an increase in compensation, anticipating extensive animosity from the community.

Yugoslavia's system of self-management provided substantial openings for local politics through its relatively decentralized structure. At the local level, it comprised *local councils*

[27] Pejkić, Jovan. 1967. '*Đerdap Neće Rat Sa Seljacima'*. (Đerdap (the dam) does not want a war with the peasants) *Večernje Novosti*, 26 October 1967.
[28] Ibid.
[29] OK SKS Kladovo. 1966. "Zapisnik Sa Proširenog Sastanka OK SKS Kladovo." p. 5
[30] Unknown author. 1966. "Informacija o Dosadašnjoj Aktivnosti, Problemima Koji Su Se Javljali i Daljim Zadacima u Vezi Sa Preseljavanjem Sipa i Tekija."

(*mesna zajednica*), which decided on relevant local issues, as well as *basic organizations (osnovne organizacije)*—what I call the local party—which represented the political branch of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia.[31] These two local organizations partially overlapped in membership, with the latter being in a directly subordinate role to the communist party. On the municipal level, *communes (opštine)* operated as governing and political centers with considerable autonomy in economic and social policy; I refer to these as the municipal party-state. Above the communes were the provinces and republics, along with federal institutions. Politically, the League of Communists, which was the sole political actor, functioned as an umbrella organization with representation across all four levels of governance. This structure supports my use of authority as an open-ended term rather than a singular, homogenizing notion of the state (Jancar-Webster 1987).

Despite the frequent administrative reforms within the Yugoslav system, communes retained significant leverage, particularly between the 1950s and 1960s (Dyker 2011). Certainly, communes acted as conveyor belts for the republican and federal state. Yet this metaphor obscures their substantial autonomy in local affairs, as well as the strategic role assigned to them by the federal party in its broader effort to decentralize governance in the 1960s (more on this in Chapter 3, where I present diffused authority). In this framework, the Kladovo commune had direct access to the economic and institutional resources that higher authorities had allocated for the Iron Gates project. Its officials led the expropriation process, functioning as street-level bureaucrats, while its party cells coordinated ideological operations on the ground.

Basic organizations were the lowest cells of the political structures (I refer to these as the local party). Hence, they bore the title, *Basic Organization of the League of Communists*. In Tekija, at least two such organizations existed: one representing the village and another linked to the

[31] For a historically vivid instance of positionality and roles of *mesna zajednica* in socialist Yugoslavia, see (Thiemann 2024)

firm that regulated river traffic before construction began. The organizations, like village units, became the central arena of conflict since they acted as mediators between the community, on one side, and the commune-level party and state institutions, on the other. Conceptually, basic organizations functioned as foundational units of environment-making authority, but with the construction advancing, they also became a part of an authority-making environment.

The prevalence of individualized forms of discontent in Tekija can largely be explained by the role of the local party, not because of coercive measures (which did not appear even in traces in the minutes), but rather due to the party's mediation between the community and the municipal state. The local party reported workers' misconduct to the "higher socio-political authorities" and received assurances that such problems would be prevented—though often with some doubt, given "the size of the object and the consciousness of the comrades-workers who in that sense took the least care."[32] In the context of growing animosities towards the municipality, mediation by local functionaries helped resolve certain issues and expressed declarative support for, at least some, claims regarding undervalued property. Most crucially, it channeled discontent through institutional procedures, creating a sense that local voices mattered.

And they did matter, especially in the case of a major decision that altered Tekija's initially planned fate. As explained above, Tekija's residents were supposed to be dispersed to Kladovo (as opposed to being relocated), but the municipal party-state had to revise this plan after the community referendum, when an overwhelming majority voted for establishing a new Tekija. The request for relocation rather than dispersal was clear and united, and it was formulated and addressed through local institutions. Acting as an institutional valve and a political bridge, the

[32] OO SK Sip. 1965. "Izveštaj o Radu OO Saveza Komunista Sela Sipa Od Prošlih Izbora Do Danas Sa Osvrtom Na Aktivnost Članova u Društveno Političkim Organizacijama." p. 4

local party was successful at first at serving the community cause while functioning as a political-ideological extension of the municipal state.

However, the metaphors of valve and bridge overemphasize regulation and connectivity, downplaying the frictions within the triangle of the community, the local, and the municipal parties. The local party representatives were caught in a tightening vice, attempting to accommodate pressures and address the agendas of the other two actors. On the one hand, Kladovo representatives expected the local party to convey their legitimacy, follow its agenda, and guide the community along the projected path of relocation. On the other hand, Tekijans expected the local party unit to be on their side, as neighbors and people who bore direct consequences of the construction, by directing the pressure upwards to change property evaluation criteria and prioritize relocation over dispersal. Being between these two fires, the local party members often spoke as if they needed to demonstrate to Kladovo that their local unit did not deviate from the communist ideological-organizational line, even when disagreeing on the specific issues related to relocation.

Discussions from 1967 illustrate just how squeezed between the two sides the local party was. After the local party leadership presented their critical yearly report, one local party member disagreed with the statement that their unit was to be blamed for the impasse with the locals, because "every person asks for his own." He also disagreed with one of his colleagues that "citizens of Tekija are requesting too much," adding that they, as a local party, demonstrated their devotion during Tito's visit to the construction site. The local party "made sure to welcome Tito as wholeheartedly as possible and that it was not nice nor in a communist manner to be treated like that regarding the relocation by the higher (municipal) party."[33] Another member agreed that the estimations of the commission for expropriations were unrealistic and

[33] OO SK pri Đerdapskoj rečnoj upravi Tekija. 1967. "Zapisnik Sa Godišnje Izborne Konferencije Osnovne Organizacije SKJ Pri Đerdapskoj Rečnoj Upravi Tekija." p. 3

rough and that they, as the party, organization needed to intervene: "Citizens are not asking for some Belgrade-level but market prices, corresponding to the value of the estimated property."[34]

Being an intermediary, the local party was the epicenter and weak point in the municipality's legitimacy-making. The meanings of legitimacy, its linguistic layers, as well as the self-perceived role in its maintenance are well-depicted in the following statement by a local party member:

> Regarding the question of the relocation of Tekija, that needs to be put on the right ground instead of spreading speculations. Mistakes that happened in the beginning should not be repeated. Members of the Alliance of Communists should work constructively and avoid causing distrust towards certain responsible factors. That was our mistake in the start, and the distrust that had emerged then has persisted to a lesser extent even today. We, communists, should act as the interpreters of the agreed program of relocation and insist that everything needs to be done within the legal framework. We need to steer the affairs in the right direction instead of causing a psychosis of distrust. There have been mistakes in that regard, but they must not be repeated after our recent meeting with the responsible (higher-positioned) comrades.[35]

The term distrust was the keyword of the legitimacy-making process around the dam. Not only did distrust and its synonyms (nervousness, speculation, suspicion) appear in official reports on issues related to the construction, but they also entered into the everyday repertoire of political practice among different actors, as will become clear in the section tracing the failure of legitimacy. Local party members talked about distrust in two ways: in support of the locals, as an adverse socio-political condition caused by construction companies' misconduct and undervaluation of property; and in support of Kladovo, as part of their self-critique for siding with locals and fostering animosity towards the "responsible factors," that is, the municipality.

[34] OO SK pri Đerdapskoj rečnoj upravi Tekija. 1967. "Zapisnik Sa Godišnje Izborne Konferencije Osnovne Organizacije SKJ Pri Đerdapskoj Rečnoj Upravi Tekija." p. 5.
[35] OO SK Tekija. 1967. "Zapisnik Sa Izborne Konferencije Mesne Organizacije Saveza Komunista Mesta Tekije." p. 2

In the context of dam construction, trust did not carry the benign, communal meaning of closeness. Rather, it had a central political connotation of moral leadership, which becomes evident when seen through its opposite, distrust. To have trust meant holding the status of a moral leader that added the necessary political dimensions of legitimacy, acceptance, and consent to what was otherwise coercively or institutionally induced supremacy. In the minutes and reports, the quest for that kind of moral leadership appeared in various instances. Local and municipal functionaries envisioned the party in distinctive ways—as the main "interpreter" of the relocation agreement, as a "steerer" of local relations and issues in a desirable direction, as a "problem-solver" that serves citizens and prevents the accumulation and outbreak of their dissatisfaction,[36] and as a "coordinator" who unites all involved institutions and does not pit them against one another.[37] Thus, the legitimacy of the Kladovo commune seemed relatively unchallenged in the first phase of construction, which was marked by silent communal dissent. This was partly because the discontent was initially individualized and partly because the local party managed to mediate and realize the legitimacy of the municipal party-state. Caught in a vice and with members who were themselves affected by the construction, this mediating role was turning more into a broken valve as the construction progressed.

Jumping and containing the municipal scale

On October 13, 1967, several major daily newspapers ran articles titled, "They fabricated a wedding to deceive the municipality," "Tekijans only want Tekija," and two weeks later, "Đerdap (the dam) does not want a war with the peasants."[38] These reports covered an episode

[36] OO SK pri Đerdapskoj rečnoj upravi Tekija. 1967. "Predlog Programa Aktivnosti Osnovne Organizacije SKJ Pri Djerdapskoj Rečnoj Upravi u Tekiji Za 1967/1868. Godinu." p. 1
[37] OO SK pri Đerdapskoj rečnoj upravi Tekija. 1967. "Zapisnik Sa Godišnje Izborne Konferencije Osnovne Organizacije SKJ Pri Đerdapskoj Rečnoj Upravi Tekija." p. 6
[38] Milanović, Lj. 1967. 'Izmislili Svadbu Da Bi Prevarili Opstinu' (They fabricated a wedding to deceive the municipality), *Večernje Novosti*, 10 November 1967.

when fifteen representatives of Tekija collected contributions from other residents to travel to Belgrade, where they would address the national media and file complaints to the Republic Assembly and President Tito's office against the commune authorities. They did so despite repressive measures: local transportation companies refused to sell them the tickets, and a criminal inquiry was opened against them for collecting the money. They suspected the municipality's involvement since their voices were continuously silenced, prevented from reaching beyond the locale "by mercy and force," as they complained to journalists.[39] So, one day, they made up a wedding, disguised as wedding guests traveling to Belgrade to purchase the tickets.

Locals presented their complaints, fears, and grievances in the well-established discourse of distrust but also expressed clear claims to infrastructure and obligations of the municipal party-state as counter-narratives. They distrusted that the municipality truly intended to build a new Tekija because the construction had already been one year late, no groundwork had begun, and housing capacities for a (temporary) workforce on the dam were expanding. They feared that the 400 apartments in Kladovo that would be vacated after the construction were intended for them. Alternatively, even if Tekija were constructed, they would lack the necessary infrastructure. They suspected that the municipality also played on the card of delay: while they refused the proposed plan, the new Tekija was stalled, the construction of the dam advanced, the water level was rising, and they would have no other choice but to move to Kladovo once the water came to their doorsteps.[40] As one newspaper article reported:

> Tekijans claim that the initial plan for relocation did not envision anything they do not already have, because they are not requesting anything more: houses of

Rokić, Vasa. 1967. 'Tekijanci Samo Traže Tekiju' (Tekijans only want Tekija), *Borba*, 10 November 1967.
Pejkić, Jovan. 1967. 'Đerdap Neće Rat Sa Seljacima.' (Đerdap (the dam) does not want a war with the peasants), *Večernje Novosti*, 26 October 1967.

[39] Milanović, Lj. 1967. 'Izmislili Svadbu Da Bi Prevarili Opstinu' (They fabricated a wedding to deceive the municipality), *Večernje Novosti*, 10 November 1967.

[40] Rokić, Vasa. 1967. 'Tekijanci Samo Traže Tekiju' (Tekijans only want Tekija), *Borba*, 10 November 1967.

> the same or similar size, streets of the same width, and identical institutions. They built all public buildings on their own, through their contributions and voluntary labor: a stone-made quay, school, ambulance, cooperative, and asphalted street. In the current proposal, the streets are narrower, the ambulance is relocated to Kladovo, and the cooperative will be incorporated into that of Kladovo.

In the same article, Vasilije Nikolić, the president of the local council (*mesna zajednica*) and a representative in the Kladovo assembly, explained:

> For the infrastructure they are legally obliged to build, there is not enough money. But how was there enough money to build skyscrapers, a huge hotel, a large hospital, and even a fishpond in Kladovo? Those were built with funds intended for the flooded areas. What other money could they have used, when the Kladovo commune itself is not being flooded—yet that's exactly where all the money ended up?

Essentially, this distrust expressed a fear that Kladovo's infrastructural rise represented Tekija's demise. As a counter-discourse, infrastructure—understood here in a broader sense as a network of local institutions and services—figured as the basic claim to social and political rights, a claim to something that belonged to the citizens, their community, and what the (municipal) state had no other choice but to provide. That was not about asking for infrastructure to be donated by the mercy of the sovereign, but rather an obligation that could not be evaded. The sense of deservingness was rooted not in external provision but in communal, collective belonging. To put this in a comparative perspective with the later status of infrastructure in depopulated villages that I explore in the next chapters, this was not "yearning" for infrastructure but rather "claiming" infrastructure. The political sentiment behind the claims was not grieving for the state to step in, make a difference, or introduce progressive legislation from above (which does not mean that the state did not use to do that, looking at historical records), but rather for the state to fulfill its duties.

To claim infrastructure and oblige the state stood in sharp contrast to the silent strategies described in the previous section. The key feature of this new strategy lies not in its content but in its method. Gathering collective resources, avoiding restrictive measures, appealing to

national media, and seeking access to republic and federal institutions were steps in "jumping the scale" (Smith 2008) and bypassing the power of the municipal party-state. The act of jumping over the heads of the commune's party contained a proper understanding of layered sovereignty over the dam project. Kladovo's power was considerable within the system of self-management, yet still limited by the political center to which the commune responded. The move to jump the scale was risky, and there was no guarantee about whom the higher institutions would side with. Kladovo leaders responded with a range of attempts to "contain the scale," which took forms of both public denunciation and the institutionalization of dissent. The initial measure consisted of delegitimizing the claim, the claimants, and the messengers. In their fierce response to the media, municipal leaders denied that the money was spent or that Tekija would not be constructed, they criticized journalists for bias and superficiality, and they denounced the protesters as Tekija's "representatives" (using quotation marks) for misrepresenting themselves as leaders, manipulating the trust of the community, and seeding distrust in order to advance their own interests by getting higher expropriation compensations[41].

In the longer run, the Tekija local party sought to redirect complaints and dissatisfaction back into predictable, less visible institutional channels. One example was the creation of the "commission for following and analyzing negative events regarding the relocation" in 1968, the fourth year of construction. Nominally, its task was to review the expropriation estimations, thus giving owners a second chance to support their claims (the commission decided that 80% of the initial estimations were correct). Beyond reviewing, the commission had a political function of closing party ranks, enforcing trust, and thus maintaining legitimacy. It represented an attempt to better coordinate the work of local parties on relocation issues, imposing a bureaucratic imperative of "proving" claims, whereas claimants had to request a revision,

[41]OK Kladovo. 1967. "Povodom Članka 'Tekijanci Samo Traže Tekiju'; Povodom Članka: 'Izmislili Svadbu Da Bi Prevarili Opštinu.'"

provide a detailed explanation for their dissatisfaction, and argue for a different decision. Those who refused to take this path were denounced as disinterested critics; they became those who did not work for the party nor the collective interest but instead sowed distrust and delegitimized the official agreement. As one local party representative argued in 1969:

> During the last meeting, some comrades presented issues, and when they were told to present those problems to the Commission for following negative processes regarding the relocation of Tekija in a written format and specifically explaining their argument, they did not respond, perhaps fearing consequences or they were just not able to support their arguments or they were in the end entirely disinterested for solving the problems in the best possible way. This is where our main weakness lies. We dared to speak on the streets about what hurts us, but we did not want to try to solve the problems in the meetings or some other constructive ways.[42]

Jumping and containing the scale depicted, on the one hand, that Kladovo's legitimacy was deeply challenged by competing narratives, and, on the other, that the mounting pressure and discontent in the local party rose to a level that required it to close ranks. It is not that the community and local party sought to forge an alternative political organization or alliance, or to play an overt triangulation power game (Verdery 2002). Rather, because local party members were themselves part of the community, I argued that they had little choice but to challenge the dominant paradigm in which a swift and economic construction of the dam was to happen against their personal and collective interests. By failing the dominant line of party influence and forcing it into repressive measures, they crosscut the party command along communal lines. This crosscutting, however, began to show the first signs of the local party's disintegration. The words of one member best depict the spirit of the local party in that period:

> I feel like participating in a meeting of an organization that is falling apart. There is no more the ceremonial atmosphere of an elective conference where we used to discuss various urgent questions in a fiery communist atmosphere. We criticize the work of the youth to conceal our inactivity. The work of members

[42] OK SKS Kladovo. 1969. "No Title." p. 3 Note: there is no title to this document, but its topic was electoral assembly in 1969. The archival marking: OK SKS Kladovo – zapis. OOSK 626/69 p. 3

> of our organization has died out, and everyone just looks out for their own interests.[43]

The failure of legitimacy

"It is all the dam's fault," a member mourned in his explanation for the fragmentation of the local party in Tekija in 1971, shortly after Tekija was relocated and the dam began producing its first megawatts.[44] It was as if the party was losing its embeddedness in the community. Its membership halved from 101 to 51, and those remaining included passive members who rarely attended or actively participated in the meetings, as well as those who abstained from paying the membership fee.[45] It seemed that the party was no longer the site of political exchanges and arguments: "Things are talked about on streets and in *kafana*, outside of the organization," another member complained.[46] The third representative remained self-critical of the party's work and tried to be encouraging, but his optimism could hardly reach far: "Communists are losing morale. They should not and must not lose their morale. Those comrades who are not tough enough should not remain among us."[47]

In terms of its role in reproducing the legitimacy of the municipal local party, the local party had fewer human and political resources to fulfill this function. It could no longer serve as a bridge or valve between locals and the municipality when its importance faded in the everyday life of the village, especially once the dam's construction and village's relocation were complete. Was this the community's revenge for past harms, its disillusionment for being betrayed and sacrificed for the sake of development? Or was it just a sign of the local party's

[43] Ibid, p. 1
[44] OK SKS Kladovo. 1971. "Zapisnik Sa Godišnje Izborne Konferencije SKS." p. 3
[45] OK SKS Kladovo. 1971. "Zapisnik Sa Godišnje Izborne Konferencije SKS." p. 2
[46] OK SKS Kladovo. 1969. "No Title." p. 1 Note: there is no title to this document, but its topic was electoral assembly in 1969. The archival marking: OK SKS Kladovo – zapis. OOSK 626/69
[47] OK SKS Kladovo. 1971. "Zapisnik Sa Godišnje Izborne Konferencije SKS." p. 4

growing political irrelevance in the sunset of the dam's construction—one that crashed above the heads of the local functionaries since they could not reach further to the municipal, republic, or federal state?

Yet it was not only the community that burnt its side of the bridge; the municipality did as well. Kladovo reduced its contact with the local party and cut off the resources necessary for Tekija's operation. It stopped responding to notes from Tekija regarding improvements in the new settlements, which had trouble with unkempt streets and green areas, along with accumulating garbage in public places. Nor did it provide an office for party meetings, "leaving the local functionaries only the *kafana* to solve their problems."[48] It may have even prevented the party from using the local movie hall for film projections, as it was reported that the Workers' University from Kladovo cut the electricity in the hall on the Day of the Republic so that the local party could not use it. On top of that, representatives from Kladovo ignored the local party meetings, which caused strong disappointment in Tekija.[49] All these actions suggest that Kladovo also gave up on the local party, perhaps seeing how ineffective it was in channeling the dissent, in coordinating the relocation, and how many of its members refused to follow the reasoning and actions prescribed by the municipality. In a nutshell, the local party failed to be a proper executor for the municipal "interpreting," "organizing," and "coordinating" aspirations of social and political affairs concerning the construction. Tekija failed Kladovo's quest for legitimacy because belonging to the community, relying on the local socio-ecological environment, and bearing the direct consequences of the construction prevented the local organization from being as obedient, unshakable, and determined as the municipality expected.

Rejected by its disenchanted constituents and abandoned by its patron, the local party headed towards disintegration, indicating that the municipal legitimacy-making chain was in trouble.

[48] Ibid, p. 4
[49] Ibid, p. 4

Yet, the multiscalar complexity of politics cautions against such a linear conclusion. What seemed like a failure of legitimacy on the local scale might have been an effect of its strengthening on the municipal scale. To briefly use the logic of hegemony-building: if I had depicted the process of separation of civil society from the party in Tekija, then there might have been a more intensive integration of the two in Kladovo. If in Tekija, disembedding the community from the environment and subjecting it to various forms of devaluation resulted in a disintegration, withdrawal, and abandonment, then Kladovo might have experienced the reverse. The intensive expansion of the municipality led by the construction of the dam might have bound together the municipal residents, its civil society, the party, and state institutions.

The opportunities and anxieties generated by a megaproject like the Iron Gates I reinvigorated this dynamic in ways that strongly resembled the city-country division. A project of that scale invariably creates new positions for material gain: employment opportunities; transportation infrastructure to enable and aid the construction process; social, health, and educational infrastructure; and housing, entertainment, and hospital facilities can all emerge to serve such a megaproject. Traces of this appeared in Kladovo, too, where apartment buildings, camps for workers, a hotel, and places for sports and culture, among others, were constructed. At the same time, the competition for resources (even when decisions are made at a far higher level and do not depend on the actors below) goes hand in hand with an increase in institutional power. For power to translate from federal and national scales to the very local ones, it needs to be mediated regionally. The question then becomes who occupies the role of political and institutional mediator conducting sensitive operations such as relocation and expropriation. In the case of the dam, that authority was vested in Kladovo municipality, and its decisions could legally be challenged only by courts and higher authorities.

The failure of legitimacy in Tekija and its probable rise in Kladovo were codependent, mutually enforcing processes. Adopting such a perspective carries a double benefit. On the one hand, the city-country relationship becomes understood less statically and uniformly, as a process developing in a conjuncture, with its political dynamic receiving a stronger conceptual and empirical focus. On the other hand, understanding the materialist and spatial foundations of state relations in the context of the production of the built environment casts doubt on the usual totalitarian state versus civil society narrative (or in this case, Kladovo as a higher state against Tekija as a society). Not only does it reject the optics of the state as somewhere above, but it does so by dissecting different instances of the state into a set of multiscalar material relations. These relations form the material basis of politics, thus enabling certain political hierarchies that further strengthen or weaken that material basis.

How does this extensive analysis of party politics matter for the dissertation's main objective, which is to understand the foundations of ecological politics in Yugoslavia? One of my main research questions concerns the formation of the environmental front, as well as its ability to alter how authority operates. The answer to the latter is more evident, as the chapter presented discourses and strategies of confrontation that ensured concessions. Of course, local power was too weak to stop the project, and the imperative of modernization was perhaps too strong to even imagine such a scenario. Nevertheless, the community managed to stay together even though neither the gorge's ecology nor Tekija remained the same.

Conceptually more important, however, is how the alliance came to be. To remind the reader, environmentalism oftentimes builds its agenda upon local issues and then scales up its influence, and that is even more true of movements for ecological justice, to which environmentalism of the poor belongs. Because of this local embeddedness, the nature of local political relations becomes preconditional for the environment's success. What this chapter has

shown is how the local state changed its position from being a mediator for authority to becoming a constitutive part of the environment itself. Thus, the environment was not a static group but a contingent outcome of local politics and the openings that the Yugoslav self-management system provided. The success of the outcome depended on the pressure that local organizers bore as members of the community, and the ability of that community to crosscut the top-down power of authority.

Conclusion: An alternative genealogy of state-socialist environmentalism

While making energy mega-infrastructure the backbone of the socialist developmental project, the Yugoslav state paradoxically undermined the political conditions for realizing the promises of that very project in the communities that hosted the infrastructure. In the first part of this chapter, I argued that the issue lay not only in the chasm between promises and reality, the said and done, or costs and benefits, but rather more deeply in the systemic devaluation of local communities. Those who sacrificed the most for the realization of infrastructure faced economic, social, and cultural exclusions from the promises of development, becoming internal peripheries to the modernization project. Yet the case of the Iron Gates cannot be reduced to the unilinear, top-down violence that the supposedly homogenous, totalitarian state-orchestrated, as is usually suggested in critical analyses of "high modernism." Nor were the locals just victims of the modernist project seeking ways to maintain their traditionalist life in liminal spaces. Against this perspective, I presented a relational and processual account of the Iron Gates as a field of struggle.

In the second part of this chapter, I traced the struggles around devaluation and political legitimacy, showing how the local resistance gradually switched from silent dissent to "jumping the scale." Being deeply embedded in the socio-environmental landscape of the

gorge, the local party became the epicenter of conflicts between the community and municipal party-state, eventually imploding and disintegrating. The locals' ability to crosscut and surpass the unity of the local party meant that the moral leadership remained sought after but out of the municipal party-state's reach. With the analysis of the inseparable dynamic between peripheralization and the loss of political legitimacy, I claimed that every act by the environment-making state might be followed by repercussions to the state's organizational or political capacities triggered by that state-made environment.

Although the consequences for the state were not drastic, they were significant enough to prompt meaningful changes. Policymakers were forced to revise both the project and the expropriation law. While canceling the project altogether would have been the most drastic outcome, that was never a realistic possibility given the dam's importance. The key political effect of the protest was that it not only undermined the party's legitimacy but also revealed a crucial shift in environmental politics that would shape future activism in Yugoslavia, a shift that involved local party members siding with environmental concerns over official policy. In the following chapter, I will show that a similar shift between the blocks of authority and environment occurred among scientists, whose independent engagement played a central role in the success of green politics in the 1980s.

Importantly, highlighting the intimate relationship between the environment-making state and the state-making environment opens up a space for an alternative genealogy of environmentalism during state socialism. Protests informed by claims to land, customary values of homes, and concerns about employment were the foundations of discontent caused by infrastructural expansion. The usual accounts date environmental protests in the region back to the 1980s, when Western antinuclear movements spread their influence across the Iron Curtain, and connected with Eastern liberal and environmental dissident movements (Guha

2000; McNeill and Engelke 2016; van der Heijden 2014). This timeline remained largely intact even in critical analyses that challenged the pervasively dismissive view of Eastern European environmentalism for not being as institutionalized, widespread, and politically charged as in Western Europe.

Alternatively, I suggest rethinking the region's history of environmental resistance through the lenses of the "environmentalism of the poor" (Martinez-Alier 2012)—through overt or covert dissenting practices and discourses that subaltern groups create when facing state- and capital-led dispossessions. Though they may not employ the language of ecology and more-than-human rights, they nevertheless still rely on discourses emphasizing what matters most in their structural position—reproduction and economic value. In this sense, I consider the resistance in Tekija a case of environmentalism of the poor because the project had direct consequences for the local ecology, regional production and reproduction strategies, people's cultural and political status, and the ways they lived within that ecology.

Why were there explicit ecological articulations in the Iron Gates and similar projects, despite the intertwined ecological and economic repercussions? Primarily because environmentalism became a global ideology only around the 1970s, and because it was a fragmented, highly professionalized, and state-managed affair in Yugoslavia (see Chapter 3). Some of the professionals who mentioned the cultural consequences of the dam were state employees, and they did so in a manner that was not ecologically universalist. One effect of this professionalized, state-led ecology was, for instance, establishing the Iron Gates National Park in 1974. In such a version, extraction and protection were not opposed but rendered compatible.

Through a conceptual shift towards the environmentalism of the poor, I argue that environmentalism during state-socialism was as old as the infrastructural-led development project. If the peripheralization that happened in the Iron Gates was not an isolated case but a

trace of the systemic trend of devaluation, as I contended in the first part of the chapter, then there might have been similar instances of resistance that remained undetected because of their localized tactics and narratives in the form of "environmentalism of the poor." Or perhaps they remained invisible because researchers looked for explicitly ecological forms of dissent.

The protest against the Iron Gates was hardly an exception. While scrolling through the newspapers about the "wedding" protest of Tekijans in Belgrade, I stumbled upon a series of media reports on violent protests near Split that happened a few days before the event in Belgrade. The outbreak was organized by locals living around the river Mala Neretva near Zadar, who crushed the construction machines and confined the workers working on a dam on the river.[50] By draining the area to create farmland, the works intended to close people's only waterway to the sea and affect their production/reproduction practices, primarily fishing.[51] Open protests followed, too. To support those facing the trial, hundreds of residents sailed on fishing boats towards the municipal court, chanting along the way against the closure of the Mala Neretva, calling for the dismissal of the local powerholder and the company's manager, and voicing their economic, cultural, and political subjugation. The manager, on the other hand, defended his plan to develop an agricultural mega-complex by bringing in the necessity of progress, and by specifically referring to the readiness of locals in the Iron Gates gorge to sacrifice everything they had ("To drown even the graves of their mothers and wives") for the common interest.[52] Thus, this brief overview of another conflict around the environment shows not only how the dam served as a nationwide exemplary and justification, but primarily as evidence that practices of environmentalism of the poor were abundant during state-socialism. The next chapter situates this and other ecological protests in Yugoslavia's changing

[50] *Večernje Novosti*. 1967. 'Mala Neretva Sukob Sa Seljacima', (Mala Neretva Conflict with Peasants) 17.10 1967.
[51] Dolina Neretve, dir. 2017. *Saga o Neretvi - Dokumentarna Trilogija - ČAROBNI JUG (1. Dio)*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggfvVs66E64.
[52] Ibid, 19:35

geopolitical and geoeconomic integration, and provides a bird's-eye view of major shifts in environmental politics.

CHAPTER 2: THREE MAJOR SHIFTS IN ENERGY POLICY AND MOBILIZATION

Introduction

Global embeddedness and scalar mismatch were defining features of Yugoslav energy and environmental politics. Actions of environment-making authority and reactions of the authority-making environment did not emerge solely in the national setting, as the previous chapter might imply with its scalar focus. Rather, they unfolded in the context of geopolitical and geoeconomic processes that shaped the constellations of both authority and the environment. Likewise, from a historically long and spatially wide perspective, we can comprehend how environmentalism continuously sought to bridge the scalar gap in power relations. While authority accessed material and political resources at both domestic and international levels, local environments had only limited influence. This chapter, therefore, narrates the history of environmentalism as a gradual proximation of influence—of closing the scalar power gap and moderating the mismatch between authority and the environment. It examines how Yugoslavia's environmental politics evolved in the context of shifting global embeddedness and as a result of gradual attempts at scale matching, dissecting the history of the socialist country between 1945 and the late 1980s into three successive periods. In each, a distinct international context gave rise to a particular mode of authority, with the environment adjusting its organizational form.

The first period, spanning from 1945 to 1964, was an era of concentrated authority, by which I mean power concentrated in the hands of just two actors: the federal Yugoslav state and the Western alliance under US leadership. The centralized federal state relied on the extraction and

export of domestic resources to purchase technology for its initial modernization, with the Western alliance providing most of the technology and financial assistance. Mobilizations in this period were rare and appeared mainly as local peasant revolts.

The second period, between 1964 and 1978, was an era defined by diffused authority—that is, a polycentric arrangement in which federal power became decentralized, and the number of international actors influencing the national energy system multiplied. International influences increased through technology transfers, Yugoslav construction exports, and heavy oil imports, while republic and municipal institutions gained strength. Mobilization took the form of "environmentalism of the poor" (Martinez-Alier 2012), of primarily local actions that occasionally "jumped scales" (Smith 2010) against the municipal state.

The third period, between 1978 and the late 1980s, brought *fragmented authority*. By fragmented authority, I mean a constellation in which previously existing transnational relations collapsed, with the domestic institutional power revealing cracks due to internal tensions. Such an arrangement created the opportunity for anti-nuclear protests to close the scalar mismatch and force federal and republican institutions into concessions. Mobilizations reached the level of the central state, just as republican and federal institutions clashed in the wider context of the oil crisis and failing international alliances.

This chapter demonstrates the reason why the term *authority* is used instead of *the state* in this dissertation. The variety of institutional actors invoked above—local, municipal, state, republic, and federal—shows how much more complex the political reality of Yugoslavia was than any singular or homogenizing notion of state might suggest. The landscape of authority becomes even more complicated when transnational actors, such as other states, geopolitical alliances, and international organizations, are included in the analysis, and more so when forces like global market relations come into play. The main task for this chapter, then, is not to isolate

single powerholders; instead, it is to provide a bird's-eye view—to disentangle the constellation of institutions and transnational forces, present how the contours of authority changed with shifting historical circumstances, and how the organization and strategies of the authority-making environment altered accordingly.

The dual influence of global integration and scalar gaps is evident throughout the three periods of authority. Apart from being Yugoslavia's main source of energy, the Iron Gates I was also a node for technology transfers, export of infrastructural works, diplomatic positioning, and an attempt to ease international technological dependency. In addition to opposing the state, local communities confronting the dam faced the weight of a proclaimed public interest: a national project tied to Yugoslavia's global position. After the Second World War, peasants faced a similar burden when the state exported raw materials to obtain technology for modernization. And in the wake of the oil crises of the 1970s, activists and experts opposing nuclear power struggled against state justifications rooted in indebtedness, outages, and oil dependency. In each case, local claims were difficult to match with the state's globalized justifications or even to gain attention.

Besides legitimacy, global positioning and scalar mismatch also altered the composition of authority. Competition over competence and resources among national and international actors affected ecological and energy policies. Certainly, Cold War divisions and the Non-Aligned Movement offered opportunities for technology transfers, yet these same geopolitical ties also imposed constraints that the state sought to overcome through new forms of environment-making. Such a situation demonstrates that the country's position in the global division of labor continuously shaped the environment through structural relations of unequal exchange. Thus, authority throughout Yugoslav history was a combination of a range of factors: geopolitical opportunities, geoeconomic constraints, developmental agendas addressing the country's

position in the capitalist system, political decisions, and transformative events at the international level.

Though national institutions and infrastructural projects mediated global influence over the environment, once environmental politics became part of global politics in the 1980s, the impact on ecological alliances within Yugoslavia grew tangible. International activist and expert networks became a primary source of organizational models. The meaning of the environment widened from local to continental to planetary through transnational cooperation and nationally rising awareness of environmental degradation. Scalar mismatch structured the uneven capacity of actors: alliances of state and capital established the scales at which environments were made, while ecological mobilizations struggled to match them. The chapter presents the historical trajectory of mobilization as an effort to adjust social bases, strategies, and discourses to confront authority at its own scale.

The chapter draws upon a broad range of primary archival and secondary historical sources. The Open Society Archive provided media reports and policy materials that vividly depicted how inter-republican tensions infiltrated energy infrastructure and reduced the country's ability to respond to external economic shocks while feeding separatist politics. Secondary literature on Yugoslavia's political economy and international positioning provided an important context (Allcock 2000; Calic 2019; Dyker 2011; Stubbs 2023; Woodward 1995b), while works on environmental activism (Cifrić 1985; Jancar-Webster 1987; Oštrić 1992) guided my interpretation of ecological politics, especially the role of nationalism in the 1980s. The chapter contributes to the literature on ethnic conflict and dissolution in Yugoslavia by revealing how energy infrastructure served an instrumental role in the prelude to the war.

The chapter follows the same structure as the previous one—in each of the three periods, I trace the dynamics of the environment and authority. Even though the environment remains in focus,

authority receives greater attention than in the previous chapter, which gave an equal weight to both notions. One reason for this discrepancy has to do with the already mentioned scalar mismatch that shaped the uneven ground for environmental politics. Environment-making authority defines the struggle and its terms: it introduces policies, defines new agendas, adopts novel trends, broadens the frontiers of extraction, and responds to changing international conditions. The authority-making environment, by contrast, is more often reactive as it tries to limit these consequences. Such a hierarchy of influence was particularly characteristic of the first period of concentrated authority, somewhat less so in the era of distributed authority, and perhaps the least in the period of fragmented authority, when ecological movements seriously challenged republic and federal institutions. In this sense, the causal direction between authority and the environment appears more one-sided, but becomes less so as the scalar gap of influence reduces.

The second reason for focusing more on authority, especially in the first two periods, is that institutional power strongly shapes historical records about environmental politics. Primary archival data and secondary literature offer far more insights about institutions and privileges from the official angle. Accounting for the environment's perspective becomes a matter of hypothesizing, excavating local records as I did in the last chapter, and putting secondary sources in a different perspective.

My selection of the three periods reflects key turning points. The years 1964 and 1965 mark the beginning of the Iron Gates I construction and the launch of a comprehensive economic and political reform of self-management. Many commentators of the oil crises in Yugoslavia identified this reform as a turning point in the transition from domestic coal toward imported oil. Furthermore, I identified 1978 as the shift from diffused to fragmented authority, as policymakers began another energy transition to domestic coal. Thus, while some turning

points are more clearly identifiable, others are somewhat arbitrary and depend on the specific cases examined in this chapter.

Concentrated authority (1945–1964)

Until 1945, most of the economy in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was foreign-owned and oriented toward exporting rudimentary goods, agricultural produce, and raw materials (Berend 2013; Calic 2019). Even when foreign capital entered industrial production, it brought limited transfer of technology or expertise (Woodward 1995). Electricity was a privilege, especially outside the richer Slovenian and Croatian urban areas. To give a comparative sense, Yugoslavia's energy consumption in 1934 was up to sixteen times lower than in industrialized Western Europe, while electricity use in Belgrade was three times that of Budapest (Calic 2019). In Serbia, national capitalists built small hydropower plants to power their own textile and rubber factories, selling surplus electricity to nearby towns for public lighting. The technology for these few plants came from Austria and Germany (Jovanović 2001).

After 1945, the new socialist state found itself in a vicious circle of underdevelopment. To industrialize, it needed technology, which it lacked; to purchase technology abroad, it needed foreign currency, which it also lacked. Earning that currency required access to foreign markets and goods to trade (Dyker 2011). International aid was scarce: between 1945 and 1947, the only assistance came primarily through UN programs, primarily in the form of food and grain. The country did not participate in the Marshall Aid program, which predominantly served the reconstruction of Western Europe (Woodward 1995). The only viable exports were raw materials that had previously served the Austro-Hungarian market, and the federal government became the central broker of this trade. The purpose of export shifted even though the export pattern and content remained the same: extraction now financed the program of

industrialization and electrification instead of enriching foreign capital. However, the reliance on raw material exports meant that forests, mines, and farmland were pushed into production at an unprecedented pace, with little regard for long-term ecological effects.

Because advanced machinery was scarce and expensive, the state extensively relied on human labor to maintain resource extraction and to advance infrastructure projects until technology became available from abroad. The federal government relied on Soviet-style economic governance: centrally planned production, mandatory quotas, and the activation of reserve labor from rural regions, with all major decisions concentrated at the top (Dyker 2011). Intensive labor production temporarily compensated for the lack of advanced technology, particularly in mining. Labor mobilization also enabled the construction of electrical and transport infrastructure. The range of labor arrangements was wide—from *radna akcija* (volunteer youth labor actions) that symbolized hope in the war-torn country (Matošević et al. 2020), to migrant workers from remote rural areas, active or demobilized army units, and even forced laborers (Woodward 1995a). These governmental efforts reshaped labor patterns and intensified extraction, causing landscape changes that would become more visible in the following years.

In its early years, the federal government resembled a peasant dreaming of expanding and diversifying the farm but barely able to maintain it. Peasants continuously pressed land, animals, and kin labor to exhaustion in order to survive amid the limits of scarce machinery, harsh weather, and rising taxes. In the same manner, the state centralized labor and resource use to boost exports to the West in exchange for advanced products. The blueprints of the early state-socialist economy followed the path of peripheral production that had dominated the pre-war era. As a consequence, the extraction for foreign markets quickly threatened ecological

integrity and transformed landscapes. Svetozar Vukmanović-Tempo, revolutionary and minister of mining and energy, recalled in his memoir:

> We began with "robbing" the mines and forests: we dug up the richest veins of ore, cut down entire complexes of forest… all those products that were in demand in foreign markets and for which we had secured foreign exchange to purchase raw and intermediate materials for industrial production, and to supply the population. To do this, it was necessary to ensure sufficient labor or mechanization. We did not have the foreign exchange for the latter, which left us with a single option: mobilizing labor.[53]

While industrialization was the government's clear priority, the overriding reason for such an intensive extraction was the urgent need for foreign currency to buy technology and expertise abroad. This plundering of the ecology was the main way to break the spiral of underdevelopment. As the dependency analysis of unequal peripheral production indicates (McMichael 2000), natural resources were the only commodities with value that Yugoslavia could offer to the capitalist market. Only when it dug up the richest ore veins and mobilized all available labor could the state gain access to technology and know-how. Such access was possible because the federal state controlled both the means of extraction and the channels of export.

With the money earned from resource exports, federal institutions could pay foreign experts and equipment suppliers to build the first high-capacity power lines and plants. In 1947, a commission of eminent foreign experts had the task of assisting in electrification. Foreign expertise was so critically important that a deputy in the Ministry of Electro-Industry addressed the Political Presidency of Yugoslavia, explaining the importance of the foreign commission:

> It is stressed that your success in this work [of forming the foreign commission] determines not only the implementation of our plan, but also that even the smallest and most sensitive electrification facilities be constructed at the appropriate technical level and with the required technical safety. As you are

[53] Vukmanović-Tempo, *Revolucija koja teče* 2:102–3, cited in Woodward 1995, 124.

> aware, in our country, there is a pronounced shortage of highly qualified personnel in this profession.[54]

Much of the infrastructure these experts designed altered waterways and ecosystems, embedding environmental change into modernization itself. Within these transfers, experts, planners, and domestic companies representing the environment-making authority were formed, gaining access to scientific and technological means that became indispensable in the production of the environment that I explored in the chapter on the Iron Gates I.

At the center of technology exchange stood the federal government. In the manner of *concentrated authority*, it held sole power to employ economic, ideological, and, at times, repressive measures to enable resource extraction, labor mobilization, exports, and infrastructure investment. Most authority rested with the federal party and state representatives, while lower-level institutions followed orders with little say in development priorities. This structure began to shift when Yugoslavia's geopolitical position changed, and the bloc of Western European countries, along with the United States, gained more direct influence through aid and technical support over the country's energy infrastructure.

In 1948, Tito openly broke with Stalin, leading the COMINTERN to expel Yugoslavia and denounce its leadership for betraying the socialist cause. This development was a turning point in the country's approach to obtaining technology. Initially, the split caused severe trade and supply disruptions and deepened technological and financial shortages. After a short period, Western governments recognized the strategic value of a socialist state outside Moscow's control. They began to extend foreign support, turning the crisis into a diplomatic and economic opportunity for both Yugoslavia and the alliance. During the 1950s, the Yugoslav communist

[54] Source: *Letter to the Political Presidency, 17.11.1947*, signed by Jovan Janković, Deputy Minister of Electrical Industry. Archive of Yugoslavia, AJ-11-19-5.

party sought to distinguish itself from Stalinist authoritarianism, moving toward the self-management system that gradually introduced less repressive and less dogmatic governance and market relations. This ideological and geopolitical reorientation made it easier to secure financial and technological aid under better conditions than in the immediate post-war years (Dyker 2011). Concentrated authority became more bipolar; power over the environment, infrastructure, and economy still rested with federal institutions, but Western governments gained an indirect yet significant influence.

In the 1950s, Yugoslavia's prosperity was no longer purely an internal matter; it became a concern for those most capable of supporting its development goals.[55] The US government provided substantial resources for factories producing electrical machinery in Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Maribor. It also trained Yugoslav engineers and financed a high-voltage grid to improve system balance. The purpose of US financing was twofold. First, to make the Yugoslav electrical industry self-reliant, capable of producing its own machines and technology, and to reduce dependence on imports from either the West or the East. The US assumed that only a sovereign Yugoslavia could resist potential conflict with the USSR. Second, to provide the infrastructural base for expanding the heavy military industry that could deter a potential Soviet invasion (Lagendijk 2008). With ample foreign financial and technical support, Yugoslavia established cornerstone companies such as Litostroj, Rade Končar, Energoprojekt, and the Hydrotechnical Institute Jaroslav Černi. These companies became key contractors on major infrastructure projects and, more than that, they became visionaries of an

[55] Western countries supported Yugoslavia partly to sustain their post-war industrial growth, as domestic energy systems lagged behind demand. In the early 1950s, the UNECE highlighted the "untapped hydroelectric potentials" of Yugoslav rivers and proposed financing plants on the Dalmatian rivers to export electricity to Austria and Germany. Although most projects were not realized, Yugoslavia became the first socialist country connected to the Western grid, primarily via Austria, Italy, and Greece (Lagendijk 2008).

ever-expanding zone of expropriation (Moore 2015), as well as central industrial and expert actors in the constellation of the environment-making authority.

The term "concentrated authority" describes the mode of power exercised over the environment after 1945. The state's control of its access to energy infrastructure depended on Yugoslavia's place in the global geopolitical and geoeconomic system. This power shifted over time from being held almost entirely by the federal party-state in the immediate post-war years to being held formally by the same state but increasingly shaped by the indirect influence of Western governments after 1948. The federal ministry for industry, energy, and mining played a vital role in organizing labor and resource use, while the Western bloc provided crucial aid for industrialization. Acting like a centralized party-state, the federal government commanded the economic, scientific, legal, and coercive means to plan and build the energy infrastructure and industrial base necessary for electrification. Lacking domestic seeds for such an endeavor, federal institutions functioned as intermediaries between domestic and foreign markets and as principal managers of substantial foreign aid.

If the federal government was the conductor of the development paradigm aimed at self-sufficiency and urban-industrial growth, the stage was set by forces ranging from deep regional inequalities rooted in Habsburg–Ottoman rivalry, to Cold War geopolitical divisions, to Western strategic interests in Yugoslavia's development. In the bipolar mode of concentrated authority, the central party-state determined the what, when, how, and why of infrastructural projects, while the background forces had enabling power that could also be disruptive once global circumstances changed. The former called the shots, while the latter could call it a day.

It is difficult to identify clear instances of environmental opposition to this concentrated authority despite the heavy impact on ecology and labor. One reason was the repression the Yugoslav state often used in its early years against both ideological opponents and peasants

alike. Peasants bore the greatest burden by supplying much of the labor and living in resource-filled areas. In the early years of socialism, they faced Soviet-style collectivization, agricultural reforms, and the establishment of party-controlled cooperatives. In response, peasants resisted through disobedience, destruction of harvests to avoid confiscation, and revolts often ending in arrests or execution (Melissa Katherine Bokovoy 1998). As in earlier examples discussed in Chapter 2, such conflicts often centered on the value of autonomy, land, and other local resources. The conflicts became less common from the early 1950s, when the government abandoned Stalinist agricultural reforms in favor of milder land redistribution (Dyker 2011). These tensions foreshadowed the kinds of struggles described earlier as "environmentalism of the poor." Peasant revolts that opposed collectivization reforms (Melissa Katherine Bokovoy 1998) can be considered predecessors of that form of environmentalism. Such environmentalism became possible only once rural repression eased and the immediate survival and autonomy of rural communities were no longer under direct threat, as authority over the environment became organized differently towards the 1960s.

Diffused authority (1965–1979)

By the mid-1960s, the bipolar power mode of concentrated authority gave way to a more plural set of relationships. Economic achievements such as sustained growth, improved industrial capacity, and broader diplomatic ties reduced reliance on any single geopolitical bloc. Yugoslavia's economic and diplomatic policies underwent crucial reforms; unlike in the preceding period of concentrated authority, when one bloc mediated foreign technology and credit, the reforms opened multiple, more flexible channels of engagement. Economic growth became so strong that international institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank presented Yugoslavia's economy as exemplary of postwar global development. Priorities

shifted from planting the seeds of industrialization to sustaining growth and diversifying production beyond extractive and heavy industries.

Geopolitical imperatives also changed. The Yugoslav leadership pursued cooperation with newly decolonized countries (Stubbs 2002). It also gradually improved relations with the Soviet Union after Stalin's death, as the new Soviet leadership showed a less dogmatic approach to Yugoslavia's self-management project and global positioning. The height of the rapprochement came in the early 1960s when industrial and economic cooperation resumed. Such an encompassing global cooperation enabled the country to bypass the dependency on one geopolitical alliance that had characterized concentrated authority. The main reforms from this period aimed to address both the unequal terms of exchange stemming from dependence on the West and the international political subordination characteristic of the Cold War. Regarding environmental mobilization, an important trend was the seed of environmental justice that appeared in infrastructure construction sites, as seen in the local protests against the Iron Gates Dam (Chapter 2). Additionally, during the 1970s, air pollution made the environment a wider public concern and a subject of institutional control.

Yugoslavia's imports of oil and exports of hydropower technology reflected this shift. The two exchanges formed a compensatory relationship: oil imports from members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Soviet Union enabled industrial expansion and urbanization, while exports of construction expertise and energy technology to the Middle East and Africa provided a means of barter or hard currency to pay for oil. These revenues also helped balance international payments, already strained after two decades of reliance on foreign financing and expertise. Viewed through the lens of compensatory exchange, the Iron Gates I project (begun in 1964) and the surge in oil imports (from 1965) were not merely overlapping in time—they reinforced one another. The dam showcased Yugoslav industry, generated revenue for oil

purchases, and together the dam and petrol carried the country's new geopolitical and geoeconomic relations.

This reciprocity contrasted sharply with the unidirectional flows of the concentrated-authority era, when resource exports rarely secured equivalent technological returns. Exporting domestic resources was no longer necessary. Even though there were plans for exporting electricity to Western Europe, those intentions remained unrealized in this period, and materialized more extensively only later when the oil crises hit (Lagendijk 2008). In fact, the terms of exchange became reversed in comparison to concentrated authority, with the import of foreign natural resources like oil that strongly shaped the country's energy sector. Apart from expanding domestic energy consumption, interventions in the domestic environment became crucial for training the construction sector to become an exporter in exchange for foreign oil and hard currency.

The dam and oil epitomized an alternative to concentrated authority in international trade and cooperation. Even though the Iron Gates technology originated in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia insisted on acquiring patents and later exported the technology to NAM members. Combined with accumulated Western expertise, exports allowed the country to play a more proactive role in the international division of labor. Yugoslavia's energy and industrial policies depended on a delicate balance between Eastern and Western blocs, while simultaneously leading the Non-Aligned Movement of decolonized states. The USSR supplied much of the technology and expertise for the Iron Gates I (1964–1972), while a US company received the contract for Yugoslavia's only nuclear power plant at Krško (begun in 1975). NAM countries became the main source of cheap oil and the primary market for Yugoslav energy and construction exports in the early 1970s.

Linking dams and oil was possible because of the country's distinct geopolitical strategy. Through *national communism* (Woodward 1995b), Yugoslavia skillfully balanced across the Iron Curtain and cooperated with both hegemonic blocs so long as such cooperation enhanced its own sovereignty and prosperity. Its *liminal positionality* and *soft hegemony* within the NAM (Stubbs 2023) were key to further developing the national energy sector. As Paul Stubbs argues:

> It was precisely socialist Yugoslavia's "in-between" status, belonging to none of the three worlds of the US-dominated North and West, the Soviet-dominated East, and the decolonizing South, that constituted this liminality while creating spaces for influence serving to protect its position in times of vulnerability and enhance its status in times of relative security (Stubbs 2023, 11).

Through this liminal positionality, Yugoslavia presented itself as a developing state when securing technology and patents for the Iron Gates, but as a developed one when showcasing and selling the technology abroad. Similarly, it applied oil-pricing policies typical of underdeveloped states, while taking a strong stance in the Danubian Commission when negotiating contributions to the dam's financing.[56]

Negotiations over technology transfers for the Iron Gates

Yugoslavia's proactive approach in negotiating dam technology exemplifies the broader room for maneuver in international relations. In the early 1960s, the national hydropower industry lacked the capacity to produce the machinery required for the Iron Gates. Negotiation teams conducted visits and talks with both Soviet and Western companies to secure equipment,

[56] Although not central to this chapter, it is worth noting that Yugoslavia spent several years pressing Danubian countries to contribute to the financing of the Iron Gates dam by raising fees for navigation through the gorge, arguing that all would benefit from improved transport. The USSR was the main opponent, but eventually conceded after protracted and difficult negotiations. This outcome highlights Yugoslavia's international standing and diplomatic leverage. Source: Archive of Yugoslavia, AJ-130-616-1014.

mainly construction machinery, turbines, and generators. The Soviet Union's initial offer resembled the unequal exchange patterns of concentrated authority, characterized by favorable financing terms that nevertheless required maximum involvement from Soviet firms.

Yugoslav negotiators, however, prioritized securing patents as well as equipment, so domestic producers could later export the technology. On the one hand, they sought greater involvement for the domestic workforce while recognizing the limits of local industry. On the other hand, a forced reliance on domestic firms could have risked delays and imposed higher costs. If Soviet companies had provided all the technology, the dam would have been finished on time, but that would have excluded Yugoslav manufacturers from gaining the necessary expertise. Ultimately, the two sides reached a compromise: part of the equipment came from imports, while Yugoslav companies produced other components under Soviet licenses. Although a Yugoslav company manufactured fewer generators than planned, the agreement represented success because it secured crucial patents.

More than an ideological alignment, the ability to climb out of unequal exchange was a significant factor in Yugoslavia's decision. The Soviet Union offered better financing and technology-transfer terms than Western firms, and the agreement strengthened both the Iron Gates project and Yugoslavia's global positioning. As Yugoslav negotiators noted, becoming a producer rather than merely an importer gave domestic companies significant potential:

> The practical value of a reference can be viewed from two angles. As testimony to the technical level of a company in its struggle with competition for securing contracts in general, the company could then make effective use of its successful participation in equipping the Đerdap hydro system. According to the plan, however, if participation is to be used in competition for securing contracts for equipping large hydroelectric plants in other countries, then this requires critical consideration. Potential buyers would be less developed countries that would demand at least the same credit conditions as those required by Yugoslavia. The example of Egypt—the hydroelectric plant on the Nile near Aswan—shows that

> such investors demand, and sometimes obtain, credits substantially greater than the value of the equipment itself.[57]

The technology transfer made Yugoslavia more competitive abroad. Indeed, firms like *Energoprojekt* built energy, military, agricultural, and cultural infrastructure throughout the NAM (Spaskovska 2021). The dam itself became a showcase for the domestic industry, and state officials promoted the dam through diplomatic visits and receptions (Sekulić 2023). Once it secured patents for hydropower machinery, Yugoslavia could turn the Iron Gates into both a demonstration project and a promise of similar projects coming true elsewhere.

Import of oil

Where concentrated authority had relied heavily on domestic coal and hydropower, diffused authority revolved around oil imported through multiple partnerships. Yugoslav labor and expertise abroad were significant sources of hard currency and barter arrangements with NAM oil producers, and political proximity to these countries promised significant gains. From 1965 onward, oil imports became central to the energy system, tightly integrating it into global geopolitical and economic currents.

For years, stable oil prices underpinned both industrialization and urbanization. The numbers reveal the rapid shift between sources: in 1960, oil accounted for 13.8% of energy consumption; by 1978, the share had risen to 48.9%, from 1.4 to 14.3 million tons (Podunavac 1979, 30). The increase in oil use reduced the role of coal. Critical studies on energy production have well documented the political-economic advantages and reasons for the switch from coal to oil (Malm 2016; Mitchell 2011). In Yugoslavia, oil was easier to handle and store after import, immediately consumable, and required smaller-scale infrastructure. Additionally, its

[57] Source: *Izveštaj. I Pregovori. Delegacija vlade SFRJ za pregovore sa vladom SSSR o saradnji na izgradnji sistema "Đerdap."* Archive of Yugoslavia, AJ-130-616-1014.

costs were not contingent on domestic conditions such as the technological state of the mining industry, inefficient labor employed in extraction, or fluctuating costs caused by unstable inflation throughout the 1960s.[58] Unlike coal mining, the economic costs of oil consumption remained favorable as long as the global price stayed steady and low. The combination of physical and economic properties meant that oil could fuel both macro-industrial expansion and micro-private consumerism.

Oil quickly became central in cities, where it was used for heating and electricity.[59] It also fueled industrial growth in refineries and petrochemical complexes in Pančevo and Croatia's Industrija nafte (INA), which supplied domestic needs and earned hard currency through exports. Oil supplied major employers in metallurgy, chemicals, construction, and industrial agriculture. In poorer republics, heavy industries tied to oil helped reduce regional disparities. The automobile industry grew rapidly, with car ownership rising annually as well. Like in the capitalist West, cars became symbols of modernity, national pride, and social status (Duda 2014, 223).

While most oil came from the USSR, growing imports from non-aligned members covered Yugoslavia's peak consumption. Iraqi oil exports to Yugoslavia tripled between 1972 and 1976, with imports from Kuwait and Libya also steadily rising (Podunavac 1979; Spaskovska 2021). The trend continued even when the first oil crisis hit.[60] Petroleum exporters also financed a range of oil infrastructure in Yugoslavia, which improved transportation and

[58] OSA, 25/82, Official discusses energy status, outlook, plans. Belgrade Ekonomska Politika in Serbo-Croatian 25 Jan 1982, pp. 19–21 (HU OSA 300-10-2:142).
[59] Households increasingly replaced coal with oil-fired stoves (*naftašice*) for winter heating. Homes and public institutions relied on heating oil (*mazut*), often stored in large nearby reservoirs. Where district heating was absent or costly, this decentralized system proved practical. Gas infrastructure developed later, mainly in the north (Podunavac 1979). Oil combustion also supplied electricity in coal- and hydropower-poor republics such as Macedonia and Croatia, supporting urbanization and essential utilities.
[60] Consumption rose because there was an expectation that the peak reached during the first increase would not climb further. Source OSA, 25/82, Official discusses energy status, outlook, plans. Belgrade Ekonomska Politika in Serbo-Croatian 25 Jan 1982, pp. 19–21 (HU OSA 300-10-2:142).

expanded processing capacities for derivatives. The Adriatic pipeline was a notable example. Planned in the 1960s and completed in the 1980s, the project linked Middle Eastern producers, Yugoslavia, and Soviet satellite countries such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Once finished, the pipeline provided participating countries with oil at a lower price than the Soviets, consequently broadening the maneuvering space for states within the USSR's sphere of influence. Beyond economic benefits, the pipeline was "a project that cut across administrative borders in a multinational federation, and that pooled resources and expertise from non-aligned, Eastern Bloc states and the UN, embodying interdependence and cooperation on two levels—both domestic and transnational" (Spaskovska 2021, 536).

The expansion of oil industry was possible not only because oil remained cheap until 1973 but also because prices were under administrative control. As the energy system diversified and internationalized, price control became more entrenched. Policymakers feared price shocks but trusted the apparent stability of the oil regime. Unlike other commodities, the federal government kept oil and electricity prices low and steady, ensuring both industrial competitiveness and domestic prosperity.[61] Because energy shaped all other sectors, producers or republics could not freely set prices without coordination and federal approval.

This pricing policy revealed a core tension. The more Yugoslavia integrated into global energy flows, the more foreign influence grew, and the more tightly prices were fixed, as if control compensated for anxiety over dependence. The public budget absorbed the costs of rising oil prices. Armed with price controls at home and infrastructural exports abroad, the system expanded oil consumption and infrastructure until the second oil shock of 1978. The expansion

[61] Agricultural products were also priced below value, channeling benefits to industry. This kept agriculture in a subordinate position and reinforced city–countryside hierarchies.

of oil processing capacity happened with the expectation that domestic higher-value production would eventually offset overall expenses.

From 1965 onward, authority shifted from concentrated to diffused. Diffusion refers to the growing number of international actors with direct or indirect influence over the country's energy system. The space for maneuver widened, with relationships less often hierarchical than those of the dependency patterns of the previous period. The novelty of diffused authority lay not only in the increase of "fruit yields" and diversification of "baskets" but also in the emergence of multiple, less intensive dependencies that gave the Yugoslav system a more proactive role. Not having all the fruits in one basket meant that Yugoslavia could turn to other partners when relations with one failed. The multiplication of dependencies allowed the country to act as a geopolitical bridge between the Cold War blocs to exchange political influence, technology, culture, and capital.

Yet this arrangement also carried risks. With possible sources of disruption multiplied, external factors could more easily trigger chronic inflation and worsen internal uneven development. Governance mechanisms such as price control, characteristic of concentrated authority, persisted and even intensified with oil crises, showing that shifts in authority were less of step-like linear changes than building upon the previous modes of power.

Environmental mobilization under diffused authority

Less direct than shifts in authority under changing global conditions, there were nonetheless significant new patterns in environmental mobilization. This link was indirect because diffusion at the intra-national scale mattered more than geopolitical or geoeconomic change. As shown in Chapter 2, an important difference from the period of concentrated authority was the emergence of more decentralized governance. Through the overarching constitutional reform of self-management, republic, provincial, and local authorities gained new

competencies. This loosening of the federal grip over infrastructural policies created space for engagement and contestation between levels of authority, allowing local communities greater autonomy to express grievances. Thus, the environmental effects were mediated by a more immediate intra-national diffusion in governance.

The constellation characteristic of diffused authority had contradictory effects on the environment. On the one hand, global diffusion meant that local places became more exposed to the pressures of international actors and global forces. The stakes for certain infrastructural projects grew and diversified, which gave institutions additional justifications to proceed with construction and placed an extra burden on communities that attempted to resist. In the case of the Iron Gates I, the proclaimed public interest was not only the provision of electricity but also the imperatives of international cooperation, technology transfer, and Yugoslavia's ascent in the chain of global relations. On the other hand, intra-state decentralization and the reduction of repressive measures meant that the violently suppressed peasant riots of the concentrated-authority era gave way to a different form of environmental mobilization. The emergence of protests resembling the "environmentalism of the poor" (Chapter 2) meant that communities were able to protest against infrastructural interventions that threatened their livelihoods. While the discourse of this mobilization did not appear with an ecological vocabulary, it was rooted in economic concerns and oriented toward the local scale.

The inflow of oil was another channel through which the architecture of diffused authority shaped the environment. Cheap oil imports shifted the geography of extraction; energy was externalized to distant locations while the ecological effects of combustion in Yugoslavia's urban centers became centralized. By the mid-1970s, worries about air pollution, acid rain, and soil degradation were common in the national media. Public concern over adverse ecological conditions in the largest cities gave rise to new institutions tasked with addressing these

problems, along with specialized journals published with the party's blessing. Initially, these initiatives represented the revolutionary party's last attempt to reform itself; in practice, they bureaucratized ecological issues and embedded them in institutional labyrinths. Bureaucratization followed the trend already established in the United States, where environmental policy gained prominence as a consequence of oil-related accidents in the 1960s. Safety measures that were introduced, however, often served to neutralize environmental criticism while ensuring uninterrupted petroleum consumption (Bond 2022). That a similar pattern emerged in Yugoslavia suggests that global processes did not affect local ecologies only through infrastructural projects but also through the newly established channel of environmental policy.

A parallel form of bureaucratized protection appeared in 1974 with the establishment of the country's first national park in the Iron Gates gorge, *Nacionalni park Đerdap* (Đerdap National Park). This was a paradox of simultaneous extraction and protection. An area in which ecology, landscape, and communal relations were so drastically altered—as shown in the previous chapter—became the country's first natural area with the highest degree of protection. Experts raced to shield Roman and Vinča cultural heritage while the dam construction went on, which resulted in establishing world-renowned museums and excavation sites in the gorge. As the National Museum of Belgrade expressed in 1967 in its letter to the Federal Committee for Education and Culture:

> With the construction of the hydro-energetic system Djerdap on the Danube and the creation of a new accumulation lake, a large number of cultural and natural monuments are endangered, as with the new lake, the ethnic and sociological structure of the population of this area is significantly changing. The construction of the dam near Sip, which should be completed in 1970, placed before our science the complex task to ethnographically, naturalistically, and archaeologically, scientifically and professionally study this area and to relocate a number of cultural monuments from their present places and save them from submergence.

Many cultural and historical objects were excavated and preserved. Together with heritage protection, the creation of the national park in 1974 ensured that those experts (primarily archeologists and biologists) interested in cultural and ecological conservation did not openly criticize the dam. Thus, their critical voices remained separated from local grievances and coopted by the bureaucracy. More importantly, environment-making remained an affair of authority, not only through the extraction of water power but also through conservation policies that realized the "wilderness idea" separating ecology from communities living with it (Guha 2000b).

The proliferation of ecology-related institutions and the rise of national parks marked a form of state-led ecological governance. *Such governmental action acknowledges an ecological issue, frames the environment within national boundaries, but keeps a strong grip over actions necessary for protection.* What might initially appear as the root of environmentalism in Yugoslavia—the establishment of the first national park—was, in fact, the work of the environment-making authority.

The paradox between extraction and protection responds to one of the central questions of this dissertation: what was the environment, who belonged to it, and who spoke—or claimed to speak—for it? On the one hand, the "environmentalism of the poor" type of resistance in Tekija established the environment as a local matter, as both ecological well-being and livelihoods depended on local conditions. But a reference to trans-local relations was largely absent: because of the nature of the articulation, the infancy of environmental ideology, and state-led protections that absorbed expert voices. On the other hand, state-managed environmentalism brought the environment to the national scale but paradoxically excluded local socio-ecological relations through conservation initiatives and the bureaucratization of protection. The mutual

exclusion between local and national environments changed only in the later period of fragmented authority, when environmentalism became a nationwide popular concern.

Fragmented authority (1978–1980s)

With the second oil shock in 1978, the constellation of authority went through a process of fragmentation. The institutional setting changed dramatically, and environmental mobilization entered its most substantial phase. The flexible, mutually beneficial trade and diplomatic relations that existed under diffused authority began to reveal deep cracks. Yugoslavia's alliance with the NAM increasingly took the form of economic subordination. Exponentially growing debt, competition over resources, and the avoidance of painful reforms turned republics against one another and against the federal government. The partialization of interests along national lines became the defining institutional power over the environment—what I label fragmented authority.

Environment-making under this guise consisted of pushing existing domestic frontiers of extraction in an attempt to secure cheap energy. The pressure on national ecology was enormous as the oil price shock prolonged into Yugoslavia's broader energy crisis throughout the 1980s. Domestic energy projects multiplied. The federal government presented an orientation to domestic coal and the use of the remaining hydropower potentials as a way to steer the country away from imported oil. These investments were solutions to shortages but also served as cover for nationalist dynamics that endangered the system. In this context of failing international alliances, partialized and competing intra-national interests, and the global rise of ecological consciousness, a decisive shift in mobilization took place. For the first time in Yugoslav history, by the late 1980s, environmentalism surpassed the local scale of the "environmentalism of the poor" to reach the federal scale. Yet, in doing so, this mobilization

entered national politics and implicitly reproduced nationalist logics through its organization. By becoming a national concern in the context of ethnic-tension, the environment could not avoid the divisive politics surrounding it.

The oil shocks were transformative events that altered global political, economic, and ecological relations. They marked a tipping point: development models shifted from mutual assistance and the struggle against unequal exchange to a race to the bottom and the responsibilization of collectives and individuals (McMichael 2000). Financial markets gained greater influence, industrial production relocated to Asia (Harvey 2005; Smith 1997), and several states began planting the seeds of renewable energy technologies in response to oil price spikes and anti-nuclear protests (Michael Aklin and Urpelainen 2018). The price increases also exposed the weaknesses of global economic relations. International dependencies intensified to the breaking point, as Yugoslavia experienced firsthand, and opened fractures that would worsen with the upcoming neoliberal "shock therapies" of the early 1980s. For Yugoslavia, its position within the NAM and its dependence on OPEC members filtered the impact of global shifts, transforming what had once been an equal partnership into economic subordination.

From being a "soft power" with "liminal hegemony" (Stubbs 2023), Yugoslavia turned into a dependent member. As Ljubica Spaskovska argues, "the relationship between Yugoslavia and the Arab oil producers had transformed its original status of cooperation as equal partners to the fact that oil wealth dictated a specific balance, or rather, hierarchy of power" (Spaskovska 2021, 540). With solidarity in the NAM waning, international financial institutions stepped into the vacuum. Debt and adjustment programs became new levers of external authority over Yugoslavia, and the IMF and World Bank gained greater influence over its economy. In the early 1980s, the debt spiral forced the government to borrow from international creditors, who

imposed strict neoliberal structural adjustment as a condition for aid, well before the post-shock therapies of the post-socialist transition kicked in. In turn, regional inequalities worsened, and ethno-nationalist agendas deepened (Woodward 1995a).

The elastic, mutually beneficial network of dependencies that had characterized diffused authority became rigid and fragile. At first, Yugoslav diplomats supported OPEC members' nationalization of oil industries as a struggle against "oil imperialism" (Spaskovska 2021, 534). Even though the country suffered from price increases, Yugoslav diplomats argued that oil prices should not overshadow the global issue of pricing raw materials (Stubbs 2023). Later, officials complained that NAM solidarity was breaking along ethnic-religious lines. The aid fund established by non-aligned OPEC members primarily reached Muslim-majority countries, reflecting the political preferences of its contributors. In a 1981 interview, the Yugoslav Minister of Foreign Affairs, Miloš Minić, observed, "OPEC has yet to agree to give more money to the developing countries. As far as oil is concerned, Yugoslavia has to pay $2 billion more this year than it paid for the same quantity of oil in 1978. You can imagine the position of countries economically weaker than Yugoslavia; such countries cannot wait much longer" (Spaskovska 2021, 540). The weakening of external alliances converged with internal economic strains, producing a domestic energy crisis that revealed the fragility of Yugoslavia's institutional arrangements. Ethnically induced tensions were reproduced through the energy sectors, particularly in the systems of pricing and transmission.

The fragility was visible in the pricing of oil and electricity, where federal and republican interests collided in ways that paralyzed reform. The ninefold increase in global energy prices after 1979 destabilized Yugoslavia's balance of payments. Oil accounted for 10% of the import budget in 1973 but almost 70% by 1985. The resulting deficit and debt were amplified by domestic policy. Republics refused to limit imports, and the reorientation to domestic sources

lagged behind plans. The price control system absorbed the skyrocketing costs: from $200 million in 1978 to $2.2 billion in 1979 (Podunavac 1979, 21). Once a tool for cushioning global shocks, federal price controls now forced the national budget to absorb the burden, while republics, companies, and consumers continued purchasing oil at subsidized prices.[62]

What began with oil price hikes became a perpetual energy shortage. Oil for popular consumption was increasingly scarce after the second oil crisis. The transition to domestic coal was behind schedule. Cold winters and summer droughts limited electricity production. Austerity measures delayed new projects. By the early 1980s, regular blackouts became the most visible sign of the crumbling federal electricity system. Consensus on reforms proved elusive. Republics shifted the costs of subsidized oil to the federal budget, resisted federal attempts to re-centralize the energy system, and attacked one another with nationalist rhetoric. Two axes of tension—between republics, and between republics and the federation—disrupted both political and economic relations (Jović 2008). The tensions undermined the energy system, from oil and electricity pricing to the persistence of oil consumption and the coordination of the electrical network. The severity of these failures revealed the repulsive force with which republics and the federation acted upon each other in the fragmented mode of authority.

In the non-hierarchical energy system, neither republics nor federal institutions had sufficient power to implement reforms. While the Federal Committee for Energy and Industry had higher competency than the republics, such as approving pricing systems and setting strategies for sectoral development, it could not enforce them.[63] In practice, no significant decision was possible without consensus, an increasingly unrealistic expectation amid overlapping energy,

[62] Source: OSA, 25/82, Official discusses energy status, outlook, plans. Belgrade Ekonomska Politika in Serbo-Croatian 25 Jan 1982, pp. 19–21 HU (HU OSA 300-10-2:142).
[63] OSA: 1979, Hoffman, Georg: Yugoslavia: Energy Supplies - Constraints and Outlooks, draft paper. (HU OSA 300-10-2)

fiscal, and political crises. One impasse occurred when the Federal Committee attempted to centralize international oil trade. Instead of each republic purchasing fuel separately, the Committee sought to coordinate imports and payments to control consumption and prevent debt accumulation. By law, each republic and province was required to deposit a set amount of hard currency into the federal account, but the republics refused to comply, and the initiative collapsed.[64] The result was uncontrolled and uncoordinated consumption, which continued to rise because oil remained crucial for heating and electricity in regions lacking alternatives, such as Macedonia and Croatia. Croatia even rejected a proposed oil tax intended to fund alternative energy facilities on the grounds of protecting consumers.

Similar problems plagued the pricing of other energy sources as well. The pricing scheme was decentralized, with the same fuels costing different amounts across republics. Low prices failed to cover operating and investment costs, while producers in different regions earned unequal revenues for the same coal, oil, or electricity.[65] The result was internal competition and an outflow of energy to areas with wealthier industrial consumers. Although the Federal Committee tried to increase and level electricity prices, the reform advanced too slowly. Even when they reached a consensus, republics were reluctant to implement measures for fear of inflation and the loss of a competitive advantage.[66] Each accused the others of exploiting its sacrifices. The result was inertia, persistence of the status quo, and deepening shortages.

Electricity transmission introduced another bottleneck to the energy crisis. The high-voltage network connected the republics, but coordination was too weak to balance production and consumption.[67] Even before the oil shocks, republics had prioritized expanding generation

[64] OSA: Nov 31, 1982, Energije će, ipak, biti. Vjesnik nedeljni magazin; (HU OSA 300-10-2:142)
OSA Oct 31, 1982, Lice i naličje energetskog bilansa: Trenutak odluke. Politika (HU OSA 300-10-2:142)
[65] 22/81, OSA, Cene I novi odnosi, 2.2.1981., Ekonomska politika (HU OSA 300-10-2:142)
[66] 39/84 OSA, Nedoumice nisu razjasnjene, March 6, 1984, Dnevnik (HU OSA 300-10-2:142)
[67] OSA: 1979, Hoffman, Georg: Yugoslavia: Energy Supplies - Constraints and Outlooks, draft paper. (HU OSA 300-10-2)

capacity within their territories rather than investing in transmission between them. Delayed investment and poor coordination created a fragile system in which a failure in one republic often triggered blackouts in others. To contain these domino effects, the Federal Committee temporarily banned electricity exchanges between republics.[68] The measure backfired. Republics facing shortages, such as Serbia during the 1983 drought, received no support. Meanwhile, Kosovo exported surplus electricity to Greece, and Slovenia imported from Austria and Italy.[69] Media reports of such transactions fueled resentment, as republics accused one another of profiteering during the crisis (Dyker 2011; Woodward 1995a).

The examples of oil purchases, energy pricing, and transmission failures depict the central dynamic of authority in the 1980s: attempts to centralize governance or defend decentralization created tensions between the federal and republican levels. This tension crystallized fragmented authority as the dominant model of governance. Domestic actors pursuing particularist goals plundered resources, competencies, and influence from previous periods. The federal agenda centered on stabilizing the crumbling system through recentralization, while republican agendas revolved around particularism, mutual accusations, and aversion to collective action.

The result was systemic failure, addressed not through reform but through ever-increasing domestic energy production. The imperative to orient to non-imported energy meant that domestic resources, such as lignite, were exploited at an even more intensive rate than in the initial period of concentrated authority. The country's largest thermal plants and open-pit lignite mines were built in this period, and hydropower projects began in technically demanding or ecologically sensitive areas, along with planning for small hydropower plants on

[68] 12/82 OSA, Vijesnik, 24.1. 1982, Hajka s okusom zablude (HU OSA 300-10-2:142)
[69] 9.9.1983 Energy Shortages Yugoslavs Facing Severe Winter (HU OSA 300-10-2:142) and 28.11.1983 Critical Power Shortage in Yugoslavia (HU OSA 300-10-2:142)

rivers previously considered unproductive. The only nuclear power plant, *Krško,* became operational in 1983, and several more were under consideration across the country. However, extensive protests confronted some of the most detrimental hydropower projects (Jancar-Webster 1987) and forced the government to cancel all new nuclear plants (Oštrić 1992). After years of relying on transnational energy flows, the fragmented authority sought to broaden the frontiers of extraction primarily at home. However, on the wings of global ecological uprising in the 1980s, the authority-making environment pushed back again, but this time more effectively than ever before, managing to address the scalar mismatch with the environment-making authority.

Environmental mobilizations in the 1980s

In the 1980s, environmental protests became widespread. They took several forms of engagement, including spontaneous youth voluntary work, informal associations organized around feminist, peace, and ecological themes, local one-issue protests against garbage dumps or hydropower projects, and, most intensively, anti-nuclear mobilizations (Oštrić 1992). The opposition to nuclear power infrastructure erupted in 1985 and 1986 in the context of globally rising concerns and protests following the Chernobyl catastrophe. Opponents organized public discussions across the republics, debating the risks of radiation, the economic costs of investments, and possible alternative sources. Public broadcasters hosted exchanges between proponents of nuclear power, mostly officials and policymakers. Experts from different disciplines, like physicists, biologists, and social scientists often represented opponents. Protests were not limited to the media but also involved a larger audience. Slovenians led the opposition, although groups from Serbia and Croatia were quick to join as well. The social base was wide, encompassing ecological activists, scientists such as ecologists, physicists, and social scientists, as well as 70,000 high school students who signed a petition to the federal

assembly. Even associations of war veterans, workers, and youth joined the initiative, which was surprising considering that they were close to the central party (Oštrić 1992).

The protesters' argument was both ecological and economic in nature. The accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl demonstrated that nuclear energy was disastrous for nature and people, and that its hazards were difficult to contain. Economically, investments in nuclear energy drove the federal budget into even deeper indebtedness because the technology was entirely imported and the construction time was lengthy. Slovenian activists also raised a systemic critique, claiming that the essential problem with the Yugoslav infrastructure was a dysfunctional industrial system that rested on misguided industrial priorities. Likewise, cross-border activists' exchanges became more potent, and Western ecological organizations cooperated with those in Slovenia (Oštrić 1992)—the republic that was geographically, politically, culturally, and economically most proximate. In the end, a new common sense regarding the dangers of nuclear power became stronger than the authority's claims of advancement and common interest. The pressure on institutions was so intense and broad that the republic parliaments of Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia each introduced moratoriums on planned nuclear power plants (Oštrić 1992). The cancellation was a major setback to the authority in the history of Yugoslav environmental politics. The state institutions of fragmented authority tried to resolve the crisis through an ever-increasing development of energy infrastructure, but faced a surprisingly wide front that was difficult to contain.

The centrality of scientists in these protests reveals the significant novelties of the authority-making environment in the 1980s. The environment did not refer only to local ecological settings, as with peasant revolts and environmentalism of the poor; the scope also connected local, national, continental, and global spaces as intrinsically dependent. Certainly, the material properties of nuclear technology contributed to this scalar extension. As the Chernobyl disaster

showed, radiation respects no national borders; its risks are systemic and difficult to contain. There was also the momentum of rising green activism in Western Europe, which provided a model for similar efforts elsewhere (McNeill and Engelke 2016; van der Heijden 2014).

However, despite the material characteristics of nuclear power and this historical trend, the protests would not have been as widespread without the involvement of social and natural scientists. These engaged experts created a discursive articulation of the endangered, extensive, and mutually dependent environment. Scientists were not leaders of the protests but agents of upscaling, who linked local concerns to systemic and international issues such as economic cost-benefit, technological risk, and global catastrophe. As with local political representatives in the Iron Gates (Chapter 1), the positionality of experts and their siding with the environment proved central. Their fragile position between authority and environment gave them credibility to act as translators. Although still divided by disciplinary and republican boundaries (Jancar-Webster 1987), many experts bridged those divides in the nuclear moment, joining physicists, biologists, social scientists, and activists into unusually broad coalitions. Rather than portraying experts as rational outsiders, it is more accurate to view them as figures who facilitated the circulation of ecological protests across scales. They translated environmental hazards to federal institutions that had ignored earlier grievances from locals. However, experts' engagement was not a clean shift from "etatist" to "expert" environmentalism but the emergence of a new front where scientists temporarily crossed the line between authority and environment to facilitate upscaling.

The anti-nuclear protests achieved an unprecedented scalar reach, but they confronted a federal arena already teeming with nationalist tensions (Oštrić 1992). In a context where nationalism was the dominant narrative, it became increasingly challenging to divert public attention to other topics. Thus, as Oštrić asserts:

> After the initial euphoria, there was a dispersal of activists from 1987, and the attention of the public declined. The nationalist euphoria gradually erases all other topics from the social consciousness. The rest of active anti-nuclear activists remained abstract in their opposition, without offering a realistic alternative (1992, 90).

I argue that nationalism did not simply overpower ecological politics as roaring traffic overwhelms someone's voice. Viewed through the lens of environment-making authority and authority-making environment, we can perceive nationalism and environmentalism as two competing projects of federal scale-making. While environmentalism sought to create a unifying pan-federal agenda, the fragmented authority defined the federal scale along a divisive, competing logic that continuously expanded the domestic frontiers of extraction. Nationalism became the defining feature of fragmented authority, and the environment remained embedded within local and national ecological, economic, cultural, and political relations. Consequently, nationalism re-scaled the constellation of the environment down to ethnic and republican frames, thus narrowing solidarities and fragmenting the field of protest. Two cases of anti-nuclear protest in Croatia and against hydropower plants on the Mura River in Slovenia bring me to that interpretation.

In the first case, we can see how nationalist rhetoric served to defame ecological protest. In Croatia, authorities denounced the anti-nuclear protests as a conspiracy orchestrated by other republics, most likely Serbia. The republic government accused the "Kolubara coal lobby" (a central Serbian lignite region), calling for political measures against it, and asking "Who and why wants an insecure energy future for Croatia, even for Yugoslavia, and how come that the majority of opponents to nuclear energy are from those republics in which, at least for now, no nuclear plants will be built?" (Oštrić 1992, 90) Again, the implicit reference was to Serbia. This instance illustrates the complexity of the ideological terrain that green activists had to navigate. They needed to articulate the discursive chains linking technology, projects, consequences, development models, and the political system in charge. At the same time,

protesters had to contend with a competing discourse that targeted the same system but aimed to preserve the energy status quo. Even if ecological groups managed to steer clear of nationalist organizational methods, they had to deal with a double enemy and potentially lose support. Or they needed to moderate their demands through an adjustment to the divisive ethnic vocabulary that proliferated under the mode of fragmented authority.

Nationalism also infiltrated the strategies of ecological actions. In the mid-1980s, protests against hydropower projects near the borders with Hungary and Austria succeeded in canceling the dams due to the strength of international cooperation (Oštrić 1992). For four years, Slovenian peasants, activists, and scientists collaborated with their international counterparts to protect the local landscape against the hydropower projects. Their persistence paid off, and the government canceled the hydropower plant on the Mura River. Oštrić notices that, while the protest in Slovenia owed its positive outcome to cross-border solidarity, it failed to establish contact with the Croatian side. Although the prevalence of this phenomenon remains unknown, it is striking that in the context of inter-republic tensions, it seemed easier for communities and activists to work together with foreigners than with their compatriots, as if international solidarity was less demanding than solidarity within the country. The meaning of "nation" increasingly narrowed from a Yugoslav to an ethnic identity. This case suggests that viewing environmentalism and nationalism as entirely opposed, as Oštrić proposes, might be overly simplistic. Perhaps a more accurate reading would recognize how nationalism became integral to defining the meaning and boundaries of the environment. It determined how connections were established between actors and spaces, shaping an environment with internal and external boundaries, setting limits on who belonged to and could speak on its behalf, and ultimately preventing a unified articulation.

Upscaling represented both the main achievement and the key obstacle for environmental mobilization in the 1980s. With a wide-ranging social base and discursive protest repertoire, the environmental constellation aimed, and largely succeeded, in becoming a co-creator of the federal scale. The protests confronted institutional power at the federal level and forced it to make concessions. By attempting to assemble a federal front, the resistance helped create the very scale it confronted. Yet that scale was organized around a logic of competitive fragmentation. In turn, nationalism, as the organizing principle of fragmented authority, shaped the mobilization. By adopting nationalist frameworks within its own organization, the movement ultimately contributed to competitive fragmentation. Once mobilization finally matched the scale of authority, nationalism prevented the emergence of a Yugoslav-wide ecological bloc. The environmental struggles of the 1980s thus oscillated between scalar convergence (anti-nuclear protests catching up with authority) and scalar constraint (nationalism reframing and fragmenting the protest field).

Conclusion

The history of Yugoslav environmental and energy politics shows how deeply ecological questions were embedded in global transformations, as well as how mobilizations struggled to match the scale of authority. In the period of concentrated authority, environment-making depended firstly on peripheral, labor-intensive, and export-oriented production under the guidance of the centralized federal state, and later on Yugoslavia's geopolitical positioning that ensured access to technologies for infrastructure-led development. Despite little space for dissonance, the pushbacks to environment-making indirectly surfaced in rural areas where labor mobilization and collectivization were felt the most. Peasant revolts, as foundations of the authority-making environment, opposed and forced the government to cancel rigid agricultural policies.

During the subsequent period of diffused authority, the constellation of authority broadened, the state became decentralized, and international partners multiplied. The environment-making continued through flagship energy projects, while the frontiers of extraction also expanded through oil imports. The initial ecological policies of the Yugoslav state responded to public outcry over pollution. Such policies framed the environment as a national concern, only to maintain ecological and social dissatisfaction within a controlled narrative. The decentralized and less punitive governance of the 1960s created space for mobilizations—analyzed here as environmentalism of the poor—to continue where peasant revolts had left off. Such protests constructed the environment as a local issue that unified ecological and communal existence. They effectively pressed institutions of authority to make concessions but rarely managed to cancel ongoing projects.

In the last period of fragmented authority, the authority-making environment matched the authority at the federal level. In this period, anti-nuclear protests jumped scale through constructing the environment as a federal and transnational issue. The opening came from the contexts of oil price shocks, global anti-nuclear protests, and ethnic tensions that weakened the governance structure. The environment encompassed wide social groups, forced the cancellation of energy projects, but ultimately did not manage to overcome dominant nationalist politics.

This narration through three periods has methodological limits. Periodization can impose an artificial impression that changes are linear, that turns happen abruptly, and that temporal boundaries between the periods are reified. In reality, environment-making authority and authority-making environment rarely shifted in such clear-cut sequences. Global, national, and ecological processes often overlapped, coincided, or moved in uneven rhythms, and this chapter has presented the most important patterns. The heuristic of periodization nonetheless

serves a purpose. It allows the dissertation to construct parallel temporal sequences and to present historical trajectories. Most importantly, periodization enables the dissertation to trace the approximate correlations between changing modes of authority and environmental politics.

The use of sequencing also reflects the imbalance within the historical records. Throughout my archival research and review of secondary literature, it became clear that institutional work is better documented, its influence mirrored in the abundance of available material. In contrast, popular environmental struggles appeared far less frequently in the sources. Periodization thus helps me amplify the role of mobilizations alongside that of the state and capital by establishing them as parallel and closely interrelated processes.

In the chapter on the Iron Gates I, the dissertation presented the processes of environment-making and the dynamics of the authority and environment. In this chapter, it followed a similar approach but with broadened scalar and temporal lenses, paying particular attention to global embeddedness. Through these two chapters, it becomes clear how the practices of extraction, the meanings of the environment, and the strategies of environmentalism shifted over time and across scales. Together, the two chapters establish the interpretative frame that the next three chapters will rely upon when analyzing the environment-making around small hydro power projects (SHPPs). The next chapter fast-forwards to the 2010s and Serbia's EU accession and presents the environment-making authority behind SHPPs.

CHAPTER 3: SMALL HYDROPOWER AS THE TROJAN HORSE OF LIBERALIZATION

This chapter diverges from the previous two in its exploration of environmental and energy politics. The focus shifts from large-scale energy projects in Yugoslavia to present-day small hydropower plants (SHPPs), and from the Yugoslav federation under state socialism to contemporary Serbia and its relationship with the European Union. Nevertheless, the analytical lenses remain the same, as the chapter dissects the new constellation of environment-making authority. In the case of SHPPs, the chapter traces how hundreds of projects reappeared in the 2000s, mostly in mountainous regions abundant with smaller rivers, under the auspices of renewable and sustainable energy. With an eye on SHPPs, the chapter concentrates on the new mode of environment-making that revolves around profit, private property, and globalized environmental and energy policies. It investigates the organization of the present authority over Serbia's environment, follows its spans across scales, and traces the conflictual agendas characteristic of this constellation.

A brief historical background provides a temporal bridge to the previous chapter. A tectonic shift occurred after the late 1980s. A series of ethnic conflicts between Yugoslav republics culminated in the violent dissolution of the country into six independent states. Slobodan Milošević's regime in Serbia waged most of the wars—and lost all. The final one, the 1999 NATO bombardment, preceded the October 2000 elections, when the opposition won and formed a new government. By then, Serbia was an exhausted country after years of sanctions, impoverishment, devastated factories, infrastructure decaying or destroyed in the bombardment, outmigration, war traumas, and state-led organized crime.

Another turning point in Serbia's politics came in 2012, when the former liberal government lost power after years of corruption scandals, unsuccessful privatizations resulting in massive unemployment, and the inability to meet European Union demands regarding the independence of Kosovo. A new era began under the neoliberal and autocratic leadership of Aleksandar Vučić, who is still president at the time of writing. He consolidated total power on the wings of a false anti-corruption campaign, during which he dismantled the former political structure, arrested national oligarchs (who later joined his regime), and established almost total control over institutions and media. He also established a wide network of criminals and domestic capitalists to support the rule of his party, *Srpska Napredna Stranka* (Serbian Progressive Party).

Serbia's accession to the EU began in the early 2000s but remains incomplete to this day. In the beginning, when Milošević's regime fell, accession to the European Union represented the last hope, almost like a civilizational project for reviving the country. The EU model was supposed to improve Serbia's political freedoms, institutions, and material well-being—in short, help the country approach the prosperous liberal democracies of Western Europe. That was how the new government promoted it, how EU officials presented it, and how much of society understood it. Yet, accession proved to be a far bigger challenge than for other post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Brussels's stick-and-carrot supervisory governance shifted over time, as the criteria of being "European" changed from delivering war criminals to The Hague, to recognizing Kosovo's independence, to implementing liberalization reforms across economic, political, social, cultural, and infrastructural fields.[70]

[70] For critical analyses of the Yugoslav post-socialist transition, with a particular focus on cultural and ideological critiques, see Petrović 2012; Buden 2012; for a focus on the social and political consequences, see Horvat and Štiks 2015.

Since 2012, Serbia has participated in technical and political negotiations with the EU and completed some chapters. Meanwhile, Vučić turned into an avid EU promoter. Although once an anti-EU hardliner, proven nationalist, Milošević's former minister, and a war propagandist, he has become the new bearer of EU promises: someone who delivers what the international powers need, enjoys their support, yet also presents himself domestically as the guardian of national sovereignty that is under the quasi-threat of those same global powers. He casts himself as the provider of material prosperity and infrastructure-led development, as well as a guarantor that the EU dream will one day come true.

In recent years, however, the accession process has stagnated for all regional candidates. Even senior EU representatives appear to have given up the enlargement dream amid resistance from established member states. The Union's salience with new members after Croatia's entrance became a new reality. In this skeptical climate, a new multi-pillar approach and access to sectors, such as the common market, before a potential full accession became the new framework—perhaps to keep the spark alive while keeping enlargement out of reach. Since 2020, that spark has turned green. Promises of "European values" have narrowed to technical and financial support for ecology, transport, and energy, though little of this has yet materialized in tangible infrastructural improvements.

NGOs and experts initially hoped that the EU would help phase out Serbia's extremely polluting thermal power plants, which generate two-thirds of the country's electricity (Kovačević 2004). This critique was seconded by reports on the Western Balkans' pollution of the rest of Europe (Bankwatch 2021). Few believed that the government would voluntarily curb pollution, but many hoped that EU accession would at least force the transformation through its conditionality standards. Yet even those hopes in the EU have recently waned. When I spoke with academics and activists in 2021 about whether they expected the EU to help resist the

construction of SHPPs, which was particularly intensive at that time, they responded with reservations. While they supported the initiative against SHPPs in front of EU institutions, they mentioned that the EU's contribution to environmental transformation has been slim. Some said that the EU's geopolitical attitude towards Russia slowed down gasification in Serbia, while others complained that accession standards were negotiated too slowly and that they lacked substantial international pressure and economic support. My interviewees agreed that the EU overlooked environmental, social, and political issues in exchange for Serbia's concessions in the dispute with Kosovo.

The expectation that "the EU should do something" existed because its development banks—the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank—provided crucial financing for SHPPs (Bankwatch 2015). The projects emerged from EU-driven reforms that were supposed to make Serbia's electricity sector more sustainable by promoting renewables, and only the EU had the necessary political, economic, and institutional leverage to pressure national governments. Candidate countries like Serbia promoted SHPPs under the very same EU legal framework, even as activists and ecological experts pointed out the technology's social and ecological harms.

Critics consider SHPPs detrimental because they: 1) use long pipelines that derive water from small waterways in ecologically sensitive areas, leaving riverbeds dry (Ristić et al. 2018); 2) rely on water-based technology in the context of climate crisis and the declining quality and availability of water; 3) ignore more ecologically sound technologies like solar and wind power; and 4) contribute only percents to the overall energy balance. Thus, given their design, consequences, and alternatives, it is difficult to believe that electricity generated from SHPPs is sustainable and renewable.

So, how could a project with such detrimental consequences have materialized? The usual suspects of corruption, weak enforcement, or imperfect legal transposition capture only part of the story: investors are often closely tied to ruling parties, environmental agencies are underfunded, and legal transposition is formal and selective. These problems are real, but they do not resolve the central puzzle. What remains unexplained is why SHPPs proliferated across the entire Western Balkans at the very moment when the EU acted as a global leader in sustainability. How did the EU framework that promoted sustainability within the Union create conditions for projects that caused environmental degradation in candidate countries? Surface-focused explanations reduce EU rules to a neutral template, addressing only local failures of compliance. They miss what this chapter highlights—that EU renewables legislation itself emerged from conflicts of interest within the Union, and that its uneven benefits and burdens were carried outward into the accession space.

Instead of taking EU laws at face value, this chapter analyzes how the EU's renewables framework arose "against the background of essentially competing and contradictory interests of different social forces" (Brand et al. 2022, 268), and how its transposition unfolded through long-term spatial inequalities and short-term alignments of interests. Nation-centered accounts also miss this point. When they notice that SHPP issues recur across the Western Balkans, they simply multiply the same tropes rather than explain the simultaneity as a systemic effect. By contrast, this chapter develops a macro-sociological approach sensitive to the multiscalar dynamics of unequal regional positionality, inquiring into the relations between the EU and candidate states rather than treating problems as purely domestic.

Following Gille (2016b), the chapter analyzes how politico-economic inequalities materialize in technology and shape the implementation of EU regulations. It traces how and why the Serbian government chose to return to SHPPs to satisfy EU rules on renewable electricity

production. The reason had less to do with concerns for sustainability and more with liberalization of the electricity market. The chapter maintains that the government chose, and the EU's Energy Community approved, SHPPs because this technology, with its scalar, economic, and symbolic capabilities, could serve not only sustainability criteria but also the introduction of private ownership.

The previous chapter showed how SHPPs first emerged in 1986 within a package of energy projects aimed at stabilizing the troubled electricity system under fragmented authority, with the state at its core. Twenty years later, in the early 2000s, an almost identical policy proposal was retrofitted for the new purpose of reducing the role of the state and expanding that of the private sector. Both the Serbian government and the Energy Community were united behind this neoliberal mission and found SHPPs useful for that cause. Yet while both worked on widening the space for private capital, their aims diverged. The government used SHPPs to create opportunities for national capital, while the Energy Community endorsed SHPPs as a step towards building an overarching legal and market framework for large foreign capital.

Both sides thus employed SHPPs as instruments of *technopolitics*—that is, politics pursuing political-economic goals through supposedly neutral technological and technocratic means (Gille 2016; Hecht 2009; Mitchell 2002; Spivey 2022; Szabo and Fabok 2020). The electricity-related legislation that seemingly dealt only with technical affairs introduced changes with far-reaching political and economic consequences. On the surface, SHPPs seemed like a technology dealing exclusively with sustainability, while in fact targeting more sensitive issues of ownership, governance, and interests. Sustainability was underemphasized and, to some extent, instrumentalized in economic restructuring. As such, it became a victim of the technopolitics of the EU accession.

The chapter begins with the Serbian policy context, then moves to a decade of EU energy policy formation, and finally returns to the constellation of capital and state forged around SHPPs. The first section presents the legal framework behind SHPPs that led the environment-making process, outlining the state of Serbia's electricity sector, the key institutional actors, and the market and energy policies that fostered renewables and restructuring. It also frames the EU accession process as a globalized development project that reproduces patterns of international subordination. The second section examines the international level of authority—the political and economic forces and relations at the EU level—and explains how their interplay ascribed the function of ownership restructuring to renewables. This conjuncture was shaped by the intertwined dynamics of Eastern Enlargement, the pan-European integration of national energy markets, and the push toward decarbonization of the energy sector. The third section returns to Serbia and state-level authority to analyze the energy reform performed under the EU supervision. It shows how SHPPs were mobilized for different constellations of interests, and how environment-making around SHPPs advanced conflictual goals. I argue this through a close reading of legal and policy documents, as well as through interviews with key policymakers. By the end of the chapter, the contours of the new authority constellation and mechanisms of environment-making will become evident.

Liberalization reforms as environment-making

The environment-making process around SHPPs revolved primarily around electricity market reform. This reform was an intertwined, double transition—liberalization of the state-owned electricity sector, on the one hand, and decarbonization of electricity production, on the other. The double transition formally began in 2004, when the national parliament approved new legislation in the electricity sector that formally permitted private ownership. In 2005, Serbia

joined the newly established Energy Community. Just a few weeks earlier, the then-united Serbia and Montenegro had also entered negotiations over a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union, which was the initial formal step towards EU accession. The period around 2005 thus marks the beginning of a foundational, overarching process of EU-led restructuring. Within this process, the Energy Community represented the EU, tasked with inducing, overseeing, and fostering legal, economic, technological, and ecological transformations in the energy sector. Serbia and other candidate countries faced an ambitious task of conducting a double economic and energy transition.

The first transition was a typical post-socialist restructuring with an emphasis on liberalization, competition, the unbundling of state ownership, and integration into the regional market. The reform especially concerned the main energy company in Serbia, the state-owned *Elektroprivreda Srbije* (EPS). Before the accession kick-started, EPS was a vertically integrated company, which meant that it consisted of units for generation, distribution, and transmission. EPS was also the sole owner of the country's generation capacities, which included both coal-powered and hydropower plants. During accession, EPS underwent organizational unbundling. The government implemented EU directives and split EPS's production, distribution, and transmission units, but maintained ownership and tight control.

Although liberalization, unbundling, and privatization frequently overlap, they are not synonymous. Unbundling addresses the legal structure of conglomerate-like public companies, splitting them into separate legal entities with clearly delineated functions such as generation, transmission, and distribution. The assumption behind unbundling is that a unified public incumbent acts as a monopoly and misuses its power against competitors and reforms. Unbundling is therefore a precondition for, but does not necessarily lead to, the sale of property. When property is sold, we are then talking about privatization. This may take the form of partial

sales, where the state retains a controlling share, or of full buyouts by competitors or investment funds. The outcomes of these processes differ geographically, as this chapter shows. Finally, liberalization serves as an umbrella term encompassing both unbundling and privatization, as well as broader policies on state aid, market access, and rules of competition.

The second transition, which unfolded alongside liberalization, was the energy transition, which required the decarbonization of electricity generation, 70% of which came from thermal power plants. Such lignite-based generation is unsustainable and harmful to public health (Kovačević 2004), as well as economically unviable under the EU's recent carbon tax rules. The main change was expected to come from expanded electricity generation from renewable energy sources (RES). As with unbundling, the effects of decarbonization on EPS were expected to be significant, which had almost no renewable capacity under its control apart from hydropower plants built during socialism.

Through this double transition, the EU promised transformative effects. It sought to alter the economic, organizational, and technological foundations of the electricity sector and, more broadly, to foster a liberalization and opening of the local economy to foreign capital. The promise extended beyond the energy sector, envisioning society-wide benefits. Rules on competition, state aid, and ownership unbundling were supposed to reduce the role of the state to a merely regulatory function while simultaneously opening up the market for private producers and retailers of electricity. These new measures would also abolish regulated prices for industrial consumers and households and enable all consumers the freedom of choice of distributors. Price deregulation and increases were especially important, the Energy Community insisted, as state aid was a negative example of how competition could be hindered. Moreover, the implementation of directives on economic restructuring was expected to expand renewable energy production. Deregulated prices, the argument went, would

gradually reduce the artificial economic advantage of electricity produced from fossil fuels and stimulate investment in renewables.

Additionally, the EU *acquis communautaire*—the Union's "constitution"—projected a model of the market that surpassed national boundaries. Instead of the fragmented markets that emerged after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, accession was meant to bring regional and, ultimately, pan-European integration through stock markets. I argue that investment in RES unified the two transitions: first, as evidence of correctly implemented economic liberalization, and second, as a mechanism for achieving decarbonization. It was precisely because of this dual function that SHPPs came to operate as both a vehicle of ownership restructuring and as proof of compliance with EU rules.

Directives concerning decarbonization, market integration, and competition were transposed through extensive national legislation. Two regulations are particularly relevant for this discussion. Like other member or candidate countries, Serbia adopted the EU directive mandating an increase in the share of renewable electricity—from 20% to 27%—in its energy mix. To achieve this, the government introduced the widely used feed-in tariff (FIT) mechanism (Milenković and Pešterić 2021) to incentivize investment in RES. This was a lucrative subsidy that guaranteed investors the purchase of electricity at a subsidized price over twelve years. All consumers covered this generous FIT scheme through their monthly bills.[71] However, this FIT design had an inbuilt issue: a sudden and massive rise in investments could backfire by increasing bills and reducing public support for RES, as had already happened in several EU countries (Cointe and Nadaï 2018).[72]

[71] FIT was not a Serbian invention but a typical example of a "traveling policy." It emerged in Germany's *Energiewende*, when the government stimulated the then-nascent industry of renewables. Subsequently, it spread across the EU and became a landmark of decarbonization (Cointe and Nadaï 2018).
[72] This is because the final amount for FIT was volume dependent. The more RES electricity was produced, the higher FIT was, and the more money consumers paid.

To prevent such a scenario, the government introduced several control mechanisms. Capacity quotas limited the maximum capacity for each RES technology eligible for FIT. The quotas applied to solar and wind but not to SHPPs, a decision with profound effects. As I explain later in the chapter, the reasoning behind the quotas was that solar power was too expensive to publicly finance due to the technology's novelty, while the transmission network was seen as too underdeveloped to take all the electricity from new wind parks. SHPPs, by contrast, were thought to be "naturally" limited by geographical conditions and, therefore, did not require further regulation. Such an arrangement meant that quotas for solar and wind quickly filled up, while hydropower remained an open channel for investment. Furthermore, the law introduced an additional safeguard in the form of conditional (rather than guaranteed) access to the grid. Through this, the government could control public expenditure for FIT and regulate the pace of investment. Taken together, the RES regulations embodied contradictory functions: they encouraged investment but sought to prevent it from happening too abruptly; they shifted costs onto final consumers while attempting to keep those costs contained; and they demonstrated compliance with the EU acquis while strategically diverging from its full implementation.

All these directives, laws, and bylaws represented the means of environment-making. The production of the environment appeared less direct than how intrusive the expropriation for the Iron Gates I seemed in Tekija (Chapter 1). Or rather, the recent process was less intelligible because of the bureaucratic and technocratic governance that produced myriad chain-like policies. Like in the gorge, the key policies concerned ownership and profitability of energy projects. Whereas the expropriation of land in the past had transformed local property relations to enable new productive practices around energy, the more recent change consisted in creating an electricity market, turning electricity (renewable and non-renewable alike) into a commodity, introducing private ownership and deploying subsidies (FITs) to enhance profit-making. With this main framework in place, all other procedures that had more tangible social

and ecological consequences—access to water, construction in protected zones, compensations to landowners, effects on local livelihoods—became merely a matter of agreement and formalism. Unlike in the period of socialist authority, the techno-scientific dimension of environment-making appeared absent under accession-led authority. Compared with the period of socialist authority, this recent form of environment-making was more indirect, served much narrower interests, and lacked techno-scientific appeal. Nevertheless, its consequences for the environment were substantial.

This form of EU-induced environment-making is technical, with a value- and interest-neutral appearance. However, in my analysis of environment-making authority around SHPPs, the acquis does not function as a purely technical, value- and interest-neutral package of reforms. Its technical appearance conceals its role in guiding fundamental politico-economic restructuring. In this sense, I follow several authors who have pointed to the deeply political nature of EU integration, which often gets lost in the endless labyrinth of rules and standards. Zsuzsa Gille (2016b), for instance, has shown how standards operate as material means of politics and reproduce inequalities between existing and new members of the Union. Böröcz (2009) describes integration, regulation, and governance within the EU as an imperial model. Drahokoupil (2009) identifies foreign direct investments (FDI) as one of the key vehicles of economic integration and simultaneous dispossession of new members, carried out with the cooperation of domestic elites, the so-called comprador service sector. Boris Buden (2012) further questions the submissive relationship imposed on candidate countries, which are expected to forget their socialist past and replace it with new European values. These are only a few of the numerous critical studies, and common to them is the characterization of accession as a fundamentally unequal relationship.

This chapter joins these critiques of the integration process and frames accession as a part of a *global development project*. I consider it as such following Phillip McMichael's (2000) differentiation between three global projects that have shaped political, economic, and ecological relations: the *colonial project,* which lasted until the Second World War; the *development project,* led by the model of Keynesian nation-states, which ended in the late 1970s; and the *globalization project,* characterized by neoliberal restructuring and global economic liberalization since the 1980s. Without any doubt, EU accession represents a case of a globalization project due to its emphasis on integration, liberalization, and neoliberalization. Yet, accession also draws upon the classical development project when it promotes linear change, universalism, and unconditionality. It unfolds in a top-down manner over acceding countries, and both domestic and international promoters present it as civilizational progress and material advancement, which are characteristics and promises of a strong, developed nation-state. It is because of these dual characteristics that I consider EU accession a global development project.

The tropes of this project are omnipresent in the restructuring of the energy sector. Take, for instance, one of the reports from the Energy Community Secretariat (for the period 2015–2016), which vividly employs the metaphor of a race to describe the accession process:

> "Transposition—it's not enough, not enough, not enough": the chorus of a song written by our colleague Peter Vajda on a tune by Manic Street Preachers for the Secretariat's occasional campfire retreats in the hills outside Vienna sums up nicely the Secretariat's work as well as this year's reporting period. Transposition was very much in focus last year. 2015 was determined by the *race* among Contracting Parties for transposing the Third Energy Package by the deadline of 1 January. This race was *won* by Serbia, Albania, and Ukraine (for gas), victories which we celebrated already in last year's Implementation Report. In the meantime, Montenegro, Moldova, and Kosovo* crossed *the finishing line* as well. Congratulations to those who made it possible. But then Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, seem to have *dropped out of the race* or even walked *backward*. This is an issue of serious concern for the Energy Community and, unfortunately, a general indicator for the lack of capability and/or willingness

> in those countries to follow European rules (Energy Community Secretariat 2016, 9, my emphasis).

In this and other reports I have analyzed, there appears to be a linear progressive path from the irrational past to a bright future, from "price regulation that constitutes a relic from the pre-reform era" (Energy Community Secretariat 2013, 11) to the cost-based and efficient European model. The progressive path is to be achieved through a guided process that brings chain-like, spillover benefits: competition, market opening, and the reduction of the state's role are portrayed as guarantors of lower prices, sustainability, and security of supply.

Moreover, the entire development project rests on the idea of transposition, that is, the substitution of one legal, politico-economic order with a superior one, without mixing or hybridizing them. Solutions proven elsewhere are treated as universally beneficial and applicable. Consequently, accession negotiations rarely focus on working out locally suitable solutions but on ensuring that EU rules and standards are transplanted without substantial alterations.

To scrutinize the tropes of development does not mean to reject a priori all reforms or to dismiss their potential benefits as false promises. Many reforms are certainly necessary, especially when we look at the current condition of energy infrastructure, energy poverty, and the government's indifference toward the climate crisis. Likewise, certain benefits and pre-accession grants should not be overlooked either. Rather, my critical analysis aims at identifying features of liberalization that prevent the benefits of accession from outweighing its losses, problematizing the one-size-fits-all model of reform, and inquiring about its far-reaching political, social, and ecological consequences.

Ownership change without privatization

Before explaining how SHPPs became instruments of sustainability and ownership change in Serbia, we need to first understand how renewables in general began to fulfill that role within the EU. Doing so will also further the analytical tasks that I initiated in the previous chapter, where I explored how environmental politics in Yugoslavia remained embedded in global relations throughout the country's history. This chapter focuses on a more contemporary form of that embeddedness, which is characteristic of Serbia's tighter institutional integration than what was the case with Yugoslavia's international relations. In this new configuration, relations between transnational actors—old and new member states, as well as EU institutions—solidify into a durable structure for national institutions in accessing countries like Serbia. The first task, then, is to explain how renewables came to represent the means of ownership restructuring within the EU, which will also open a perspective on the formation of the EU-level authority.

In the 2010s, especially among latecomer EU members, electricity sector reforms followed a common logic. Ownership structures changed not through classic brownfield privatization but through greenfield private investment in renewables. Fossil-fuel plants became unviable under EU regulations, while subsidies made new RES highly profitable. This situation created an implicit strategy of market restructuring, in which state firms kept their old assets but private capital reshaped ownership through expansion into renewables. However, the restructuring did not exist from the onset of renewable power sources, nor was it universally applied across the whole Union. Rather, the process was geographically and historically contingent: it gained traction mostly in the countries of the Eastern Enlargement, and especially among the latecomers to accession, who were subjected to more rigorous conditionality rules than their predecessors.

Which historical processes created that nexus of RES technologies, sustainability, and ownership change? How did the implementation of that nexus play out across the EU's unevenly developed geographies? Three processes formed a conjuncture: 1) the Eastern Enlargement with its centrally positioned inflow of FDI, 2) the creation of the EU-wide integrated energy market through extensive liberalization, and 3) the decarbonization of the EU electricity sector. In conceptual terms, that conjuncture operated as an overarching *organizing logic* (Sassen 2008) that defined the meaning and purpose of renewables, including SHPPs in latecomer countries like Serbia. That organizing logic was a contingent yet structured outcome of relations between founding and new EU member states, the EU Commission's agenda, and conflictual relations between different branches of capital.

At first, these three agendas operated relatively autonomously from one another. They had a certain degree of synchronicity, but it took time before they fully started enforcing each other. Among them, decarbonization (understood as the development of modern renewables) and energy market integration were most closely linked in EU policy, but even they emerged independently. This entanglement was somewhat paradoxical, since energy had been central to European integration from the very beginning. The European Coal and Steel Community (1951) and Euratom (1957) were the founding pillars of the Union. Yet after the 1960s, energy integration stalled, and the common market advanced primarily in other sectors. When energy returned to the center of EU policy, it did so less as a shared public good and more as a "Trojan horse" for market liberalization.

The development of modern renewables started in the 1970s as Western states' response to the oil shocks (Michael Aklin and Urpelainen 2018) and resumed in the late 1990s as an effort to reduce carbon emissions and develop national industries (Cointe and Nadaï 2018). These were national projects (especially in Germany and Denmark) that initially had little to do with

integration into the common market (Cointe and Nadaï 2018). Likewise, while the formation of an integrated electricity market had been on the Commission's agenda since the 1980s, progress stalled because influential Western governments resisted losing sovereignty over critical infrastructure and exposing it to competition (Cointe and Nadaï 2018; Haar and Marinescu 2011; Heddenhausen 2007). The opposition began to fade with the 1997 Directive, which introduced organizational (not ownership) unbundling of national companies and non-binding national quotas for renewables (Cointe and Nadaï 2018). Merging decarbonization and integration agendas held considerable political weight, both internally and externally. Internally, it aimed to demonstrate the feasibility and vitality of integration through liberal market mechanisms (Cointe and Nadaï 2018). Externally, it positioned the EU as a global leader and model in climate politics (Biesenbender 2015; Quitzow and Thielges 2022).

The third agenda—Eastern Enlargement—took shape through FDI as the primary mechanism of integration into both the EU and the global economy. FDI targeted places with abundant socialist industrial legacies and skilled but cheap labor, especially in the automobile sector. Candidate countries competed for these benefits by providing generous subsidies and pursuing extensive liberalization of their economies (Greskovits 2014). Yet, while Visegrad countries reaped the fruits, latecomers from the Western Balkans engaged in a race to the bottom over labor-intensive, less fruitful investments (Radenković 2017). FDI became omnipresent in sectors beyond manufacturing, including services and finance (Greskovits 2014), and the electricity sector was no exception (LaBelle 2020). The rationale for promised benefits in the electricity sector was similar to FDI inflows in other sectors. The existing infrastructure was obsolete or malfunctioning, available technology was outdated, and budgets for upgrades were seriously constrained. The solution came from the privatization of distribution and retail companies. As shown in Hungary in the 1990s (LaBelle 2020) and Romania in the early 2000s (Haar and Marinescu 2011), foreign capital arrived from Germany, France, or Italy and brought

know-how, new management practices, and renovated infrastructure into the sector. Importantly, privatization through the gradual sale of stocks occurred in some Western European countries, too, but it did not follow the same logic of FDI.[73] States often kept controlling shares of public companies, allowing only the partial entrance of private capital. The result was not a total sell-off but varied ownership arrangements between countries (Heddenhausen 2007).

At first, FDI in Eastern European states targeted retail and distribution. The infrastructure necessary for pan-EU integration, such as interconnectors and transmission lines, was partially financed through EU funds. However, EU support rarely extended to the most capital-intensive sector of generation (Gál 2021). Generation became key for international capital in the second phase, when the three agendas merged and formed an overarching organizing logic.

The tipping point came in 2009. Privatization, decarbonization, and integration formed the conjuncture at which renewables addressed more than just sustainability concerns. Directive 2009 introduced two key changes: unbundling of public conglomerates into independent entities, and mandatory renewables quotas (Cointe and Nadaï 2018). Enhancing liberalization through ownership separation and market opening was essential for the Commission's efforts to achieve market integration (Yurchenko 2020), despite strong resistance from powerful member states such as Germany and France. It took time, diplomatic means, and market positioning for them to accept the new rules. Another key change concerned decarbonization because the Directive introduced mandatory quotas that each member state was obliged to fulfill, though even then, there were exceptions. While existing members, including the Visegrad Four, had greater flexibility to improvise, partially meet, or even avoid the two demands (Ćetković and Buzogány 2020; LaBelle 2020), Romania and Bulgaria, as latecomers,

[73] This was the case of the UK, France, Sweden, and Germany (Heddenhausen 2007).

implemented them fully (Davidescu et al. 2018). This trend shows that for latecomers, ownership restructuring and decarbonization were made interdependent, stricter, and nearly as demanding as membership itself. This discrepancy in conditionality between acceding and existing members exposed how candidate countries were caught in a bind: on one side stood unavoidable and continuously evolving EU conditionality; on the other, pressures in the European electricity market, where the most powerful actors sought to restore profits lost due to stricter EU rules.

The case of Romania is particularly exemplary of the pressures of the twofold transition. To enter the EU, Romania had to unbundle the electricity sector, downscale state control, and open the market to private investors in renewables. Yet the grid infrastructure was obsolete and needed both a regular overhaul and an upgrade to permit renewable intermittent sources. In the face of budgetary limitations and EU regulatory pressure, the government conducted numerous privatizations, expecting them to "contribute in terms of modernization and upgrading infrastructure, superior managerial and operational know-how to improve the efficiency of distribution network and the quality of services to consumers" and "also deliver on the new environmental targets" (Haar and Marinescu 2011, 2250). These privatizations followed the already established logic of FDI investments in the region: the process happened "on the back of a legislative framework" through technical and technocratic regulations and under the leadership of foreign advisors and the national comprador sector (Haar and Marinescu 2011, 2249). The initial investments began around 2004, first in distribution and transmission systems, as well as in some aspects of generation that required technical or environmental upgrades. Importantly, the change of ownership structure in generation occurred not through brownfield but through greenfield investments in renewables.

While Romania diligently implemented the new rules on decarbonization and liberalization, national companies from more influential states looked for ways of restoring profits lost at home amid liberalization. The dominant strategy of these companies (E.ON and RWE from Germany, ENEL and ENI from Italy, EDF from France, and later CEZ from the Czech Republic) was to replace domestic vertical integration (as requested by the EU) with block-wide horizontal integration. They carried out the shift through large-scale mergers and acquisitions in countries like Romania and Bulgaria. They started with companies in distribution, but their long-term goal was domination of renewable generation, since only RES could provide them with long-term and substantial gains due to FIT and carbon pricing of energy (Haar and Marinescu 2011).[74]

Renewables thus became a lucrative frontier for these firms, which already possessed the requisite capital, technology, and know-how. In Romania, large capacities in wind and solar were allocated to foreign investors, while smaller capacities, often in solar and SHPPs, remained for national investors (Davidescu et al. 2018). In practice, while partially opened for competition, the privatized utilities abroad engaged in international mergers and invested in renewable generation. The partial break of national monopolies did not result in open competition, as promoters of liberalization had hoped, but instead created EU-wide oligopolies. In this sense, I argue that renewables became synonymous with ownership restructuring. This unfolded at the conjuncture of the new wave of accession, increased pressures from Brussels for liberalization and decarbonization, and market pressures to renew opportunities for profit-making.

[74] For an overview of ownership changes in Western and Eastern Europe, particularly from the perspective of Serbia's regulatory perspective, see (Maćić 2014; 2015).

Despite strong evidence of this shift, ownership restructuring via renewables operated as a stealth mechanism of privatization. The stealthiness came from the discrepancy between formal rules and unofficial, often technocratic practices:

At the EU level, no explicit stance on ownership has been taken due to the different national attitudes towards the role of the state in the ownership and control of the utilities. Article 295 of the EC-Treaty expressly states that this "Treaty shall in no way prejudice the rules in the Member States governing the system of property ownership." This did not prevent the European Commission from recognizing from time to time that privatizations of state-owned utilities may be beneficial for improving the competitive environment in which these companies operate—yet without developing policy approaches in this respect. It cannot be denied, however, that the liberalization policy initiated on the EU level has influenced the ownership structure of the respective industries in the Member States (Heddenhausen 2007, 2).

Serbia followed a similar pattern. Official documents and accession reports seemed agnostic on the issue of ownership. Privatization remained indirect, just as the EU expectations about property change remained blurred. That expectation surfaced rarely in the public, particularly in reports that accentuated the role of private foreign capital. In its 2010 report, the Energy Community insisted:

> Competition and State aid law are of great importance in the energy sectors characterized by natural monopolies, a high degree of concentration, and a high level of State intervention. The necessary progress towards full implementation of the electricity and gas acquis can only be achieved when competition and State aid law enforcement protect markets from distortion and *enable market access by new entrants and foreign competitors* (Energy Community Secretariat 2010, 22, my emphasis).

In the same vein, the Energy Community explained in its 2016 report:

> The Energy Community's third dimension is integration. Integration of energy markets on a regional level, but also with the wider European energy market, may be the Energy Community's most noble objective, as integrated markets translate into prosperity, peace, and stability. Integration must go hand in hand with domestic reform. The experience in Southeast Europe shows that the creation of a regional wholesale market depends on liquid national markets and vice versa. It also shows that often *the only true challenge to monopolistic national energy markets will come from enlarging those markets and getting foreign players in*, which in turn depends on the creation of supporting conditions for new market entrants on the national level (Energy Community Secretariat 2016, 9, my emphasis).

With the conjunctural understanding of renewables as the means of ownership change, we can make sense of the role SHPPs played in Serbia's energy transition. Despite the 2004 law allowing private ownership in the electricity sector, I am not aware of any privatization of the public electric utilities; however, a change in ownership structure in the generation sector is underway. The rate of privately owned power plants continues to rise, while public investment in RES has stalled. Although no public companies have been privatized, the overall share of private ownership in electricity production has been consistently growing. The government has slowed public investments in renewables, while domestic and international institutions have provided financial and administrative support almost exclusively to private investors in renewables. Thus, renewable energy technology occupies a central role in property shifts without formal privatization.

When it comes to SHPPs, national-level authority consisting of high state officials, along with local investors, employed this technology to channel domestic capital and temporarily slow down the expansion of foreign capital in the critical sector of electricity production. At the same time, SHPPs were a product of the policy frame and FITs and, as such, were a testimony of completed market restructuring, as required by the EU-level authority.

The preceding analysis of EU dynamics not only explains how renewables in general, and SHPPs in particular, came to introduce private ownership, it also serves a broader conceptual role in the dissertation, as it reveals two significant aspects of the environment-making authority. First, the analysis furthers my explanation of multiscalar authority that I initiated in the previous chapter. Second, it presents the pervasive patterns of uneven development that the ongoing energy transition reproduces.

What we have seen so far is that the liberalization requirements Serbia has faced in the EU accession process (Section 1 of this chapter) were a product of complex and unequal relations between the founding and newer member states and the EU Commission. In simplified terms, the case of SHPPs involves both the national and international levels of environment-making authority. While the next section elaborates on how domestic authority was assembled, this section has outlined the process that constituted transnational, EU-level authority. The catch is that domestic and transnational authority in the case of Serbia do not stand on even grounds, nor do they interact as partners. That arrangement is in stark contrast with the case of Yugoslavia, where domestic and transnational authority were formed through relatively horizontal alliances and energy infrastructure, particularly during the period of diffused authority (Chapter 2).

The EU's legal and political organization represents the international instance of environment-making authority that sets certain economic and ecological parameters. Serbia's national-level authority then cooperates and competes with this international instance, engaging with those parameters to produce projects like SHPPs—but always as a minor partner with many obligations before receiving any rights. Serbia has little ability to alter the solidified structure of relations between existing members. The relations and events that once transpired within the transnational constellations of the environment-making authority—the EU Commission, old

and new EU member states, and different factions of capital—have solidified into institutional stratification and legal codes, becoming a structural condition for new candidate countries. In other words, what was once a process among members has become a structure for candidate countries.

In this understanding, I draw upon Erik Wolf's (1986) distinction between *tactical* and *structural powers*. While the former refers to the capacity to determine the setting within which interpersonal relations take place, the latter denotes the power that "organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the distribution and direction of energy flows" (586). I add a temporal dimension to Wolf's concepts to suggest that the transnational authority in the EU was formed through tactical power relations, which later crystallized into structural power over national authority in Serbia. That renewables became the means of ownership change among recent member-states was an outcome of competition between the EU Commission's agenda for sustainability and integration, incumbent companies' search for new markets, older members' deflection of EU rules, and the inescapability of those rules for recent members. To Serbia, this outcome appeared as a pre-given policy package that determined the purpose, distribution of costs and benefits, and set the relations between energy, market, and sustainability. Such was the arrangement between international and national constellations of authority in the case of SHPPs.

This section also illuminated the fundamental uneven dynamics of the EU-led energy transition, revealing how spatial patterns of uneven development are reproduced through the constellation of environment-making authority. Forces like flows of capital, infrastructural underdevelopment, inescapable rules of conditionality, and market pressures were all tied into a systemic logic. This logic took its clearest form among latecomers to accession. The trend of entangling political and economic hierarchies in the energy transition was most apparent in the

EU periphery, where the forces of uneven development were most acute. Being a *latecomer* is not simply a temporal position; it also carries profound consequences. Latecomers face equal or greater economic pressures but have fewer mechanisms to address them. They typically receive fewer benefits from schemes like EU funds or FDI and must contend with far more complex and demanding EU directives that have evolved over time. Finally, latecomers have fewer mechanisms to avoid or negotiate conditions. In this sense, the position of a latecomer is a product of institutional forces and long-term relations inscribed into the EU structure. Since previous candidates had already exhausted most of these mechanisms, they became formalized into continuously stricter conditionality. SHPPs in Serbia appeared within this context of increased conditionality and market pressures.

In the next section, I shift to the national level authority to present how domestic political and economic actors responded to EU requirements. However imposed and inescapable the structural power of the EU might seem, SHPPs were not directly mandated by the EU but represented Serbia's creative response to international pressures. I argue that the Serbian government used SHPPs and renewable technology caps to maintain a strong state role while balancing opportunities for domestic and international investors in renewables.

The formation of state-centered authority in Serbia

Narratives of entrepreneurship and advancement

The emergence of SHPP projects in Serbia cannot be understood apart from the aims of the first democratic government to create a national entrepreneurial class in the energy sector. In the early 2000s, policymakers saw in SHPPs an opportunity for the gradual opening of the energy sector to private capital, which they claimed would generate enough resources and spill

over into other sectors such as tourism and agriculture. While the purpose of SHPPs later shifted toward maintaining control over a critical sector against the entrance of foreign capital, in the beginning, the emphasis was on the role of domestic private capital as bearers of development. The narratives of local entrepreneurship and rural development that SHPP projects supposedly embody were a constitutive part of the environment-making process. State representatives and investors employed these discourses, and development agencies put them in wide circulation through global networks of policymaking. Those promises of domestic advancement added a socially relatable layer of justification to the technocratic framework that I presented at the beginning of the chapter.

One of the founders of the SHPP initiative in Serbia was Milisav Petković. Until the late 2010s, he was an MP, a member of the parliamentary energy committee, and one of the leaders of the energy committee of the then-ruling Democratic Party. I met him in a café in the outer part of Belgrade, where Milisav arrived after his shift in the coal mine where he worked as a geologist. "I had also prepared projects for two SHPPs in my village in Western Serbia," he said, "but I gave up. I didn't want anyone there to denounce me as some tycoon. I can't find benefits in something that my village or municipality doesn't perceive as beneficial."

He went on to describe the committee's work, which aimed to mobilize local capital and carve out space for the first national entrepreneurs in the energy sphere, all while contributing to the progress of the local economy:

> Our party committee intended to create around three thousand entrepreneurs through our RES policy. In our market, these would have been three thousand domestic entrepreneurs who would pay VAT, around whom tourism and ecology would revolve. And by giving up on SHP, the current government took away from our people the only thing they could have done, while enabling the Americans with just one signature to build hectares of solar parks. We intended to create a master plan for each municipality. According to the plan, each municipality would provide the necessary paperwork while the investors brought the rest. They would pay 15–20% of the profit to the local budget,

> which could further be used, for instance, for street lighting. (…) We could have increased the budget of each municipality, and both the state and the investors who remained to live there would benefit. (…) I went for a weeks-long study trip to Austria, Italy, and Slovenia, and saw how they developed through SHP. (…) We aimed at investors with technical expertise, or at those mid-level entrepreneurs, such as dentists and lawyers, who had money and who would team up with experts.

Milisav's contrast between local and American capital is crucial. The opposition between public and private ownership faded, and the origin and destination of profit became the sole markers of public interest. While international capital served only foreign interests, domestic capital was, by default, beneficial. The former encouraged the population to leave, while the latter prevented outmigration—a chronic issue in Serbia. Serbian entrepreneurship invited "our people, our children" to earn and keep living in Serbia, while foreign capital had no interest other than profit. The contrast was surprising, considering that the post-2000 governments, of which Milisav was part, shaped the entire economic and social policies according to the needs of foreign investors (Radenković 2017). The opposition between the two forms of capital drew on a narrative of depopulation, which was yet another example of how the lack of people justified new rounds of profit-making (as discussed further in Chapter 4).

Milisav found the protests against SHPPs unreasonable and naïve, as they erased a rare locally generated development opportunity. "Are we so strong, advanced, and superior to allow ourselves to say, 'I don't care about anything, I want clean air without coal extraction, I want clean rivers without taking water?' All that while you or my children run after a piece of bread and living space abroad? The most important thing for me is what the deceased Zoran [Đinđić, assassinated prime minister] said, 'To ensure that our children remain in our country.' Now, the question is how to find a balance between these two goals," he insisted with a mixture of passion and frustration.

The committee Milisav worked for organized extensive activities, such as visits to countries where SHPPs were widely used, as well as promotional events in municipalities across Serbia. As a result, they published a booklet (Petković and Ivanović 2006) with a set of technical and policy recommendations on concrete steps needed to financially support and bureaucratically ease the investments. Interestingly, this publication was just one among a series of works published by engineers and their associations in the early 2000s that reaffirmed the importance of the hydropower industry by reminding us of its glorious history before and during socialism (Jovanović 2001). Others highlighted unused water potentials to outline future steps of development toward SHPP expansion. Among these was a team of engineers working with EPS and the Pirot municipality (Skupština opštine Pirot 2006). In 2005, the group began revising the 1984 cadaster for Stara Mountain, conducting new measurements and creating more detailed plans than in the original cadaster. They also opened their study with the idea that new projects could be a fruitful enterprise for the local entrepreneurial class.

The fact that policymakers in Serbia envisioned SHPPs as generators of national private capital appears even more understandable if we look at the global rise of hydropower in the early 2000s. This growth had to do, again, with the strong enmeshing of this electricity source with development agendas, almost exclusively in the global South. For some time, hydropower was a preferred technology due to its lower technology costs, large capacity, and potential to mobilize large portions of labor. With its mega dams, China pushed these advantages to their limits and became the single largest developer of the hydropower sector in the world (International Energy Agency 2021). With the decarbonization turn, which included intermittent sources into the energy mix, hydropower reclaimed its value as "the world's most cost-effective, dispatchable low-carbon electricity" (International Energy Agency 2021, 28).

Similarly, small hydropower was promoted by global development agencies, such as the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), as a universal solution that could address not only energy provision concerns but also dire socio-economic conditions in remote, rural areas:

> As the lowest-cost renewable energy technology, hydropower remains integral to international efforts to fight the climate crisis and ensure a clean energy future. Small hydropower (SHP), due to its adaptability to the local needs and conditions and suitability for remote rural areas with low-density energy demand, has been at the center of development strategies worldwide, whilst helping reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promoting greater energy independence. If effectively and sensitively planned, SHPP projects can also offer opportunities for the empowerment of local communities, including the usually disadvantaged groups, such as women and youth, empowering them economically and contributing to progress towards greater equality" (UNIDO, ICSHP 2022, 5).

Global institutions like the World Bank were significant promoters of using the untapped hydropower potential in the Western Balkans region as a path toward sustainability and development (World Bank 2018)—what I am arguing were opposing agendas in Serbia's case. In addition to providing legitimacy to discourses of national entrepreneurship and development, these institutions also operated as sources of policy solutions centered around SHPPs. In Serbia, SHPPs represented an appropriate solution because of familiarity with the technology, lower comparative costs, and their global status as a sustainable technology for the "underdeveloped" countries. The narrative of progress was abundant, and discourses of carbon neutrality quickly caught up as the accession-led reforms went on.

However, the economic and ecological aura of SHPPs soon frayed within the competitive context of EU accession. Apart from decarbonization, renewables in latecomer countries increasingly served as vehicles for profit-making and the restructuring of state control. Renewables thus had quite a different function than fostering domestic entrepreneurship, especially among EU international policy and economic representatives who preferred large-

scale foreign investment and who held greater sway in EU decision-making. SHPPs were a child of that particular policy frame. So, the question was how the embedded tension between different purposes, visions of progress, and economic beneficiaries played out in Serbia's energy policy and infrastructure, as well as in alliances between different factions of the state and capital.

Infrastructural expressions of diverging interests

After discussing the discursive side of environment-making, let us now turn to alliances, interests, and the infrastructural expressions of authority. Between 2009 and 2020, connections between high state officials and different factions of capital gradually formed and evolved. While the EU level of authority exerted a structuring yet less tangible influence on the domestic environment, the authority consisting of state, domestic, and international capital actors had a more direct and decisive impact on the environments where SHPPs were developed. Relations between these actors transformed over time and took characteristic technological expressions: hydropower or wind. Solar became more dominant only with new legislation around 2020; until then, it was the most expensive and least utilized technology, constrained by several bylaws (the next section elaborates on this).

This analysis rests on the assumption that all policies, including environmental and energy policies, represent competing interests. Policies can be understood as class projects mirroring unstable balances of power and relatively durable hegemonic blocs. As such, they are conflict-prone creations that also inflict crises in social reproduction and ecology (Brand et al. 2022). In that sense, I approach environment-making authority around SHPPs as a frictional and changing assemblage of conflicting interests materialized in various legal and infrastructural forms.

In the first period, between 2009 and 2012, the government sided with public and domestic private capital. This was the period when Milisav worked on implementing SHPP policy. Another set of hydropower plants, *Limske hidroelektrane* (Lim hydropower plants) (VM 2014), showcased the imagined role for EPS, the public utility company. The project relied on the FDI model: the Italian company Seci Energia was to finance it, EPS would serve as the major owner and contractor, and all electricity would be exported to Italy via the planned undersea cable through Montenegro. Some authors considered this project proof that EPS received preferential treatment from the state, which was crucial evidence of the state's effort to protect EPS from foreign capital by prioritizing hydropower over other energy sources (Ćetković 2015). Yet, under unclear circumstances, the *Limske hidroelektrane* project was canceled, and as I show below, the role of the public company in RES investments diminished. The space for investments in RES became reserved exclusively for private investors, as prescribed by the EU accession framework.

After 2012, the government changed, and Aleksandar Vučić's party became the sole powerholder in Serbia. Serbia began implementing EU-prescribed liberalization more diligently while at the same time creating its own interest group within the energy sector. EPS became merely an observer of decarbonization, with private national and international capital taking the main roles. The greater participation of private capital followed both EU requests and the national policymakers' wish to encourage domestic private capital in the sector. It is therefore not surprising that EPS's labor union openly criticized renewables, especially wind energy, claiming it would undermine the economic foundations of the electricity system (Insajder Video 2023) and impose additional costs on the company (Ćetković 2015).

In this second period, the goal was to carve out and secure a space for private domestic capital close to the ruling party. Local and mid-level capitalists and entrepreneurs chose SHPPs

because they were significantly cheaper than wind and solar, expertise for it already existed in the country, and returns were secure and high due to the FIT system. Unlike in Kosovo or Albania, where foreign companies often invested in SHPPs, Serbia's SHPPs were almost exclusively owned by domestic investors, some of whom had close connections to the ruling party. One was the godfather of President Aleksandar Vučić, Nikola Petrović, who launched his first projects while Vučić was a member of the opposition but extended them during Vučić's rule (CINS 2024). The fact that SHPPs became *the* method of fostering private domestic capital seemed evident from the growth of projects: while only 21 were approved until 2013, this number rose to 188 by 2020 (Ministarstvo rudarstva i energetike 2021), when almost all new investments stopped due to environmental protests.

Even though SHPPs flourished, Serbia could not achieve the required 27% of renewable electricity solely through SHPPs and domestic capital. This was not only because of limited logistics and modest hydropower capacities but also because the EU, through the Energy Community Secretariat, was clear that foreign capital had to be the main agent and beneficiary of joint decarbonization and liberalization. The last pattern in state–capital relations thus emerged between the government, representatives of the ruling party, and international investment funds. Global investment funds became more prominent in Serbia than the European incumbent electricity producers that had dominated in Romania and Bulgaria, as I described earlier. This shift followed negative experiences in Romania and Bulgaria, where RES frameworks were temporarily suspended due to protests, or in Hungary, where the government overturned liberalization through nationalization.

The new constellation of authority formed around wind parks, with investment funds at the center. These funds came from the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Finland, Italy, and Germany (BBC News na srpskom 2021). The investment funds and companies were mostly

privately owned, although some involved mixed ownership, often in cooperation with large domestic investors. These actors obtained the most favorable locations with the strongest wind capacities, mostly in the wind-rich Vojvodina province. By the early 2020s, they had developed ten projects, including the region's largest, Čibuk 1, with 158 MW capacity.

Although the inflow of capital aligned with EU preferences and the government fully embraced the FDI model, the relationship between the government and foreign investors was not entirely without friction. Foreign companies were dissatisfied with the same aspects of Serbian energy policy as the Energy Community, such as artificially low prices based on lignite combustion and unpredictable legislative changes. Legislative issues directly affected their ability to invest and profit, the investors complained. In 2012, they established a lobby group, the Serbian Wind Energy Association, to create a more favorable investment environment. Its head was Ana Brnabić, then manager of Continental Wind Partners, a US investor and one of the most significant developers of wind parks in Serbia. In 2014, Brnabić wrote a critique of the dominant policy:

> For years now, EPS has had no means to invest in new production capacities, modernization, or environmental protection, and private investors have no interest in investing in new capacities in the heavily regulated market. Year after year, Serbia's energy production capacities grow obsolete, and with no new investment, the country becomes more energy insecure, more import dependent, and with slightly less clean air to breathe (Brnabić 2023, 93).

The tension between foreign investors and executive powers became particularly visible in the wind park corruption affair. Petrović, who was then head of the public transmission company EMS, allegedly requested €2 million from Continental Wind Serbia in exchange for permitting one of its wind parks to connect to the grid (BBC News na srpskom 2021).

From 2016 on, the relationship between the ruling party and foreign investors grew smoother. As had occurred with figures from the comprador sector moving between the state and private sector to advance the FDI agenda (Drahokoupil 2009), Brnabić also became a minister and, shortly thereafter, prime minister. This incorporation was reflected in the growth of wind capacities for foreign investors as well as in Petrović's entry into the same branch as one of the first domestic investors.

The last legal modification represented a temporary balance between the interests of domestic investors close to the party, international funds, and the EU requirement for a double transition as the door-opener for the infrastructural and economic integration of Serbia's electricity market with the EU regional market. The emphasis here is on *temporary* balance. As in the earlier cases of Romania and Bulgaria, the arrival of international funds to the Serbian market amplified a common concern related to the energy transition under liberalization: the future of the state in the sector.

The preceding analysis contributes to the dissertation by presenting authority as an inherently frictional organization of political and economic actors who represent different agendas, but nevertheless still manage to establish common infrastructure projects to satisfy their diverging interests. While the capitalist logic of profit-making underlay all technological expressions of environment-making, the ways in which relations of authority materialized in infrastructural projects— from hydro to solar, to wind—differed substantially. Perhaps most important were their consequences for the environment, as these technologies affect ecologies and communities to varying degrees. While acknowledging the significant differences in sustainability and resource renewability of these infrastructures, it is still important to recognize that even the most ecologically sound technologies can bring detrimental social consequences

if energy projects devalue communities and land and subsume them to the logic of capital (Franquesa 2018).

Continuing relevance of the state

After exploring the shift in constellations, we now turn to a persistent feature of the environment-making authority—the continuing role of the state. The state remained a pivotal actor against the odds of EU accession. The analytical value of this observation does not lie in theorizing the obvious nor reverting to a homogeneous notion of the environment-making state. Rather, it lies in understanding this continued relevance through the inherent tension that characterizes any constellation of the environment-making authority: the tension between the needs for legitimacy, representation, and access to resources and monopolies that any state and its political elite require. When some of these needs become seriously threatened by the servile role that state institutions play in facilitating capital's search for broader frontiers of extraction and profit, political elites might need to reconsider their approach. Political and economic dependencies thus compete within the organization of authority. The conflict between these dependencies prompted governing structures in Serbia to introduce policies like SHPPs and investment caps on solar and wind power projects.

Like other candidate countries, Serbia faced economic and political dilemmas over the liberalization of its electricity sector. The economic question concerned the distribution of costs and profits from RES investment: the state and citizens became payers through the FIT or similar schemes, while private investors directly profited from subsidized decarbonization. A deeper trepidation was the changing role of the state. Due to liberalization, the state lost control over the electricity sector and turned into a mere regulatory intermediary connecting producers, capital, and consumers.

These concerns were clearly articulated in my interview with a former Assistant Minister at the Ministry of Mining and Energy. We met a year after he had fully returned to his professorship at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, after nearly a decade at the Ministry. Professor Banjac offered his view on trends in the electricity sector:

> I believe that EPS should be the major investor in renewables because no one invests better than the state. However, the cadres and management in the EPS are politically installed; they get their salaries and do nothing, so they have no incentive to plan strategically. EPS has been reduced to the role of paying for feed-in tariffs and connecting RES power plants. A deeper problem in Serbia is that there is no electrical industry, so our universities do not educate any more cadres for that branch. It was not like that before; our economy invested in the sector and developed itself through these investments. The rule was that the technology for the first investment was imported while the technology for all subsequent projects was produced by domestic companies. Look at the automobile sector, we have no producers of engines because cars are only assembled here. There is still thermodynamics because we still have thermal power plants. But that will also vanish when wind parks kick in fully, our task will be reduced merely to grid connections—that is how much our workforce will take part. On top of that, the Energy Community insists that only private capital must be permitted for investments in renewables. There is no place for the state. I do not understand why such an insistence, especially because we can notice that state-owned companies still hold a large portion of the market in Western European countries.

The question, then, is how to understand this critique of liberalization and the ongoing energy transition, especially since it comes from a former high-ranking official of the institution responsible for implementing EU standards. Perhaps it serves as a cover, acknowledging his role in curbing public investments in renewables and advocating for privatization—particularly sensitive in a country where privatization carries negative connotations due to numerous failed and corrupt attempts. The public utility EPS was still one of the rare remaining public companies in Serbia. Another interpretation is that the critique passes the buck onto the EU—a strategy frequently employed by Serbian governments since the start of the accession process. In that way, controversial reforms continue while the responsibility is deflected toward actors

outside domestic political reach. And yet another way to read the statement is as an expression of something characteristic of any governance process: policies are formulated without unanimous support, even among those who are supposed to implement the policy in question. Whatever the motive behind this dissonant statement, the economic and political concerns it raises about liberalization appear significant—either genuinely shared by Banjac or as a reference point with greater social relevance.

The experiences of recent EU members are illustrative of this relevance. Romanian and Bulgarian RES policies did not fail because of noncompliance with EU rules; in fact, these states were among the first in the EU to achieve the mandatory quotas, largely because they were the most generous in opening their electricity sectors to private investments. However, they failed their citizens. Recall that under the rules of liberalization, FITs are paid directly by individual and industrial consumers. This means that high investment levels and growing FIT costs translated into skyrocketing consumer bills. Consequently, 2013 was marked by extensive dissatisfaction from industrial consumers, which cascaded further into voters' disappointment, protests, and even the fall of the government in Sofia. Both countries eventually stalled new investments in RES and canceled FIT schemes, despite sharp criticism from the European Commission for endangering investors' trust (Cointe and Nadaï 2018; Davidescu et al. 2018).

The experiences of recent accession show what is at stake under a highly liberalized and privatized market. When we use energy, we are not just consumers; we are also citizens who have expectations of the state. Because of the essential importance of energy, the roles of consumers and citizens overlap, though the latter becomes even more emphasized when access, affordability, and quality of supply are endangered. When infrastructure for any reason becomes dysfunctional or fails consumers/citizens, the crisis of political legitimacy can become an acute expression of underlying class and political tensions. This is why it may be useful to

understand infrastructure as the medium through which relations between political elites and popular groups are condensed, and why maintaining the balance of these forces is as imperative as maintaining alignment with capital.

The Serbian government introduced a set of bylaws, technical regulations, and technocratic solutions to prevent a scenario similar to those seen in latecomer EU members. Although these measures fell within the field of sustainable energy policy, their purpose was not to foster RES investments but to control the pace. The bylaws acted as a safety brake, preventing the excessive transfer of costs to consumers and a possible spillover into political dissatisfaction. The quotas that the government introduced were supposed to both enable a controlled liberalization and minimize adverse economic and political consequences.

As the current Minister's Assistant, Rade Mrdak, put it during our interview, "breaking the state monopoly" was high on the government's agenda. He presented liberalization as axiomatic but did not speak of it as if it were forced or something to be accepted with resignation. Rather, he described it as a universal EU rule, applicable to all countries and, as such, beneficial for Serbia. "We have advanced a lot in that [breaking the state monopoly] in comparison to our region," he said with a certain pride. After an extensive elaboration of implemented reforms, he explained the logic behind quotas that capped investments in wind and solar, and the lack of limits for SHPPs:

In the end, everything comes down to the costs, social acceptance, and interests that benefit the most. The logic behind quotas was the following. Solar and wind power plants were much more expensive to construct than hydropower plants. Therefore, the electricity produced by them would be more costly. If there were no quotas for solar and wind, uncontrolled construction could have directly raised citizens' expenses, as happened in Bulgaria, Spain, and Romania. There were no quotas for hydropower because there is a natural limit on them: up to 300 MW

in total. SHPs are also constructed at a slower pace, approximately ten per year, because they are more complex. If there were any problems, the government would have been able to stop them quickly. On the other side, hundreds of megawatts of solar can be built in a year or two. And of course, the problem with wind parks was also related to the limits of the grid and the issue of balancing.

Mrdak's statement corroborates that there was a clash between EU pressure, the opening to capital, and affordability. At first, the quote presents an explanation for a technical decision to impose tight limits on all investments in renewables except for hydropower. Hydropower was cheaper, owned by local elites, and easier to control. The explanation sounds rational when put in the context of EU experiences, where rapid renewables expansion led to excessive costs. It also seems cautious and caring towards Serbian citizens, who would bear the heaviest burden of energy transition. In Serbia, the political risk would have certainly been too high, given that low electricity prices functioned as an important social measure amid widespread economic and energy poverty. Balancing EU demands and investor interests was only one part of the story; it was also vital to shield those social strata who were most vulnerable, at least temporarily.

Yet the danger for political elites from unhindered liberalization and decarbonization extended beyond voter dissatisfaction; it also threatened the state's control over a critically important sector. While Mrdak's explanation presents a caring side of the state, there is a deeper reason why capacity quotas for renewables were introduced. After all, the government did not try to enforce constant electricity prices—it has steadily raised them over the years, as requested by the IMF, World Bank, Energy Community, and foreign investors. For that reason, I argue that technology quotas were not only about prices; they were also about preserving the state's

control over its position in electricity. The effort to preserve the role of the state was temporary, lasting for several years before another piece of the liberalization puzzle was implemented. Quotas were there to control the damage, but only for a short time. This pattern became evident after the pandemic, when quotas were lifted and investments in wind and solar gained impetus, just as international actors requested.

Furthermore, quotas did not address the underlying concerns of the sector's ongoing liberalization. They were a temporary measure, meant to demonstrate that the transformation was underway and following EU rules, but without squeezing the state out of the sector. Inconsistent as it may seem, quotas performed a double function: they enabled formal compliance with EU rules while preserving political legitimacy and state control. Quotas were not an exception to RES policies but rather a rule the political elite employed consistently to control (but not refuse) the effects of liberalization, without endangering compliance with EU rules, the interests of capital, or political legitimacy.

This outcome is obvious from a similar restrictive regulation, namely, the government's reluctance for several years to provide guaranteed network access to all RES producers. The government proposed that the transmission operator (EMS, then led by Petrović) maintain the right to reject some producers when there was a danger of grid imbalance. The Energy Community, however, requested that access to the grid be unconditional and guaranteed to all third parties (Energy Community Secretariat 2015). From its reports, I get the impression that the Community was aware that the government used its control over the operator as a means of *technopolitics* to exclude competition, as had happened elsewhere (Envall and Rohracher 2023; Spivey 2022). Like with the quotas, the disagreement lasted for several years before the government ultimately conceded. In the same vein, the government conducted the unbundling of transmission, distribution, and generation, garnering praise from the Energy Community for

the reform. However, it also appointed Vučić's godfather and RES investor, Nikola Petrović, as its manager, all to remain in effective control over the process of installing renewables.

Taking these examples into consideration, I argue that the quotas, conditional grid connections, and limited unbundling were examples of the same strategy. These policy measures not only balanced between external and internal forces but also maintained national authority's control over critical infrastructure. However, the strategy was only temporary, with the controlled flow of reforms perpetually continuing in the same direction required by the accession process. Liberalization was slowed down, but eventually it went on. The quotas were not a brake on liberalization nor a divergence from the EU path, but a policy mechanism that ensured a gradual opening to capital, culminating in new legislation introduced in 2021. Implementation of quotas only confirmed that SHPPs were not enforced by some EU lobby but instead were the government's temporary, creative solution for balancing multiple pressures from the EU, domestic and international capital, and citizens. They were a way for the constellation of the state-led authority to respond to the conditionality of the EU-level authority and to deal with political and economic dilemmas that any environment-making authority faces, though unfortunately at the expense of the environment.

Concluding remarks: Liberalization and conditionality above all

This chapter has argued that SHPPs appeared not as a direct product of external pressure but as the state's creative response to the dual conditionality of decarbonization and liberalization. While conditionality opened the black box of ownership and control over critical infrastructure, the state authority looked for ways to minimize the effects on the electricity sector. The environment-making behind SHPPs thus served several goals: generating profit for domestic

capital; balancing between public, national, and foreign capital; and helping the national political elite remain in charge of the critical sector.

Even though the government initiated the SHPPs, responsibility cannot bypass the EU institutions that supervise the entire process of accession. Both sides cared mostly about liberalization and control over the sector, while decarbonization remained secondary. My analysis of legislature and compliance reports indicates that questions of economic assistance, social and ecological justice, and long-term strategy for the sector received considerably less attention. Thus, I find that the responsibility for socially and ecologically detrimental projects like SHPPs does not solely rest with the national government but also with the way EU accession operates. Certainly, EU institutions did not enforce the projects, even though the EU development banks provided crucial financing. The problem was that enforcement of liberalization rules had a clear priority, while the implementation of sustainability standards seemed subordinate. Noncompliance in the ecological domain was rarely as vocally sanctioned as were the structural reforms of liberalization. For EU and national policymakers, liberalization represented a precondition of decarbonization. In such a hierarchy of priorities, renewable technology became a realization of ownership change; therefore, any resistance to ownership structures backfired, slowing down the energy transition. Such an arrangement was not an accident but an in-built, structural problem that favored certain priorities, private interests, and technocratic ways of conducting public reforms.

In conceptual terms, this chapter has analyzed policymaking behind SHPPs in an effort to dissect the new modes of environment-making and the novel authority constellation in charge. It has also outlined the main mechanisms and identified the priorities behind the production of the environment. First, the chapter delved into the national transposition of EU directives as the new mechanism of environment-making. Unlike the domestic technological and

engineering channels characteristic of the Yugoslav period, legal reforms that organized production, distribution, and control over electricity generation around market and profit provided the blueprint.

The chapter also identified a multifaceted constellation of authority in charge of environment-making, which spans across national and EU levels and consists of numerous institutional and economic actors who often assign different purposes to energy infrastructure. At the EU level, authority emerged from struggles between the Union's leadership, member states, and factions of capital. These competitions resulted in linking renewables to integration, liberalization, profit generation, and sustainability. The domestic constellation formed around high political representatives, with changing positions for domestic and foreign capital. This alliance was also born out of internal and external struggles. For these actors, SHPPs and other domestically owned power plants represented an opportunity to slow liberalization, develop a domestic capitalist base, and maintain control over the sector.

The next chapter shifts the focus to the local environments of Dojkinci and Rakita. It explains how the conditions of economic decline and depopulation facilitated investments in SHPP but also created the possibility for local resistance through rural tourism. In Rakita, the protest emerged but was overpowered by the environment-making authority organized around the investor's promises. In Dojkinci, rural tourism provided an opportunity to the anti-SHPP protest to showcase a development alternative. In that way, the socialist-era environment-making created fertile ground for a new cycle of environment-making through SHPPs, or stimulated the emergence of the authority-making environment opposing the projects.

CHAPTER 4: ENVIRONMENT-MAKING THROUGH (DE)VALUATION IN STARA MOUNTAIN

Introduction

Life could not appear more different in Dojkinci and Rakita, two mountainous villages in Serbia. Typical weekends in Dojkinci, a village in Stara Mountain in eastern Serbia, are a true cacophony of cement mixers, chainsaws, hammers, and mowers. Residents tirelessly renovate their houses but try to maintain the old structure and archaic look of the outer walls, which are made of clay, hay, and wood. A few of them received EU-supported grants for rural tourism, while most others invest their savings and fix up homes step-by-step. Dilapidated houses are surprisingly rare in Dojkinci. When they appear, their owners are considered lazy and careless by their neighbors. Public condemnation is strong because houses in Dojkinci embody kinship ties, and negligence equals betraying predecessors and ancestors, as well as current neighbors.

Rakita, the village of a hundred people on the other side of Stara Mountain, gives the opposite impression from Dojkinci. Graffiti declaring *"Život nema, smrt ne doodi"* (There is no life, death does not arrive either) is what welcomes visitors. These large, red letters were painted during the ecological protests against the small hydropower plant (SHPP) that has been constructed in this village. The graffiti immediately conveys the social condition in this small village: time here appears to stand still, and the material conditions of the village amplify the graffiti. One immediately notices the bumpy road to the village that has lost all the asphalt, decaying houses among which only a few are sporadically maintained, or small landfills one easily spots on the way.

Despite their contrasting current conditions, both villages share a common history of depopulation dating back to the post-WWII years, when the Yugoslav state conducted fast-tracked urban and industrial development. Their trajectories converged again in recent years, when both villages became targeted locations for hydropower plants. While several plants had been planned in each village, only one was finally built, in Rakita. The project in Dojkinci was canceled even before its inception due to widespread protests, along with hundreds of other projects that were planned across the Western Balkans. Notably, Rakita was also a site of resistance, with hundreds of activists from across Serbia joining local efforts to stop construction (see Chapter 5).

It was precisely the social and ecological consequences of the energy transition that were at the center of protests in Stara Mountain. Protests drew the public's attention to the disturbance of aquatic life, reduced water levels, and disturbed ecosystems around riverbanks (Ristić et al. 2018). But more than that, they joined the issues of demography, marginalization, and environmental destruction. Depopulation and economic decline that were the outcomes of the past environment-making practices seemed to have opened the possibility for a new cycle of the environment's production—energy extractivism under the auspices of renewable and sustainable sources. This, in turn, created opposition to extractive planning and gave rise to the authority-making environment. In fact, the question remains whether environment making through SHPPs would have become so widespread if mountainous regions were not already so depopulated and marginalized, yet still rich in "water potentials" that remained unexploited during Yugoslavia's initial modernization.

This is the central concern of the chapter: how did the authority's past interventions in the mountainous area lay the groundwork for the recent planning around SHPPs explored in the previous chapter? And how did those past interventions affect the recent mobilizations that the

next chapter focuses on? Three chapters into this dissertation, it is clear that the two processes are distant in time, governed by different institutions, and occurred in quite distinctive political and economic contexts; thus, establishing a direct causal link is moot. And yet, the SHPP protests had already created a discursive connection that equated ecological degradation, loss of water, and the final disappearance of local communities. Rather than tracing the "original sin" back to the communist regime, as my informants often did, I instead explore how depopulation, which initially resulted from restructuring after 1945, met and reinforced the novel forms of environment-making.

How did the decline of rural populations, which had fueled Yugoslavia's industrial and urban growth, inform today's energy extraction projects that were designed to benefit domestic and foreign capital? After the last chapter's detailed examination of the EU political-economic and policy contexts for SHPPs, this chapter looks into another structural setting, that is, the social and infrastructural conditions characteristic of Serbia's mountainous areas. After all, the capitalist logic of energy extractivism for SHPPs did not simply hit the ground; it instead encountered regions with favorable ecological, social, and political conditions in which to flourish. This chapter examines those very conditions.

The literature on environmental justice depicts how mutually enforcing, spatially inscribed social hierarchies, processes of (de)valuation, and production of nature stand.[75] For instance, when poor, racialized regions and countries of the Global South become depositories for toxic waste, it happens because environment-making follows the contours of socially and spatially unequal organization. Waste goes where people and places are treated as less valuable, where

[75] While referring to values, this text does not take part in the anthropological debates on value (Graeber 2001; Otto and Willerslev 2013). Rather, values/value figure here as signposts for ideological, economic, and cultural transformations that are characteristic of studies of uneven development. Therefore, symbolic values, social values, or simply values refer to features that are normative and desirable in some context. Conversely, economic and productive value refer to exchange value that is accumulated in the form of economic capital. Finally, when writing about (de)valuation, I am referring to the power-laden process of inscribing, recognizing, and ordering values, as well as creating conditions for the reproduction of economic value.

livelihoods depend on waste transfer, and where dumping is cheaper for economic and political institutions (Guha 2000a; Martinez-Alier 2002; Guha and Martínez Alier 2013). Could it be that SHPPs followed a similar coupling between depopulation, devaluation, and infrastructural extractivism? Perhaps the condition of depopulation and infrastructural decay, as the product of decades-long spatial differentiation, provided fertile ground for new, degrading investments like SHPPs.

Encountering depopulation after reading about energy production and ecological mobilization might be confusing for the reader. Thus, it is necessary to clarify how socio-economic rural decline connects to the concepts of environment-making authority and authority-making environment. Two analytical additions are necessary before the chapter can proceed. First, my analysis of energy and environmental politics has been, until now, conjunctural and eventful. The emphasis lay on specific energy projects, transformative moments, and instances of pushback by the authority-making environment. In contrast, the ecological and social changes examined here are less eventful and more narrated like a long historical trajectory. Such a trajectory presents environment-making as an outcome of authority acting upon, and in the process reinforcing, spatial differentiation. People responded within the parameters of these structural conditions by moving to cities and thereby contributing to the outcome of rural depopulation.

Second, the intervention needs to broaden both the objects and subjects of environment-making. So far, environment-making has largely referred to the extraction of energy sources conducted by the constellations of the state, supra-state institutions, and capital. But social and ecological relations change not only through interventions into the biophysical world, but also through drastic social interventions that modify our cohabitation with our surroundings. An example I focus on here is labor mobilization from rural areas to urban and industrial centers.

Through mass migration for work, entire communities and landscapes change, with the emergence of new productive and reproductive practices reflected onto landscapes. Unless such labor mobilization happens forcefully—which was not the case in Yugoslavia (see Chapter 2, section on *concentrated authority*)—people also contribute to new environments through their preferences to leave for a life that seems easier and more promising.

Another way to think about the connection between past and present environment-making is through a recurring logic of (de)valuation and spatial differentiation. Depopulation is another face of urban agglomeration and intensive industrial growth. Rural areas have long served as resource frontiers of valuation for infrastructural, industrial, and urban expansion, as the first two chapters depict. Peripheral and frontier status of rural regions was reinforced through energy, industrial, agricultural, and environmental policies that various constellations of environment-making authority introduced. Similarly, the responses to major political and economic events, like those presented in Chapters 2 and 3, ended up with similar outcomes for remote places. Yet, the economic histories of villages in Stara Mountain raise another question: does devaluation in one period enable revaluation in another, as Neil Smith (2010) captured with the concept of the *see-saw movement* of capital? If so, then who responds to the apparent opportunity created by the initial decline? In other words, did depopulation simply invite capital—through SHPP investors—back in search of undervalued resources? Or did it also motivate residents who live through the "busts" to resist and reorient that return?

I suggest that capital is not alone in identifying underused potential where others see abandonment. Local communities also actively interpret and act upon decline. Some seek to benefit from capital's return; others resist it, pursuing alternative pathways. In Dojkinci and Rakita, residents variously appealed to the state, negotiated with developers, or organized against both in defense of local ecology and community life. If a capitalist finds abundant

resources in a depopulated and defenseless area, locals also act upon the decline they face. To act upon social and economic decline means to keep places alive even when they seem to be falling apart, and that may become a part of the new cycles of the see-saw pattern of valuation and devaluation, and thus a constitutive part of the environment-making process.

The community in Dojkinci associated depopulation and SHPPs as mutually reinforcing, presenting both as a danger to the environment—the final loss of community, family heritage, and a traditional way of life centered on sheep herding. Rural tourism appeared as a universal solution in conjunction with the global turn to rural/eco-tourism that appropriated the role of both ecological and social savior. Tourism merged the promise of economic prosperity with family legacy, communal labor, and status, suggesting that these would strengthen one another. Conversely, the community in Rakita understood decline through the lens of decaying or lacking infrastructure. While the lack of people was still an important issue, the yearning for infrastructure became the main expression of grievances because of the long-term material neglect by the state. Everyday talk about local infrastructure operated as a discursive arena within which basic provisions were promised or claimed. Much that appeared routine in Dojkinci was promised in Rakita in exchange for consent to the plant: renovated roads, septic tanks, and organized garbage collection. Thus, the cases of SHPPs in Dojkinci and Rakita exemplify how socio-economic decline opens up space for new phases of environment-making. Perceived as an opportunity or a threat, decline can become a fertile ground for capitalist extraction or stimulate autochthonous commodification of place.

The chapter unfolds in three sections. The first part traces the past environment-making in Rakita and Dojkinci through industrial, energy, and agricultural policies that represented the power of the state-organized authority over rural regions. The social and economic highs and lows remained visible in landscapes and infrastructure: decaying dairy farms in Dojkinci and

the abandoned coal mine in Rakita. The second and third sections examine two divergent popular responses to SHPPs. In Rakita, a discourse of infrastructural neglect created space for extractive promises that overpowered the local opposition to SHPPs, while in Dojkinci, tourism and heritage became foundations of the authority-making environment against SHPPs.

The initial depopulation

After a few rainy days in May, I went with Zoran, the president of the local council (*mesna zajednica*) in Dojkinci, to collect greens and the first spring mushrooms. Mushroom picking can be a source of additional income in the village, especially during the season for *boletus* and *chanterelle*. But at this time, only tiny *čeladinke* grew, which are usually fried or used in soups the next day. They grow in colonies, and when you dig away deeper into the grass and spot a few of them in a bundle, there is a chance you may find a meadow full of them. Then it feels like winning the lottery. But we were not so lucky that day. We went from one field to another, several of them owned by Zoran's family, but the grass was too wild, full of thorns and bushes, and these mushrooms rarely grow in such conditions. The environment seemed too hostile.

Zoran stopped in one of the fields, staring intently at the large bushes, weeds, and young trees. I discerned a small *pojata* in their midst, or rather, just beside them. He had a mild smile on his face, as when someone digs into his memory and finds something they thought they had forgotten. He was evoking the past life in this *pojata,* a small building where his family used to keep sheep during the summers. In the recalled hubbub that suddenly filled the yard, he could recall his grandpa's shepherd shouts breaking through fields and the kids' responses. This game would last throughout the day; there was never silence around this *pojata*.

> "The sheep were placed on the lower level, while we lived above. This was the sleeping area, and this is where we all used to sleep together," he would point

> with his thick finger from a safe distance, as we could not approach the ruined building. "None of these shrubs, thorns, wild trees—none of that existed. Just plain, endless meadows maintained by sheep grazing. It was like that while my grandpa was alive and able to care for the herd. At that point, in the 1960s, my mother and her sisters were already in Pirot, first finishing their schooling, and then finding jobs and establishing families there. As no one returned to live here, the size of the herd decreased continuously with my grandpa's diminishing physical strength. From almost 200 sheep to zero, when we sold the few that remained when he passed away. With his death, sheep-keeping in our family died".

The Stara Mountain's environment is full of ruined buildings and abandoned fields, each of them revealing the common trajectory of socio-economic rise and decline. They exemplify Ingold's (2000)distinction between the *land* as a quantifiable and homogeneous space and the *landscape* as something that is qualitative and heterogeneous. The key to this distinction lies in the fact that all human life is situated in a certain environment, which means that the landscape evolves together with the temporality and sociality of human dwelling (what he calls the *taskscape*), and vice versa. Ingold thus argues that "the landscape is the congealed form of the taskscape" (Ingold 2000, 199). The landscapes in the mountain are potent with social relations, meanings, and practices, through which communities made both themselves and the mountain over centuries. The surroundings, together with attached residual values, memories, and symbols, allow me to reconstruct how the environment-making process unfolded over time in the two villages.

Rural depopulation was a consequence of Yugoslav socialist modernization, and it was exacerbated by geopolitical factors after the fall of socialism. Yugoslav socialism relied upon the ideal of "directional change" (McMichael 2000, 7), which was common globally for similar development projects after WWII. In Yugoslavia, its linear and hierarchical view of progress conditioned material well-being and emancipation upon the transformation of peasants into workers (Woodward 1995b). This transformation left different traces in Dojkinci and Rakita because of their different pre-socialist paths. In the 19th century in Dojkinci, sheep-keeping was

the center of socialization, as well as of communal and kinship relations. It was coordinated between families through institutions of collective work like *bačije*, and its main product was the hard, old cheese, *kačkavalj.* Over time, dairy production stimulated the development of small-scale artisanal production and commerce, and the export of *kačkavalj* enabled the rise of the first capitalists in the mountain, who then built the first hydropower plants (Petrović 1997). Such a development of the indigenous capitalist class followed Marx's crucial findings on the origin of industrial capitalists among artisans and guild masters (Marx 1978), which Tania Li (2014) also supported in her ethnography of primitive accumulation in the Indonesian hinterlands. As in those cases, the cheese trade generated inequalities and forced many people to seek daily work in other places (Petrović 1997).

On the other side of the mountainous range, in Rakita, sheep herding was important for community organization and subsistence production, but the livelihoods of the village depended on other commodities—coal and miners' labor (Šantić and Martinović 2007). The privately owned mine *Jerma* opened in 1925, with King Aleksandar I as one of the shareholders, and it employed hundreds of miners from surrounding areas. It stimulated the infrastructural and socio-economic expansion of the village, the fruits of which are still on display in its displaced railway, ruined school, and abandoned cinema. A local historian portrayed the social, economic, and infrastructural transformation that the mine brought:

> The mine was connected to a narrow-gauge railway line, Belo Polje–Rakita. The train ran on average six times a day, which allowed people to travel during the day whenever they wanted. At that time, the mine employed around 800 workers, and with "Vetreni," over 1,000. When you add to that various services like administration, education, cooperatives, trade, police, artisans, the total number of employees in the area reached about 1,600. It was a real boon for this small region, as there was no unemployment, especially among the youth. People lived with their families and earned incomes from livestock and agriculture; they didn't move away because they had no reason to. That was a time when people in this region were cheerful and in good spirits, when many people met, passed by, caught up with one another on the roads and streets, all rushing to get to some job. It was a time when there were no fallow or untilled

> fields, when almost every free patch of land was grazed by livestock, accompanied by mountain dogs, guardians, and smiling shepherd boys. It was a time when, in every hamlet, you could hear the barking of dogs, the cries of boys, and the songs of harvesters (Đurić 2012, 12).

Yugoslav socialist modernization had contradictory effects in the mountains and is remembered as both a curse and a blessing at the same time. After WWII, it ironed out some inequalities through the collectivization of factories, mines, and hydropower plants. It also brought improvements in the production and export of cheese (Lazarević 2021), as well as in social reproduction and culture (Petrović 1997). These traces are still visible in ruined cooperative dairy farms, cultural centers, and ambulances—infrastructure that many locals yearn for today. However, modernization also drained populations from rural areas to towns. As I explained in Chapter 2, during the period of *concentrated authority*, labor mobilization was necessary for export-oriented peripheral production of raw materials, and then for intensive industrialization and energy projects. As peasants from Dojkinci left for education and work in the textile, rubber, and construction sectors, the village was becoming increasingly depopulated, indicating a communal contribution to the making of the local environment as I encountered it during my fieldwork. Since 1978, only two children have been born in Dojkinci (Petrović 1997). Self-reproduction in Stara Mountain turned into a bare, day-to-day existence of elders.

In Rakita, the socio-material decline occurred more abruptly and followed a different policy channel, but with the same consequences. The mine was shut down in 1963 due to low productivity, as part of the overall reforms under *diffused authority* that reoriented the country's energy system from domestic coal to imported oil (Chapter 2). When the Yugoslav model of growth fully embraced oil, miners migrated to the construction sector, which offered better working conditions, particularly large infrastructural projects like the Iron Gates I. With miners

leaving Rakita, the village's population and social life decreased as well. Those who remained continued working on the dairy farm or commuted for work in textile or metal industries in the nearby towns of Pirot and Babušnica (Šantić and Martinović 2007). The social and economic decline was immediately felt:

> But, as the people say, "After the good, comes the bad." In 1963, a more serious move began toward closing the Nova Jerma mine, which soon came to pass. Along with the mine's closure, the railway was dismantled, and the tracks and locomotives went for scrap metal. To make matters worse, the operation for exploiting the "Vetren" forest was also shut down. Fear and apathy took hold among the people, and depopulation began rapidly. So now, after all of this, out of 15,000 inhabitants in this area, a little under 1,000 remain (14).

The downward spiral continued into late socialism, in the era of *fragmented authority* (Chapter 2). Production in many dairy farms dropped during the economic crisis of the 1980s and then halted in the 1990s due to the international embargo that struck many industries, including cheese export (Lazarević 2021). Since then, the population of Dojkinci has oscillated between 50 and 100, mostly retired residents. In Rakita, the center of economic and social activity moved to the nearby spa of Zvonačka Banja, seven kilometers away (Šantić and Martinović 2007). The switch from mining to tourism lasted only until the 2000s, when the spa complex was unsuccessfully privatized and closed. The current population of Rakita is also below a hundred, with a few children of school age and a few working people who commute to nearby Babušnica.

Communities continued to actively shape the local environment even though the downward spiral seemed unstoppable. The connections between villages and those who migrated to towns did not entirely cease, even during the 1980s and 1990s when depopulation reached its peak. Many people visited relatives who remained in the villages and helped them around the houses or in the fields. In fact, subsistence agricultural production was part of the privately led "small

economy," which acted as a buffer and absorber of unemployed masses during economic downturns caused by the oil shocks. This subsistence production gained its importance, especially during the hyperinflationary 1990s in Yugoslavia, a time villagers remember as relatively secure while urban residents queued for essentials. Economic downturns caused by privatizations and austerity measures further strengthened the relations between villages and their former inhabitants. Faced with retirement, lost jobs in older age, or upon receiving severance pay from privatized factories, it was common to return to villages in the early 2000s (Bogdanov 2007).

The periods before, during, and after socialist modernization did not simply supersede and erase one another. Social change rarely results in a rupture and disappearance of social systems, as Tilly (1989) reminds us. Likewise, complex value systems nested in Stara Mountain did not disappear with the detachment of people from places; they left their *residual values* through which locals feel about and interpret the present. These residuals originated from the past but continuously shape the present at both affective and practical levels. They could be incorporated or excluded if they became too opposed to the dominant culture (Williams 1977). Together with the current social structures, these residual values formed *structures of feeling*. Unlike relatively coherent formations like ideology, structures of feeling are, as Williams (1977) explained, cultural formations marked by their complex, contradictory, and open-ended character. Such complexity is noticeable in people's narration of village histories: in one breath, they blame the socialist state for draining the mountain of people; in the next, they express gratitude for the social mobility they enjoyed during the same period. They exalt socialist modernization as setting the standards for community well-being, while claiming that the village was most developed in the pre-WWII era of communal labor, artisanship, and sporadic family entrepreneurship. Perhaps, above all, the complexity and contradiction in these narratives mirror the dual character of environment-making as initiated by state-led authority

and actively made through personal and collective trajectories—with the contributions and consequences remaining worlds apart between authority and community.

From depopulation to (de)valuation to environment-making

After outlining the social and ecological transformations in the mountain, the question remains how to conceptualize these shifts, and even more importantly, how to connect them to the dissertation's key topics. Certainly, rural depopulation was hardly unique to Yugoslavia. Post-Soviet and post-socialist regions underwent similar transformations following the collapse of state-socialist regimes. The concept of *emptiness* emerged to describe these transformations comprising the loss of constitutive elements in places and communities—people, buildings, or infrastructure (Dzenovska et al. 2023). It is a situated, grounded notion that is contingent upon the competing interpretation of those who experience it. Various actors will perceive depopulated places as a loss, an opportunity, or with indifference, depending on their interests (e.g., locals, state institutions, or investors) and standpoints (external observers, insiders). In this sense, Martin (2021) argued for an understanding of emptiness that depends on the differential registries of observation. Similarly, Gille (2020) demonstrated how different significations of vacated spaces hide disparate ideologies.

Regardless of how identical it may appear, my case differs from the post-socialist emptiness in the Latvian case discussed by Dzenovska (2020). One difference stems from the historically specific role of the state. Whereas emptiness in Latvia resulted from unprecedented processes of global integration, neoliberal restructuring of the post-socialist state, and East-West labor mobility (Dzenovska 2020), depopulation in Yugoslavia was the consequence of state-governed industrial development. The national scale was at the core of rural depopulation in Yugoslavia, and it remained so even when the state addressed the oversaturation of the labor

market by facilitating the mobility of the "underclass" workforce from peripheral areas to Western Europe (Ströhle 2016). This centrality of the national scale also meant that social and economic decline was not necessarily led by a disinterested state as in later post-socialist contexts (Dzenovska 2020). Villages maintained their relevance for the Yugoslav state: initially, as sites of induced transformation, and then as the inverse of urban advancement. Even with fewer residents during late Yugoslavia, villages could still count on some infrastructure (health, culture, transportation), until the post-socialist transition dismantled them entirely. However, at that point, the rural-urban divide was fading because many towns in Serbia were undergoing a decline similar to that in villages—a process that is still ongoing.

A more fundamental difference in my approach concerns the status of emptiness in relation to broader theories. While recognizing its empirical significance, I do not consider emptiness a stand-alone concept. Rather, I perceive it as an ethnographic term capturing the common sense of spatial differentiation. This perception reflects the logic of global uneven development, making that logic always appear contextual, contingent, and through specific economic, social, and institutional mechanisms.

My understanding of Yugoslav depopulation is closer to anthropological studies that examine social and ecological transformations as expressions of devaluation and valuation. In the area of energy infrastructure, Jaume Franquesa (2018) employs the nexus of waste/value to analyze how peripheral localities are repeatedly devalued through newly emerging energy projects that aim to boost capitalist accumulation. To that assigned status of waste, the traditional notion of autonomy acts as a counterforce to defend local land, reproductive practices, and dignity. Franquesa's work falls between two broad bodies of literature that ethnographically explore the coupling of valuation and the environment. One example is Tanya Li's (2014) work on the emergence of capitalist relations of production through the changing roles of commons, rooted

in local traditions, and changing landscapes of agriculture that result in social expulsions. Another example is Anna Tsing's (2021) research on abandoned landscapes as opportunities for new forms of commodification and entrepreneurial subjectivities. These studies provide a refined, historically informed, actor- and politics-centered account of socio-environmental change as an expression of (de)valuation. I rely upon this framing to make sense of the transformation in the Stara Mountain.

The century-long rural microhistories in the mountain thus represent a case of environment-making. The episodes of relative prosperity, stemming from integration into regional or global economic circuits, were followed by phases of decline when villages became relative outsiders to economic and political affairs. Commodities such as cheese, coal, and the labor that produced them, once sources of value, were rendered redundant under changing political and geopolitical conditions. People's decisions to migrate followed changing structural conditions; to paraphrase Marx, they made their local histories under those circumstances. Thus, the rural landscapes I encountered during my fieldwork were in decades-long formation—a process under the governance of the environment-making authority, which reinforced the logic of (de)valuation.

(De)valuation is the spatial logic of uneven development—what David Harvey (2018) described as the foundation of capitalist accumulation and what Neil Smith conceptualized as the "see-saw" movement of capital (Smith 2010). This spatial logic underpinned the local shifts I described in the previous section, with centers of valorization rotating between mining, construction, and tourism. Spatially, the shifts were most visible in the urban-rural relationship: when peasants provided critical labor for the rise of socialist industries and cities, when mountains supplied energy for industrialization, or when the medical and hospitality sectors harnessed the ecological affordances of remote areas. The ups and downs of Dojkinci and

Rakita present vivid examples of valuation and devaluation; expansions in some areas and the corresponding retraction of built environments in others were mutually reinforcing. Looking through the lenses of (de)valuation, we can understand how capitalism as a social system creates possibilities through the expansion of social and ecological frontiers, only to later devalue its creations and set the stage for future rounds of valorization through novel activities.

In my case, the state had a prominent role in the structural logic of (de)valuation. For instance, the King of the first Yugoslavia was a shareholder in the *Jerma* mine alongside domestic and international capital. The reorientation from coal to oil was a strategy of *diffused authority* within which the Yugoslav state established international alliances and sought to climb the ladder of international markets (Chapter 2). Similarly, the growth of dairy farming took place under state-run cooperatives, as did rural collectivization attempts, labor mobilization, and later investments in spa tourism. The environment-making in my case occurred through overgrown landscapes, disappearing agriculture, depopulation, economic decline, and infrastructural ruination. This production of the environment reveals not only the movements of capital but also the particular contours it took through its entanglements with state institutions. The see-saw movement did not simply reflect the trajectory of abstract capitalist logic, but a historically and geographically specific coupling of state and capital. State institutions and capital arrived in and departed from these villages hand in hand.

Thus far, I have presented how environment-making in Rakita and Dojkinci happened through (de)valuation emerging from the interactions between: state-led industrialization and urbanization; geopolitical events such as the embargo in the 1990s; village histories and ecological affordances; opportunities such as grants for rural tourism; and social values prevalent in each village. Certainly, people's decisions to leave villages for a more prosperous

life also had a role in forming the rural environments. Their actions mattered even though their agency could not overwrite the role of authority.

Even more in the present time, it is both empirically and politically important to examine how people act within the cycles (de)devaluation, and how they consequently lay the groundwork for new steps in the production of the environment. Such a question entails inquiring into how people make sense of and act within these in-between moments, and what kinds of everyday experiences and practices mediate the cycles of rise and fall. Building upon Harvey's subsequent political orientation toward uneven development, as well as recent anthropological engagements with the concept (Kasmir et al. 2024), it is crucial to ask how popular common sense and collective repertoires of action invite, reject, or adapt to the see-saw movement of state and capital.

In the rest of the chapter, I analyze how past instances of (de)valuation and environment-making became enmeshed in new cycles of valuation around SHPPs. Focusing on infrastructure in Rakita and rural tourism in Dojkinci, I examine how different actors employed depopulation—either as the foundation for mobilization within the authority-making environment or as an impetus in the environment-making authority for the realization of SHPPs.

Rakita: infrastructural decay as an asset for authority

The large red graffiti reading "There is no life, death does not arrive either," painted close to the built power plant, still bears witness to the efforts of anti-SHPP protests to organize local opposition to the investor. This powerful message was supposed to communicate that such a destitute place was targeted by greedy investors and forgotten by the institutions, linking

ecological and socio-material concerns. But the result of this attempted articulation was limited on the local scale. The ecological protests in Rakita, which seemed massive in the media, were organized by a part of Rakita's community, but mostly attended by activists from urban centers. Despite the protests, the power plant was constructed, though it did not become operational until summer 2021. This was perhaps an intermediate phase, a compromise meant to end once public reflectors turned off. Such intermediateness was reflected in the continued divisions between opponents and supporters of the plant—something I had not encountered in other villages of Stara Mountain, where the anti-SHPP mobilizations left little room for dissonant voices. While staring at the power plant on the left side and the graffiti on the right, I could not stop wondering what enabled such a dissonance to appear here, where it was perhaps expected for the opposition to be the strongest if judged according to the public image of a victimized village that had emerged during the two years of physical, legal, and environmental turmoil.

It took very little for the social fragmentation to surface. While trying to recruit interviewees in front of the local grocery shop, a group of men who had been casually killing monotony with beers had suddenly split. Jovan, a former miner who moved to Rakita, his father's place of birth, argued vehemently against the power plant, explaining that another plant could also be built that would produce even more noise, deprive even more people of water, and profit only the investor. On the other side was Miloš, who dismissed such a possibility, saying that people like Jovan present SHPPs as poisonous nuclear plants, while they only rely on water that is abundant and barely used by anyone downstream. As the disagreement over the value and uses of water could not be settled, the two sides turned towards delegitimizing one another's arguments, accusing each other of being bribed. One side accused international environmental NGOs of bribing the protesters, while the other pointed the finger at the investor and his people from the village.

It is clear how the invocation of bribery served both sides in disqualifying the arguments of the other. It employs social values as a moral denunciation: if someone was paid, then they were not honestly involved in collective life, did not support the shared social values of that community, or lacked the capacity to recognize the hidden intentions of those who give money (values here are moral and cognitive abilities). Like the discourses around anti-corruption in many post-socialist contexts (Kofti 2018), these kinds of disqualifications are also common in Serbian politics. They are deeply rooted in popular perceptions that render political activity a dirty, dishonest business to be avoided entirely (Spasić 2013). Speaking pragmatically, however, these bribes were opportunities for both the investor and the locals who supported the project. The investor was the pivot of authority, able to gain local support through promises of benefits that were normally the responsibility of the state, while people saw this as a rare opportunity for any kind of gain in a context where political institutions had long ignored them. Of course, such maneuvering space for locals was limited and ultimately reproduced the conditions of deprivation—but it was still popularly interpreted as an opportunity.

Despite the disagreements around SHPPs, infrastructural decay remained the main topic of everyday conversations in Rakita. It is visible in the very condition of infrastructural objects. There are no cesspools, so people release wastewater directly into the river passing through the village. Garbage collection in the area does not exist either, so visitors can easily spot small landfills along the river and smell waste burning in metal barrels. And the condition of the road between Rakita and Zvonci is such that it divides rather than connects the two villages. Unlike Dojkinci, Rakita belongs to a municipality with a historically weak industry and a high poverty rate; many of its residents had permanently left and did not turn their homes into weekend houses, and its surrounding area was not recognized as having exceptional natural beauty. While the dimension of ethnic marginalization is outside the scope of this chapter and dissertation, it should also be noted that this is an area with a Bulgarian majority.

The protests against SHPPs, which were organized jointly by a group of locals and the movement *Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Mountain,* tried to unify socio-economic grievances with ecological concerns. Activists argued that the investment would destroy the already decaying roads, limit locals' access to their land, and reduce water levels, but these concerns failed to unify the village. The mobilization attracted mostly activists and visitors from urban areas, while many locals remained silent or unconvinced (Chapter 5). The authority-making environment appeared strong from an outsider perspective, but the front did not manage to involve all—or even most—of the local community.

"Yearning" for ruined or absent infrastructure remained the main expression of socio-material decline. This yearning forms a dialogical discursive field connecting those who yearn and those who provide the desired objects. As such, it is the main reason why depopulation represents a favorable condition from the perspective of capital. It enables investors in hydropower to create clientelist dependency relations and promote their extractive projects as opportunities for gaining basic provisions. Correspondingly, the yearning shows that the residents experience the past rural devaluation through the loss or absence of infrastructure, and that they seek any benefit in a context in which they are deprived of basic services. In this way, capitalist valuation through investment in SHPPs becomes a matter of the common good, or at least of reciprocal gains.

If we analyze the discourses around basic infrastructures in Rakita—complaints, desires, promises—we can more clearly grasp these pragmatic or strategic uses of socio-material decline. Drawing on recent work in state theory and clientelist relations in the post-Yugoslav region, I argue that *yearning* for infrastructure (Jansen 2015) contributed to socio-economic downturn being an asset-value for investors to accumulate more capital. Infrastructure is not only a mirror of decay and depopulation but a privileged point for retracting relations between

authority and the environment. This is so because infrastructure has a double character: it is the material embodiment of ideological and biopolitical state-society relations and a way of belonging (Appel et al. 2018), on the one hand, and a vehicle—a *fix*—for capitalist accumulation (Harvey 2001), on the other. To fully understand how the common sense of devaluation tied to local infrastructure operates, it is necessary to zoom out from Rakita alone to the broader region of Zvonci, Zvonačka Banja, and Rakita, as they are all immersed in the same yearning and clientelist relations of dependency.

The most discussed topic in Zvonačka Banja, a place seven kilometers from Rakita, was the privatization and renovation of the swimming pool within the ruined spa complex. It's no surprise, since the remarkable modernist hotel was remembered as the main source of local prosperity. The spa complex was again stirring hope among my hosts and other locals. My host, Mara, an almost 60-year-old woman, lived with her mother-in-law. Like many men from the area, her deceased husband and father-in-law were construction workers. Mara lost her job in a textile factory in the early 2000s and worked in agriculture in Italy, but returned ill and incapable of continuing her work. Since then, the two women have been living on minimal pensions and sporadic, low-rent accommodation income.

Among their recent tenants were the workers on the SHPP who lived there during construction. I wondered at first whether these women were in favor of the power plant because the rentals added some income to their livelihood. They often described SHPPs as an opportunity for some small improvement in the village; Mara would emphasize this "small," stressing how little was needed and how much it was desired. She felt the same way about the swimming pool and the deteriorating road. "Little, little, at least something, so that something starts moving here where we live," she would repeat with a tone on the verge of begging, as if she were asking for a favor she did not expect to materialize. At the same time, while talking, Mara's voice overlapped

with the voice of the prime minister on the TV, who was listing the factories, highways, and hospitals the government had opened in the last years, a vivid example of the "enchantment of infrastructure" (Harvey and Knox 2015) that has been the benchmark policy of the ruling party for a decade.

But what can an SHPP bring to a village that got electricity decades ago? What, and how much, is that little—and what is its price? What if that little is not about quantity but instead something basic and essential that has been missing, perceived as a vital pillar of everyday life? Stef Jansen (2015) identifies this missing element as the absence of the social state, more precisely, the state emptied of its socio-economic function compared to its counterpart during the Yugoslav period. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, he argues, such statehood is desired and yearned for, as the state is imagined as a holder of the key to a "normal life." Yearning for the little around Rakita is yearning for the basic provisions of that "normal life," and it is expressed mostly through missing infrastructure. If infrastructure becomes perceptible in urbanized regions only when it fails (Graham 2010), I would argue that in rural peripheries, it is normalized in its absence and through a constant desire, and it becomes the most noticeable when it finally appears. Absence of the state, which takes the form of infrastructural decay, is a historically specific outcome of recurring (de)valuation rather than an ordinary feature of rural life.

The condition of decline in Rakita is vocalized as yearning for infrastructure. Depopulation and economic downturn appear as a structure of feeling tied to deprivation of basic services, but without a strong sense of being entitled to them. It is something people wish for but lack the means to demand. This desire is directed to anyone who might provide it. It legitimizes developmental projects and allows for their status as "the last hope." Moreover, yearning is strategically employed by all sides, which points to the dialogical nature of this phenomenon.

On the one hand, the need for infrastructure is well-recognized by authority and employed to make locals consent to extractive projects through promises of improved infrastructure. On the other hand, yearning around Rakita does not remain a passive condition of waiting for the state. Residents also rely upon it, convinced that extractive investments are their rare opportunity to gain some collective or individual benefit.

Therefore, the investor assumed a prominent role in the constellation of authority. He promised to asphalt the terrible road between Rakita and Zvonce if he were allowed to excavate the major hydropower pipework as part of the project, something the protesters in Rakita rejected for fear of being cut off from the only available road. He also began construction on one part of the SHPP in Zvonci spa, where he had already made donations for infrastructure, which prevented any overt dissent. Importantly, these provisions did not mean that a non-state actor was merely filling the gap left by the neoliberal state; rather, this reflects a specific formation of authority, one consisting of state and non-state actors working together to create a clientelist dependency network. Such a network resembles the system of socio-political connections in Bosnia—*veza,* or *štela*—through which favors and services are provided and maintain local hierarchies (Brković 2017). The investor in Rakita was the one willing to promise better infrastructure, clear the riverbed, provide temporary jobs, or pay for land near the power plant. Andre Thiemann (2024) explored ethnographically in Western Serbia the work of *boundary-making*. That work involves defining what counts as the state and who acts in its name. The investor took on the role of the local state - of the provisioner of infrastructural improvements, thus redrawing the boundaries of the state. By assuming some of the local state's roles, he behaved as a centrally positioned actor within the local authority.

Local state representatives in Rakita and Zvonce were also part of this constellation of authority, acting as gatekeepers to the network of dependency. They held some power in the

village and mediated between the community, local institutions, and the investor. These mediators were also political actors, like representatives of the Bulgarian community or the president of the local council. They tended to be wealthier, with renovated houses, highly educated children, or relatives working abroad. As some opponents of the SHPPs told me, these mediators had access to resources such as jobs and public funds and could help people get Bulgarian citizenship, thus allowing them to work across the border and in the EU. In this sense, it is clear how, in Rakita's context of long-term deprivation, class and political relations form the skeleton of this dependency network. During my short time spent in Rakita, I could witness how this clientelist network limited the efforts of ecological mobilization, disunited the locals, and enforced the existing social divisions (more on this in Chapter 5). Local representatives were on the side of authority here, unlike in Chapter 1, where the authority-making environment was successful in crosscutting the governance of the party-state. Such an outcome confirmed the crucial role of local politicians in mediating or siding between the two constellations.

The ability of the authority to create consent is limited because how people experience and interpret the condition of decay depends on local history and social relations. Interpretation would have taken a different path in the absence of Rakita's history of modernization through mining or the presence of more supportive institutions. Its temporality could have been more backward-looking, more nostalgic, had investors, with all their promises, been absent. The dependency network would also differ if local mediators had fostered more equal relations, as happened in Dojkinci, or if the gatekeepers had resisted investors' attempts and instead became both provisioners and facilitators, as in Topli Do (see Chapter 5).

The extent to which authority can establish local consent to environment-making thus has its limits. This became particularly evident when the Bulgarian consul visited Rakita during the

peak of the resistance. To reconcile the opposing sides, he pledged to help the municipality construct a wastewater system. As a first step and gesture of goodwill, he donated a prefabricated, small church worth 22,000 euros. However, neither the supporters nor the opponents used it for religious purposes. Overgrown with weeds, the church became an object of mockery, a material reminder of clientelist relationships and unfulfilled yearning. As Jansen (2018) similarly observed during protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this absurd church proved that there are limits to identity politics. Yearning cannot be easily satisfied with provisions that do not at least nominally correspond to the objects of that yearning. Nor can the infrastructural decay easily be substituted with a random element that does not relate to the way this condition is experienced.

There is little new in how authority uses strategies of "corporate responsibility" to make local populations more willing to accept ecological costs, mask them, or try to break resistance (Kirsch 2014). What makes this case of SHPPs unique is the correspondence between needs and promises, along with their strategic use. It would be too easy to assume that those like Mara supported SHPPs only because they benefited individually or because they lived in an illusion. The condition of rural socio-economic decline points to the distinctive ways authority and communities mobilize that condition for a new cycle of (de)valuation and environment-making.

Dojkinci: Rural tourism as the foundation for the authority-making environment

If infrastructure in Rakita revealed how authority relied on socio-economic decline to realize its extractive projects, then rural tourism in Dojkinci presents an opposite perspective of how the authority-making environment deployed depopulation to oppose SHPPs. Rural tourism

became an alternative developmental vision for Stara Mountain, but it also served as an alternative path for reinsertion into capital circuits. Depopulation represented a threat, and rural tourism appeared as a savior through its promise of coupling and enforcing symbolic values of homes (kinship, tradition, and social status) and the economic value of houses. This section disentangles the coupling of economic goals and symbolic priorities under the enabling conditions of EU accession, rural development, and valuation of nature. It depicts how the two villages were set apart, the two visions of development clashed within the same space, and how rural tourism was envisioned as an alternative to extractivism.

The socio-cultural importance of homes is especially noticeable in the narratives of those who returned and renovated their houses. For many, return felt like an expected step because they had grown up around village life and never entirely severed their communal and kinship ties. Their oscillatory movements between city and village were built on kinship and obligations, economic necessity, and peasant habitus that did not disappear during the period of socialist modernization. Marina is one of those who considers herself a returnee and stays in Dojkinci until winter. When she retired, she felt claustrophobic and idle in the city; she "could not imagine herself sitting with a purse in a park every day." Disenchanted by the careless collapse of one of the largest textile factories, and having lost her steady income a few years before her retirement, she decided to spend most of the year in Dojkinci, where she works tirelessly in the fields and collects wild fruits and mushrooms. Despite the hardships she experienced as a girl in a patriarchal context, she belonged in the village and felt purposeful in everyday work. The mountain was the environment Marina belonged to.

Like many others, Marina has also been renovating her home. At first, these renovations were necessary to prevent the collapse of houses, which would usually begin with the sliding of large, heavy stone panels under the snow's weight. Without timely repair, the rafters and walls

would dampen until the house ultimately collapsed, leaving only debris. Such debris then becomes saturated with guilt and grief, as well as public condemnation, especially if it was a family home. This would be the final step of decline—the disappearance of the family's traces in the community. This social condemnation highlights the double symbolic importance of homes: that of family legacy and prestige. Houses are not only sentimental objects but also measures of diligence, capability, and social status, expressed through careful maintenance and continuous investment rather than luxury.[76] This is evident in how renovations shifted from necessity—repairing roofs, adding bathrooms and cesspools—to cultivating a rustic, "authentic" look. This trend was emblematic of post-socialism, as houses became new objects of symbolic value, with their distinctive aesthetics and even limited use, as owners sometimes spent limited time there (Tomić et al. 2018).

Another role of the house—as a potential source of income—emerged with the availability of the first EU grants for rural development, when rural tourism began to appear as a rare if not uniquely viable economic option in the village. It was the EU's vision of rural development that enabled this turning point. Generally speaking, the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) focused on increasing global competitiveness through conglomeration, modernization, and cheapening of food production (Bogdanov 2007). Such a system, based on extensive rules and conditions, disfavored small producers,[77] especially in newly accessed countries from Eastern Europe (Aistara 2018; Gille 2016). As the subsidy system moved toward the promotion of competitiveness, the emphasis shifted to a multifunctional, multi-sectorial, and flexible vision of development, within which support for rural tourism became the model of "economic

[76] As some of my interlocutors kept repeating, people first look at houses to determine which kind of personality someone has. This was also evident in everyday gossip, inquiries, and critiques.
[77] For the recent results of the CAP (intensification, oligopolies, disappearance of small farms), see F. Harvey and Correspondent 2021)

diversification" that was supposed to mark a departure from the traditional coupling of peasantry, land, and production.

Although Serbia could not directly benefit from the CAP as an accessing country, a similar package of rural support has been available through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for Rural Development (IPARD) fund. This was the tipping point for turning houses into commodities for touristic entrepreneurialism because only a few people decided to use subsidies to renew their livestock.[78] Ivan was among those who had the necessary skills and resources but did not apply for the grant. He was a retired livestock technologist who worked for a long time, until its dissolution, at the largest sheep breeding farm on the mountain. He still keeps a few sheep but emphasizes that he produces cheese only for the family and because he grew up doing so. "I would never sell my cheese because no one knows its value, nor the amount of work it requires", he said. Citing complicated procedures and low subsidies, he did not find it worth developing his cheese production. With rare exceptions, sheep-keeping became a way of reproducing the values of labor and tradition when no viable economic possibility was left.

Tourism remained a rare option for filling the depopulated villages, and it also figured as such in practices of municipal and state authority. Like with the glorification of individual success in Latvia (Dzenovska 2020), the media often portrayed the entrepreneurial *domaćin*—a devoted, family-rooted householer—as a model of success. Such glorification steered public attention away from the outcomes of rural environment-making: the fact that rural communities were depopulated, villages were infrastructurally devastated, and that livestock had decreased dramatically nationwide due to low subsidies, uncontrolled imports, and reduced national

[78] This trajectory of residents' personal choices in the context of enabling structural conditions again supports Marx's fundamental argument on autochthonous sources of capital accumulation. As noted in the first section, similar process occurred in the 19th century, when cheese producers turned into some of the first local capitalists.

budgets for agriculture (Pejanović 2013). Rural tourism thus became an important pillar of agricultural and national developmental strategies, something that the municipalities took on as well in their vision of development in Stara Mountain, resulting in the opening of a large hotel on one of the peaks, or in using EU funds to turn a former military barracks into an attractive motel in Dojkinci and renovate the road to it. Rural tourism was constructed on several scales of authority as the last hope, and it was enthusiastically picked up by locals, too, as a business opportunity, a mission for revival, and a means to resist SHPPs.

The mobilization against SHPPs actively contributed to the development of rural tourism in the mountain, with Dojkinci at the center of its actions. Even though renovations of homes had already begun in early 2010, the renewals intensified during and after the protests, which had increased the public visibility of the mountain. Photos and videos showcasing its natural beauty, particularly in the vicinity of Dojkinci and Topli Do, were widely shared across media and social networks, often as examples of what was to be lost due to hydropower. By the time the pandemic began, local tourists were already familiar with the mountain, and digital nomads looked for land to buy. Villagers quickly renovated their homes and expanded accommodation capacities, hoping that the boom in visits would continue even after the pandemic. What started in Dojkinci became exemplary, as soon Topli Do followed and even extended the initiative through its own projects.

The authority-making environment actively shaped the strategy for eco-tourism and incorporated it into the broader struggle. The activist group *Odbranimo reke Stare planine – ORSP* (Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Mountain) mediated between villagers, small donors, and a university professor with her architecture students, who together renovated several dilapidated buildings, including schools and cultural centers. A House of Culture in Dojkinci was one of their achievements (Faculty of Architecture 2019). Through donations and

voluntary work, they managed to turn a decaying, emptying building into a visually compelling place that presents local culture and way of life, and that serves locals as a place for communal meetings and cultural events. The professor and activists presented their goals not only in terms of creating local infrastructure for eco-tourism and education but also as examples of alternatives to both SHPPs and state negligence.

However, rural tourism also had a less optimistic side. Because of the ways it intersects through family, communal, and environmental relations, this model of development reproduces old and generates new social and spatial fragmentations. Gender and class inequalities dating back to socialism dictate different temporalities of renovations. Men who had worked in the automotive tire factory (later privatized under *Michelin*), the military, or the police had better salaries and pensions, allowing them to renovate their houses more quickly and comprehensively. Women like Marina, who worked in the underpaid and unsuccessfully privatized textile industry, renovated room by room, always looking ahead for the next steps and feeling like they were lagging. These inequalities continue through applications for grants. While grants were nominally available to everyone, in practice, only those with enough knowledge, access to initial capital, and knowledge could go through the lengthy and competitive procedures. Moreover, some locals in Dojkinci aspired to extend their businesses, raising concerns about the emergence of touristic monopolies, as happened in Topli Do. Like in a capitalist microcosmos, the gatekeeper in Topli Do (and the former leader of the protests) built a hostel. As the most influential local representative, he organized cultural festivals and renovations of houses, which became the main channel for various grants for the village (see Chapter 5 and Rajković 2023).

Rural tourism also mimics the (de)valuation patterns of uneven development and differentiates between the places that do not possess enough "natural capital." This relates to the way natural

environments around Dojkinci and Rakita are differently valued and points to the importance of spatial affordances for the rise from the socio-economic downturn. The recognition of natural exceptionality strengthens the availability of grants and infrastructure, as well as the interest of residents and visitors. In this sense, while both landscapes can appear breathtaking to visitors, Dojkinci benefits from being in a zone that has the second-highest category of a nature park. In the long run, this status secures the long-term development gaze and entrepreneurial initiatives by authorities, investors, and residents.

This nested commodification of houses, the mountain, and its resources formed a key component of the developmental vision and served as one of the main strategies of anti-SHPP mobilization, offering a tangible alternative to extractivism in Rakita. In the conjuncture of the ecological and aesthetic significance of the mountainous landscape, the existing institutional frame, and local practices, and amplified by the environmental protests and the COVID-19 pandemic, both renovations and tourist visits to Stara Mountain skyrocketed, demonstrating how some depopulated places remain incorporated in capitalist valorization.

Houses in Dojkinci do not become pure commodities overnight, nor do most of the owners aspire to become entrepreneurs. Homes continue to exist and change as a trinity of three worths—tradition, social status, and commodity—with the hope that they will each enforce the others' realization. Yet these values rarely exist on equal terms, and social fragmentation deepens as trade-offs multiply. Similarly, hopes for tourism as a magnet for returnees and want-to-be-peasants are strong, as is the determination to preserve the base of the house by turning the meaning of it upside-down in terms of intimacy, function, and everyday life. Nevertheless, anxieties about the impossibility of sustaining tradition sometimes prevail, as in the realization that those who come will not be "authentic" locals with respective skills, habits, and roots. As

if the future brings a difficult trade-off between demographic survival and the maintenance of tradition.

Conclusion

This chapter connected several of the dissertation's threads and presented how they historically unfolded on Stara Mountain. It continued where Chapter 1 left off, further showing the disfavored position that rural regions occupied within Yugoslavia's industrial and infrastructure-led modernization. It also depicted how transformative events and shifts in authority, introduced in Chapter 2, produced cycles of socio-economic highs and lows in remote areas. Furthermore, it illustrated how EU governance (discussed in Chapter 3) resonated indirectly in such places in polyvalent ways. While that governance provided kernels of hope through touristic revival and a model for ecological preservation, it also indirectly undermined those very hopes through an energy transition policy entangled in struggles over control and ownership of the energy sector.

Taken together, these threads helped me explain how earlier forms of environment-making emerged under varying constellations of authority before and during the state-socialist period, how those interventions deepened inequalities between urban and rural areas, and, finally, how enduring social and spatial differentiations have once again been drawn into new cycles of (de)valuation around SHPPs. Social and economic decline was the starkest consequence of rural transformations during and after socialism. In the recent context of EU accession, this decline either created fertile ground for establishing consent to a new cycle of environment-making around SHPPs or became a foundation for the authority-making environment against those degrading projects. In Rakita, the environment-making authority was embedded in a network of dependencies, with the investor as the main provisioner at the center, and local

politicians and community representatives acting as his gatekeepers. He conditioned his promises of individual and communal gains upon consent to construction. Although the authority-making environment appeared, it was overpowered by the environment-making authority revolving around infrastructural promises. In Dojkinci, the authority-making environment was rooted in traditional values of homes, kinship duty, and nostalgia for a once-prosperous and vibrant community. After decades of depopulation, locals interpreted SHPPs as the final threat to rural life. Thus, eco-tourism came to represent not only the continuation of tradition but also a path to revival antithetical to SHPPs.

The economic reintegration of mountainous areas will likely launch new forms of production of the environment, new forms of authority, and novel kinds of mobilization. This is part of a global trend, as we can see how industrial agriculture and bio-production compete for new frontiers across the planet, global tourism seeks new exotic landscapes, intensified energy production demands ever-more fields, hills, and rooftops, and mines for critical mineral extraction continuously expand. After all, the emergence of SHPPs in the former Yugoslav countries was not accidental nor was it a regional phenomenon—it was a model that traveled worldwide (Erensü 2018), searching precisely for the mixture of devaluation, remoteness, and resourcefulness. This chapter has shown how these new forms of extraction re-engaged previously established spatial and social hierarchies, thereby reaffirming or recasting the dynamics of uneven development. The next chapter turns to the mobilization against SHPPs, a struggle reminding us that new forms of environment-making rarely pass unchallenged.

CHAPTER 5: THE MOBILIZATION AGAINST SHPPS

Between 2016 and 2020, environmental protests against small hydropower plants (SHPPs) spread across Serbia, from the villages of Stara Mountain to the nearby town of Pirot and the capital, Belgrade. The anti-SHPP mobilization reflected several features typical of environmentalism (as discussed in the introduction). First, the protest was a single-issue action that lasted until the cancellation of new SHPP projects. Members and supporters united in their opposition to SHPPs rather than around a long-term agenda or an existing political organization. Once the SHPP issue was addressed, some core members of *Odbranimo reke Stare Planine* (Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Mountain, ORSP) tried to shift their activism to other ecological issues, but did not manage to establish a mass organization or define a coherent agenda. Second, the mobilization was ecological not only because of its cause but also because of its ideological agnosticism. Environmentalism typically rejects ideological labels, framing its concerns as above any ideology. As ORSP activists emphasized, liberals, leftists, and right-wingers alike must eat healthy, drink clean water, and breathe clean air. Third, the protests primarily took the form of local contestations. Even though it appealed to the broader public, the mobilization's strength and available means ultimately depended on local contexts, although the resistance did address the state from local to national levels. Environmental relations between rural communities and their surroundings, prevailing social relations in the villages, and the political constellation behind the local autonomy were some of the key factors shaping the mobilization's outcomes.

What began as a self-declared apolitical mobilization resulted not only in the cancellation of new SHPP projects but also in the creation of a repertoire that informed subsequent ecological

mobilizations. The protests also unexpectedly engaged people who had long distanced themselves from formal politics. How did a protest shaped by local concerns and ideological distance from politics manage to produce broader political effects? I approach the outcome through the analytical lenses of what Stuart Hall defines as *articulation* (Hall 1986*)*. Discursively, articulation is about speaking up and framing an issue, assembling its meaning out of contradictory worldviews to establish a shared understanding. Organizationally, it refers to forging a political front that unites social groups with dispersed and often conflicting positions and interests, forming what Antonio Gramsci termed a historic bloc (Hall 1985, 1986; Hall and Grossberg 2019). In this sense, this chapter traces the discourse, strategies, and political relations through which the authority-making environment emerged to counter SHPPs. Given the ideological plurality of ecological activism and the complexity of the anti-SHPP protests, I turn to Stuart Hall's concept of articulation as a more open-ended and analytically productive framework. Hall coined the concept in the context of neoliberal counter-revolution and the poststructuralist critique of rigid Marxist structuralism that derived political positions solely from class (Hall 1986).

The range of actions within the authority-making environment was wide, from informing rural residents, holding gatherings, and staging short road blockades, to maintaining months-long barricades and organizing protests in Belgrade targeting key authorities deemed responsible—ministries, banks, and international financiers (Chapter 3). Most of these actions were conducted by the environmental activist group ORSP, which had around ten core members who had not known each other before but who quickly managed to gather a significant public presence and become the main narrator of the resistance. Through its Facebook group, ORSP informed thousands of followers about its actions, shaped a counter-discourse on SHPPs, and gathered donations for operations. Local leaders—mostly village presidents of local councils—maintained their influence through close cooperation with ORSP. Yet, as I witnessed during

my fieldwork, tensions over leadership and symbolic capital seemed unavoidable, though they did not threaten the common agenda.

The mobilization resonated more deeply across Serbian politics than is typical for a single-issue protest. Despite its localized origins, it nevertheless gathered countrywide support. While the protests were framed through the language of rural survival, they raised broader concerns regarding the condition of the state and the nation. They carried symbols of peasant and environmental survival while drawing support from a wide array of social, spatial, professional, and political groups. This was particularly striking in a context where "politics" had become a folkloric swearword, and distancing from politics had become pervasive in everyday talk (Spasić 2013). The decades-long dominance of liberal and Western-centered views (Jehlička and Jacobsson 2021) and ethnic discourses (Chapter 2) had pushed ecology into political oblivion. In this climate of antipolitics, SHPP opponents problematized the projects so effectively that the environmental struggle became one of the rare channels for doing everyday politics in Serbia.

Taken together, the three features of environmentalism provided unique affordances for action but also set limits on its political potential. Although the single-issue character affirmed opposition to the political establishment, the protest faced organizational and ideological challenges that might be less common among formalized groups. Likewise, antipolitics strengthened the protest's mobilizing appeal, but ideological agnosticism raised concerns about social justice (Rajković 2023). Like other ecological mobilizations, the anti-SHPP protests evaded simplistic ideological binaries such as progressive versus conservative, left-wing versus right-wing, and political versus apolitical. Its social and political base spanned peasants, urban dwellers, political activists, intellectuals, conservative proponents of social justice, and liberal-leftist voices invoking the nation and the people (Rajković 2022a; 2022b).

Previous chapters have shown how environmental action has historically transcended rigid analytical boundaries. Chapter 1 demonstrated how opposition to the Iron Gates dam challenged the project across and not along the dominant line dividing the people from the party-state. Chapter 3 illustrated how the ecological mobilizations against nuclear power plants during the 1980s became intertwined with nationalist politics. The assumption that political content is pre-given only fixes actors into generic categories instead of revealing the agendas around which an environmental front forms, what boundaries of the environment it establishes, how it limits the range of its actions against authority, and which diverse groups it assembles into an alliance.

Drawing on the concept of articulation mentioned above, I suggest that the authority-making environment emerged and succeeded because its discursive framing of SHPPs was symbolically broad enough to bring together varied social and political groups, while its internal political relations remained flexible enough to sustain the diverse mobilization. More specifically, a shared sense that something was disappearing with the rise of SHPPs brought a variety of people into an unexpected alliance. In participants' accounts, SHPPs threatened to eradicate local autochthonous life built around waterways, the unique ecosystem, precarious peasant livelihoods, and, according to some, even the nation. Some interlocutors drew on conspiratorial beliefs about water wars against the nation, merging these ideas with scientific arguments about insufficient water flows and thus enabling alliances between conservative activists and scientists. Local ecological settings and political dynamics in villages remained relevant even when the mobilization spread to urban centers. Finally, in addition to pressuring the state to cancel SHPP projects, I argue that broadening the field for political engagement through ecological struggles constituted the most significant, if largely unintended, authority-making effect of this mobilization.

The first part of this chapter presents the multitude of narratives woven around the notion of the eradication of water and nation, as well as political connections that held this alliance together. This section is based on interviews with activists and residents from all the villages I visited, but primarily from Dojkinci, where these connections and narratives were most clearly vocalized. The subsequent section introduces a "negative case" of contested mobilization in Rakita to demonstrate how the local socio-ecological context posed significant obstacles. The section that follows draws mainly on my visits to Topli Do, showing how local autonomy and the success of resistance relied on the centralization of authority among dominant villagers. This chapter concludes the analysis of SHPPs, focusing on the authority-making environment after the previous two chapters explored how authority conducted environment-making around SHPPs.

The discourse and alliance behind the protest

"How come I am in this story? Because they started to rob us of our water." That was how one of the leaders of ORSP, Aleksandar Jovanović Ćuta, explained his motivation for joining the struggle. His family came from Temska village, but he grew up in Belgrade, where he became a theatre director. He continued to visit the village occasionally, but his relationship with the place intensified when the SHPP project appeared. Why? Because it threatened to finally strip the village of its last life-providing substance—water—after years of ongoing attempts. "Since the 1960s, when they—the state—built the HE plant Zavoj, and the 1990s, when they started digging the tunnel to direct the village's only river towards the dam, it has all been an ecocide of enormous proportions. Long ago, Temska had 2500 people, but now, only 600; it used to be the leading village on the mountain. And if a place like Temska declined to today's level, you

can imagine what happened to other villages. To bury people… Now, with SHPPs, we are all facing a biological eradication".

The authority making-environment against SHPPs emerged as an amalgam of different political orientations, professions, and dwellers. Despite this diversity, all opposed the project through a common register of *eradication*. Scientists warned against the disappearance of species and habitat, locals spoke of losing their way of life, and activists of a more conservative bent framed it as part of an ongoing global war for water. At the same time, left-liberals and ecological NGOs drew the public's attention to ecological destruction, the final collapse of the rule of law, and the sacrifice of vulnerable populations to the unjust energy transition. All perceived that something would have been obliterated if water were grabbed and packed into pipes: habitats, species, the state, equality, or the nation. ORSP joined these perspectives into a widely shared discourse of SHPPs as instruments of eradication.

The boundaries and meanings of the environment ranged from localities to national boundaries, depending on the objects of eradication that social actors put forward, whether local ecologies or the nation's existence. Significant overlaps also appeared between the ecological, social, and political meanings of eradication, sometimes in surprising ways, such as between conspiratorial and scientific framings. The repurposing of conspiratorial beliefs for ecological issues, together with the undefined organizational structure of the mobilization and strong local autonomy, helped sustain the environmental front against SHPPs.

Eradication of the autochthonous mountainous life

As endless as the capillary mountainous streams are, so was water integral to villagers' agricultural and leisure activities. In Dojkinci, where sheepherding is still practiced, auxiliary

buildings called *pojata* once accommodated herds and herders near streams. There, by the *pojata*, against the constant roar of water, my host, Zoran, remembered learning herding with his predecessors, letting a tear fall as he spoke of guilt and the difficulty of maintaining the tradition, or brightening with enthusiasm as he recounted friendships and romances born along the banks. Some informants like Zoran referred to experiences like these as *autohtoni planinski život* (autochthonous mountainous life), invoking what Azra Hromadzic (2024) calls a *riverine way of life*—a collection of everyday practices, sentiments, and memories that form around the river and provide the basis for resistance to hydropower planning.

In Stara Mountain, the fear of losing water was intricately connected to the fear of depopulation. Chapter 4 presented *emptiness* as the dominant structure of feeling, emphasizing how culturally rooted and prevalent the fear of disappearance in rural areas became following the decades of depopulation and neoliberal social and agricultural policy. Among locals, the threat of losing water grafted onto that structure of feeling and became identified with a loss of kin, homes, food, memories, and ecosystems. Defending streams and rivers meant fulfilling kinship obligations, preserving memories of the past, ensuring the conditions for future family life, and protecting the means of reproduction for both humans and non-human species.

Worries about water went beyond nostalgia, touching upon present knowledge and reproductive practices. Zoran knew the full course of the streams, even though the water sank and resurfaced multiple times along its way. He told me how, as a boy, he and his friends dropped coloring matter into the water and followed its flow. At other times, he spoke of the best swimming spots across the mountain, a bit secretively though, as if to protect those hidden gems from mass visitors. With a wink, he said he usually brought his friends there but promised to show them to me, too. Another time, while planting vegetables and plowing the soil with Zoran and his mother, it became clear to me how much their garden depended on the river—

not only when we irrigated it directly from the river, but also as groundwater maintained the soil's moisture. Villagers believed that if an SHPP were built, both the quality and volume of water would decline, endangering their plots.

They also feared for their drinking water if the SHPPs were completed, not because the water system captured water directly from the river, but because locals knew how interconnected surface and groundwater systems were. Since waterways feed each other, springs providing drinking water could have suffered too. This concern for springs manifested in everyday practices. It was common to drink directly from smaller surface waters, and I often did so when accompanying the sheep-herder Joca or while going with my hosts to collect wild edibles (Chapter 4). I sensed then that drinking carried a performative element even when we drank out of pure thirst. My companions' facial expressions portrayed an appreciation of the abundance, pride, and trust in the water's quality. They showed care, too, when clearing out dry leaves and branches from seasonal springs or restoring the stones that usually directed the water around if torrential rains dispersed them. All these ways of using, feeling, remembering, and caring for water depict the sentiments, practices, and kinds of belonging that made up the local environment. That socio-natural totality, that existentially central and emotionally charged unity, was what SHPPs threatened to eradicate with kilometers-long pipelines.

Eradication of the nation

The alarm of eradication went well beyond the local environment to encompass the nation. A dedicated activist with conservative worldviews told me that the existence of the Serbian nation was at stake. In her forties, Ana joined the protest in memory of her mother, who grew up in a village near Rakita. She spent months on the barricades in Topli Do, cooking for the activists

and caring for older people. “It gave me a new life purpose after divorcing, quitting a job at a local Chinese shop, and relocating to another town,” she explained.

Ana provided the most elaborate story on how SHPPs related to the disappearance of the Serbian nation. In her account, a long-term war had been unfolding in Serbia—a war on a global scale and not merely a domestic issue, with the struggle for water representing the final battle. The first stage of the war began with the communists’ post-Second World War industrialization and depeasantization; the second arrived with the influx of Chinese sellers in the early 2000s, who displaced domestic, quality goods with cheap, low-quality products and catalyzed the rise of industrial unemployment across the country. The third came with the mass arrival of migrants from the Middle East who, she feared, secretly wanted to inhabit depopulated areas, thus slowly replacing the “autochthonous” people. The final stage, she said, was the global war for water, which would intensify through large-scale SHPP investments and ultimately erase the entire nation. The articulation of the anti-SHPP mobilization was emerging evermore complex, tying different instances and temporalities of authority, multiscalar environments, and political action into a systematized narrative.

Although I heard a story like Ana’s only once, I encountered less elaborate but similarly charged stories. Some locals and activists believed that SHPPs were just an interlude to water dispossession and that electricity production was not the main reason for investments. The catch was control over water sources. They said that enclosing rivers from the surrounding habitats and communities would eventually give companies the exclusive rights to bottle and sell water. Suddenly, locals would have to pay for something so essential that was once free and abundant. Some interlocutors perceived energy concessions as water concessions that legalized water grabbing; in the long run, they feared that enclosure would lead to the disappearance of people from the mountains and Serbia in general. Like Ana’s story about the

four wars, there was an underlying suspicion that something else was happening behind the veil of SHPP planning. There seemed, or so the suspicion went, to be a vast disproportion between the small amount of electricity produced, the high level of investment, and the unprecedented water quality used for purposes other than fostering human and non-human life.

Ana's narrative contains some features that are characteristic of conspiracy theories (Byford 2006): a powerful, manipulating force hides its true interests in order to seize the most precious element—water. The global indications of water scarcity are undeniable, stemming from abundant scientific research, trustworthy media, and everyday shortages and droughts. Although the culprits of the conspiracy remain hidden, my interlocutors occasionally pointed to multinational companies already owning water businesses in Serbia (like Coca-Cola and Nestlé) and powerful states seeking new sources of wealth and control ("water is becoming the new oil," some said). For them, SHPPs were the last nail in the nation's coffin following years of collective indifference to depeasantization, depopulation, and resource grabbing. It was a momentous imperative to thwart the projects ("now or never," some interlocutors warned) and protect both nature and the nation at once.

Describing Ana's and similar narratives as conspiratorial should not mean relegating them to the historical lineage of antisemitic or propagandist fabrications that have long circulated in Serbia's popular political imaginary (Byford and Billig 2001). Nor should the designation of "conspiracy" serve as a label for nefarious intentions or inferior knowledge—doing so only subjugates popular knowledge and delegitimizes shared concerns. Instead, I frame the story as *agency panic* (Melley 2000) in order to situate it in its sociopolitical context and grasp its collective purposes. Conspiracies proliferated in the US at the dawn of the neoliberal order, reflecting liberal political subjects' disappointment with the transfer of political and economic power to the global actors and away from the national reach, control, and accountability

(Melley 2000). While Melley stops short at the disenchantment of the liberal subject, other authors point out how conspiratorial contents carry collective tales of traumas and empowerment (Lepselter 2016) and unpredictability in the Anthropocene (Hetherington 2020).

Narratives that appear paranoid may help people make sense of repeated collective sufferings. Through them, subjects control reasoning, narration, and knowledge and create predictable order around traumatic pasts or precarious, still evolving futures, particularly in social contexts experiencing repeated turmoil or foreign interventions (Marcus 1999). People get the impression that, through conspiratorial narration, they can make transparent otherwise undiscernible global economic and political forces. Even the most adversarial conspiracy theories, like those justifying ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, allowed Serbian soldiers to "make sense of war and post-war experiences while reinforcing national moral boundaries," enabling them to "exercise a certain degree of power and carve out a sense of worth for [their] existence in a situation of overwhelming powerlessness" (Jansen 2003).

The narrative equalizing SHPPs with water loss and the eradication of the nation carried an easily discernible message of loss, precarity, and urgency that emerged over decades of wars, foreign interventions, and economic hardship. Finding culprits seemed irresistible, with a finger pointing insecurely at different instances of the environment-making authority—from the state and capital to impersonal global forces. With an urgent call to act, these conspiratorial sentiments provided the authority-making environment a mobilizing potential and direction for acting against the degrading environment-making around SHPPs.

We cannot understand how the protests integrated scientific and lay knowledge if we dismiss conspiracies as mere fabrications. While some scholars consider these two truth regimes irreconcilable (e.g., Weir 2008), the leaders of the protests managed to articulate them jointly, thus providing an encompassing sentiment for the environmental mobilization. The key

argument against environment-making for SHPPs was that water was too precious to be sacrificed, an idea that circulated among scientists. The leading academic opposing SHPPs, hydrology professor and university dean Ratko Ristić, helped popularize this narrative. Ristić was an early member of the national commission for SHPP approvals—that is, a member of the environment-making authority—which he left after witnessing the vast ecological degradation and the commission's ignorance, as he explained. As an academic who joined the struggle from the beginning, he shaped the environment's scientific argumentative arsenal. With his non-compromising but calm public appearance, Ristić gave an aura of not only an empirically founded opponent but, above all, of a patriotic figure disinterested in party politics yet profoundly concerned for local landscapes and communities, the countrywide ecology, and the nation. Through him, the environment obtained even more convincingly its multiscalar character.

It was Ristić who popularized the discrepancy between the precious water sacrificed to SHPPs and their insignificant energy gains. In the national media and at protests, he presented photos from his field research documenting ruined riverbeds and water enclosed in long pipelines. He condemned, always in a passionate but sober manner, the superficial and compromised approval procedures and failed technical designs of the plants, all of which resulted in endangering species that neither the highest guaranteed protection level of a national park nor the designations of rare and endangered species could save. A rhetorical question was frequent in his appearances: was all this ruination of water and ecology worth the miserable 2–3% of electricity?

Unlike locals who spoke of water as abundant but endangered, and unlike the early planners of SHPP who talked of irrationally wasted water that is unused for productive energy purposes (Chapter 2), Ristić alarmingly positioned Serbia's environment as the poorest in the region in

terms of clean water, cautioning that even its remaining drinkable water was in rapid decline. His warnings became viral on social media and were readily employed by locals, activists, intellectuals, and ordinary observers alike. Media and NGO reports on the chronic water pollution and seasonal shortages across the country—issues that preceded SHPPs—became increasingly frequent and relevant in the context of ongoing struggles for water.

Ristić's arguments established scientific grounding for the widely shared sentiment regarding eradication. Indeed, in such a charged environment of protest, the mismatch between the gains and losses of SHPPs became too extensive to ignore; the preciousness of clean, life-bearing mountainous water appeared undeniable. Perhaps the only possible conclusion was that the sacrifice of water to SHPPs must have served purposes other than mere energy production. As Jovanović , the leader of ORSP, put these points together, "There is an idea that we should disappear from this space. Maybe it is not planned, but that seems to be a goal, for people to leave collectively." He rarely missed the opportunity in his appearances to warn that "our people will become ecological refugees" if the extraction of water, land, minerals, and metals continued at the ongoing pace.

What did the narrative of joined ecological and national eradication do for the mobilization? And how does it inform our understanding of the authority-making environment? The narrative was so potent that it assembled an ideologically wide front. The main message of the fear of eradication departed from the earlier, compromised, and divisive symbols of party and state institutions, the rule of law, recent wars, heroes and losers, and EU accession. As Rajković explains (2022), the protests represented an *ecopopulist* rebellion because they employed ecological metaphors ("water as life itself") in the form of "floating signifiers" to appeal to different class positions, thus pitting "the people" against a corrupt state. Water, health, survival, and corruption were the topics many could identify with.

At the same time, the subjects of homeland, nation, natural exceptionality, and peasantry became largely detached from nationalist bigotry, purified and repurposed for environmental rather than ethnic conflicts. The state became the principal offender, a corrupted servant of capital or international interests, thus a betrayer rather than the protector of the patriotic cause. Notably, the government's arsenal for spinning and defaming proved largely impotent. Regardless of whether it invoked the Kosovo conflict to deter attention or accused the protests' leaders of corruption and betrayal ("paid by Western organizations"), irrationality ("we need green electricity to decarbonize"), misjudgment ("the EU made us do this, it was not our decision"), or manipulative politicization ("protesters are politicians who pretend to be ecologists")—all of these efforts seemed to fail. The discourse on eradication was readily accepted by political abstainers, oppositional right-wing and liberal supporters, and even by the traditionally conservative voters of the ruling party.

The narrative of eradication established the environment not only as a local but also as a national category, an outcome resembling the achievement of the anti-nuclear protests in Yugoslavia. In both cases, the role of scientists was pivotal to upscaling the mobilization. With such a wide meaning construction, the narrative established a buffer zone between the state and the nation—that is, between authority and the environment. The nation encompassed society in its imagined natural habitat, while the state appeared as a transnationally organized authority endangering both nation and nature through greedy and irrational environment-making practices. Thus, the discourse identified the state as the primary culprit.

The emergence of an unlikely alliance

It is one thing to establish the environment and identify the culprits in authority, and quite another to define effective strategies and keep the mobilization together. We have observed

similar steps in the case of the Iron Gates I dam (Chapter 1). There, local Tekijans established the local environment, mobilized communal ties, and confronted the municipal party-state. Likewise, in the anti-nuclear protests in Yugoslavia, the environment encompassed the federal scale, with federal and republic authorities becoming targets of ecological grievance (Chapter 2). Yet these two chapters also showed that "jumping scale," crosscutting party command, establishing transnational connections, and mobilizing a diverse social base remained key to success against authority.

The introduction to this dissertation said little about politics in its broad sense and more about the environment and authority simply because politics remains an elusive and contingent matter of strategies, resources, ideological and social ties, and momentum. This is true of any political action, including environmentalism.

So, what can we learn about these political aspects from the anti-SHPP front? Regarding ideological ties, the most unusual relationship was that between natural scientists on one side and conservative activists or locals who shared some version of the conspiratorial narrative on the other. The overlaps between their different invocations of the environment were apparent, as was the shared identification of what endangered social and natural life, including the ways of proving and narrating it. With this overlap, the expected division between the scientists and activists involved became thin in the face of an established common understanding of what SHPPs represented. It was not that the actors ceased to be who they were: activists stuck to their methods, though they had developed a strong grasp of and skill in presenting and politicizing scientific facts. Scientists, in turn, did not become conspiracy narrators or publicly spread conspiratorial stories. However, some academics did grow closer to conservative political circles, like professor Ristić mentioned above. He and the leader of ORSP spoke about SHPPs in the documentary film of a popular right-wing intellectual and filmmaker. In its

narrative, the movie served as a classic case of conservative appropriation of environmental topics, interweaving pollution, climate change, GMOs, SHPPs, the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the spike in cancer rates, Western dominance, and more.[79] It was, therefore, little surprise when Ristić later became a candidate for Belgrade mayor, representing a hard-core conservative party. However, it is essential not to equate these instances of collaboration with right-wing co-optation of the protests. There were certain short-lived attempts, but ORSP activists promptly rejected them as instances of politicization and governmental infiltration.

Regarding strategies and their effectiveness, I suggest that activists and scientists strengthened each other's perspectives as they exchanged narratives and sentiments. Shared understandings pulled them closer while allowing each party to maintain its relative autonomy, bringing them a step closer to the common goal of putting a halt to SHPP construction. I want to emphasize the surprising effect of those conspiratorial beliefs and sentiments on the ideological framing of SHPPs. Unlike conspiracy theories that reject environmental concerns and deny climate change ("drill, baby, drill," "climate change is a leftist fraud," and so on), the narratives I describe here had the opposite effect. Conservative activists appropriated scientific arguments, strongly emphasizing hidden interests and intentions, and underlined the urgency of acting to stop the catastrophe. By locating the causes either within the environment-making state (for years attempting to steal Temska's river) or within global political and economic authorities (for their persistent animosity towards the nation), they established an extensive spatiotemporal chain of real and imagined injustices. Their narratives gave followers a purpose, not just to know about the issue but to act and stop it. All these popular interventions into scientific discourse reinforced the scientific claims. Popular narratives gave scientific arguments social justification and mass support, while the conspiratorial narratives became simultaneously

[79] "Težina Lanaca 3" 2019, YouTube.

repurposed for contemporary challenges and obtained an additional kernel of empirical foundation.

Finally, what kept the alliance together? A frantic distancing from politics, as well as a paradoxical lack of organizational structure. Many political groups tried to plant their seeds in the discursively rich ground of the mobilization, but with little to no success. For instance, right-wing groups tried briefly to appropriate the protests by offering their manpower and protection during the demonstrations in Temska and Topli Do, but locals and activists rejected them instantly. This was not only for ideological reasons, as the ORSP-led front, which was itself composed of individuals with diverse political orientations, was agnostic toward ideological divisions and did not shy from an occasional communication with hard-core conservatives. Right-wing services were instead rejected because these groups were seen as satellites of the ruling party and a channel for infiltration.

Cooperation with leftist-liberal organizations was more fruitful, but they remained minor partners providing extensive logistical assistance. Since political parties remained sidelined from the beginning due to activists' disgust towards politics, the main collaborators were environmental and legal NGOs and small media outlets. These acted as bridges with international donors, launchers of legal initiatives, information disseminators, and coordinators of pan-regional anti-SHPP initiatives. Being aware of both the complexity of the anti-SHPP front and the urgency to oppose the projects with whatever means available, one of the leading ecological organizations, "Right to Water," joined Jovanović from ORSP in articulating the leading political motif of the mobilization: that right and left, village and city, young and old, must unite together to defend the water. However, due to the diversity of the front, imminent internal competition over command, and the symbolic status of "the right river defender," the maneuvering space for these leftist NGOs remained limited to logistics and policy advocacy.

The protest's organization—or more precisely, its lack of defined structure—was the second reason for its success. Apart from roughly ten core ORSP activists, the mobilization included numerous local village representatives, independent academics, NGOs, and lay participants. It was so vast that the ORSP's invocation of "movement" in its name misled observers: externally, it appeared solid and popular due to the broad membership of its Facebook group, but internally, it worked more as an ad-hoc group. Like many single-issue protests, the group's actions were courageous, instantaneous, and effective. Still, its long-term vision rarely surpassed the "ecological autonomy" slogan and the localized initiative of "revival through rural tourism."

I argue that the mobilization persisted exactly because of this organizational flexibility. Despite sporadic internal and external attempts to overtake the leadership over specific actions and internal conflicts that were less visible publicly than on the ground, no single actor could attach their particular agenda, steer the narrative in a desired direction, and lead the protest. All they could do was add their ideological flavors, include their interpretation of what SHPPs were eradicating, and widen the front without increasing the effective control over it.

To conclude this section on anti-SHPP articulation, different discourses on water all spoke of disappearance, thereby mobilizing unlikely allies. The groups that came to constitute the environment—scientists, villagers, left-liberal activists, and right-conservative activists—each interpreted SHPPs as a means of eradication but with different emphases on what the endangered environments represented: from ecology and autochthonous mountain communities to destitute populations and the entire Serbian nation. The contours of multiple environments appeared through these variations of who the concerned subjects were and which ecologies were threatened. Moreover, the effectiveness of this assembled environment was in its breadth. There were significant overlaps between the articulations, some of which were

surprising, like those between the conspiratorial and scientific ones. The resurfacing and repurposing of conspiratorial beliefs for ecological issues, together with the undefined organizational structure of the mobilization, provided a fertile ground for the authority-making environment and contributed to its persistence against SHPPs.

The lasting relevance of the local context

The "negative case" of unsuccessful resistance in Zvonci and Rakita complicates my depiction of authority-making. Among all the villages I visited, an SHPP was built only between these two villages, and that was no coincidence. What represented the environment here seemed opposite from other villages: not everyone in Rakita and Zvonci viewed the Rakitska river positively. Political dissonance appeared because supporters of the SHPP treated the riverine ecosystem as worthless; however, whether those people had already perceived the ecosystem as unworthy or came to see it that way in response to the SHPP remains an open question. When social life tightly interweaves with the given ecology, as in Dojkinci, Temska, and Topli Do, protests have more substantial potential because positive experiences, memories, and reproductive practices enforce actions. Conversely, negative sentiments about the Rakitska river sowed doubt instead of decisiveness, created emotional ambivalence and confusion about the surrounding ecology, and thus erected barriers to the emerging articulation.

Signposts of the derogatory status of the river followed me during my visit. Locals surprised me with the same question: "Are you for or against the SHPP?" Either they asked carefully or insisted against my reluctance to answer. I did not expect this question because I knew I had come to an area where the protests had once been particularly massive, where hundreds of people gathered in one of the most decisive demonstrations to stop the construction by damaging the large metal pipe. In the national public space, the scene of the pipe cutting had

come to symbolize the zenith of the mobilization—its unity, commitment, and courage. And yet, a year later, I was confronted with this question that I had initially thought was rhetorical. But I realized it was not the more I saw the protest's graffiti, "No to the SHPP" and "ORSP," overpainted and concealed by a black layer. The celebratory portrayals of ORSP's action in national media, produced by journalists and activists alike, masked an important tension. The SHPP in Rakita was the only one that the investor connected to the grid among all the other villages I visited. As I explained in detail in Chapter 1, the residents of Rakita, where the investor built the water-capture component, were divided for and against the project. At the same time, villagers from Zvonce, where the developer placed turbines, mainly favored the plant. Even though the river made the two villages inseparable, the pipeline sunken in the riverbed created an unbridgeable divide.

For the opponents of SHPP from Rakita, water represented the condition of social and ecological survival, memories about happy moments and about the loved ones who were buried nearby. On the opposite side were supporters of the SHPP project, who emphasized that the use of water for electricity production was benevolent. Water flowed through the plant without contamination, creating benefits for everyone. In that affirmative version, the river's water figured merely as a substance with physical properties, just as an engineer would perceive it in technical parameters of speed, fall, and mass.[80] Opponents of the SHPP were usually skeptical of promises made by the investor, while supporters saw in the project an opportunity for infrastructural renewal (what I analyzed in Chapter 4 as "yearning for infrastructure"). The

[80] I had encountered another, also benevolent view regarding the use of water in Dojkinci. It came from a person who supported the struggle but was nevertheless skeptical about its promises of revival through tourism. He wondered whether it was indeed better to let water serve some productive purpose like electricity generation if, in a few years, villages would become entirely depopulated anyway. Despite his influential status in the village, he did not present this view to his neighbors, perhaps due to of the prevailing anti-SHPP attitude.

conviction that SHPPs could bring benefits to the village enforced such a benevolent perception.

The most negative view regarding water itself persisted in Zvonce. Not only did they present SHPPs as beneficial, but they perceived the water as "lifeless," emptied of any life-bearing substance or creature. Some pointed to anti-flood dams from the 1970s that had turned the once-unpredictable river into a step-like, tamed cascade. "No fish, crabs; nothing can live there, swim upstream, or survive the downstream falls," one of them explained.[81] There was a consensus that the river contained nothing to defend, that what died once could not be revived. "We have neither benefit nor damage from that water," another resident pointed out. According to the most degrading version, the water was neither neutral nor lifeless but a burden. "This water brings us nothing but trouble," the strongest proponent of SHPPs from Zvonce passionately argued. He and his friend—influential locals with political connections—described the river as "evil" and "dirty," carrying only waste that people in Rakita discarded in the absence of organized garbage collection (Chapter 4). They saw in SHPPs an opportunity to contain that "trouble" by concentrating and keeping the waste upstream—the "benefit" that the investor also promoted in national media (RTS 2018).

The negative framing of water reveals how relevant the historically accumulated practices of environment-making and experiences of spatial differentiation can be for a mobilization. As I explored in the previous chapter, the production of the environment can occur at a slower pace, operating through direct interventions (or their absence) into specific places, as well as indirectly through collective practices. We can observe something similar here. Past

[81] Interestingly, he believed that the series of dams were built to slow down the water carrying exceptionally sharp elements that, after flowing through regional rivers finally reached the Danube where it the ellipses at the turbines of the Iron Gates system. Others discarded his theory as an invention, but still agreed that the river was lifeless, explaining that the dams were there because the river was extremely flood-prone, and that it had already caused landslides and created a lake.

infrastructural interventions conditioned present-day sentiments, even though those interventions happened decades ago and formally had a protective anti-flooding role rather than an extractive function. Devaluation and socio-spatial remoteness were felt strongly through the absence of waste management infrastructure. Inter-village tensions that had emerged during the region's economic decline continued to reinforce negative perceptions once SHPPs arrived. Thus, these three more or less direct instances of gradual environment-making shaped the possibility for the contemporary authority-making environment. The protest's effort to portray the river as endangered met resistance rooted in these histories and in perceptions of the local ecology as already too degraded to be worth saving.

The question is whether people in Zvonce and Rakita supported the SHPP because they already held a negative attitude toward the Rakitska river, or whether they created and promoted such a negative narrative because they believed in the promises of the SHPP. This may appear as a chicken-and-egg dilemma since this chapter provides evidence for the former position, while the previous chapter on yearning for infrastructure supports the latter perspective. I believe both are true. Past interventions in the riverbed were real and mattered; it would be too simple to consider them a "false consciousness." But I am also convinced that the promises from the SHPP did not create the negative discourse from scratch but had enforced it, perhaps gave it a new dimension and additional motivation.

On the one hand, the past restructuring of the local landscape altered the life of species and people's engagement with the river, and such a negative view further flourished with the drastic decline of sheepherding since the river served one reproductive practice less. The lack of garbage infrastructure meant that people threw trash in it, which further strengthened the river's status. On the other hand, such a status acquired a new dimension and purpose with expectations from the power plant, the provisions that some obtained, and the defamation

spread by the investor's local middlemen. It would be naïve to believe that those gatekeepers could one day entirely invent and impose the perceptions of the environment. My explanation fits the perspective of the environment as a dialectical metabolism: a mutually co-produced relationship between society and ecology (Introduction). We cannot reduce causality to either narrative or political positioning but must understand how they enforce each other. Past infrastructural interventions alter the local ecology; communities then resist or adjust their everyday practices and make sense of the new environment. Finally, new infrastructural projects land in this social-ecological context, encounter support or opposition, and further transform both ecology and perceptions. And so the process of making the environment continues.

The contrasting perceptions of the river shaped not only the course of the protests but also their political implications. If the river was seen not as life-giving but as lifeless matter, how and why would anyone defend its water from an SHPP project? To articulate water as an environmental issue, the movement had to counter historical narratives that had caused political dissonance, which it could not do without dealing with the lasting context of ecological, social, and material relations. However crucial the endangered common good was, the biological status of water did not invariably translate into an urgency to defend it—to form and act as the authority-making environment.

Political work with communities was necessary to assemble the mobilization. Besides providing accurate information and logistics, the anti-SHPP movement needed to do ideological work that engaged with beliefs, emotions, and practices rooted in the local environment. Furthermore, the authority-making environment could hardly emerge as long as prevailing negative relations between the places remained. If we agree that the environmental relationship is primarily the expression of the social order, then it becomes clearer why people

in Zvonce were so reluctant to support their neighbors from Rakita: there was a historical divide between the two villages dating back to the ruin of the spa hotel (Chapter 4). Residents from Zvonce criticized Rakitians for either participating in the destruction, standing aside, or letting it happen indifferently. Some locals implied that the absence of support for Rakitians represented an act of due revenge. Thus, any attempt to create a unified authority-making environment needed to address prevailing social fragmentations.

To contest the SHPP, activists had to reinterpret the river's meaning and confront narratives that dismissed its value. ORSP created a network of gatekeepers, local supporters, and action groups, in addition to providing information and logistical help. Perhaps it did not engage sufficiently in ideological work with the skeptics, as if the group gave up on the supporters of SHPP, expecting the local gatekeepers from Rakita to do the convincing, regardless of their unfavorable status in neighboring Zvonce. Thus, an open space emerged for the two political leaders from Zvonce mentioned above to strengthen the opposing views on the local river. It was perhaps not an accident that the two of them were the most vocal when depicting the river as the village's curse in their efforts to defend the project.

The significance of village autonomy

Topli Do provides an opposite perspective from Rakita and Zvonce on how local social and political dynamics affect the formation of the authority-making environment. Strong local leadership provided the basis for defending village autonomy, which was essential for the protest's success in this village. Centralization of power in Topli Do was a precondition for the pushback against authority represented by the investor, local state, and responsible ministries. Thus materialized a seemingly paradoxical situation: the villagers who challenged such potent intruders allowed the local council president, Marko, to become exceptionally influential. What

might appear as a paradox or abuse of power, in fact, represented one of the protests' main strategies concerning the rural constellation of power, available social resources, and disenchantment with national politics.

Marko, the president of the local council in Topli Do, reached the height of his influence while acting as the backbone of the village's barricade. He was key to establishing and maintaining the protest, organizing shifts, supplying protestors with food from his fast-food restaurants in town, and gathering residents to clash with the investor. Beyond the village, he contributed extensively to its visibility in the media and on social networks, driving visitors and activists (including me) with his Jeep to and from the village, collecting and distributing donations for the barricade and renovations. His representative role gave him an institutional shell, strengthened his legitimacy, and cemented the influences stemming from his commitments. Although part of his influence came from his father's past position as a military commander of the surrounding border zone, Marko's logistical provisions to the protests were crucial for his lasting power.

His role at the barricade, and later in the renovation efforts, gave him the most substantial leverage in this village of barely forty to fifty, mostly elderly residents. Surely, Marko's position did not go unnoticed: some locals, recently relocated people, and visitors privately critiqued him—sometimes harshly, sometimes more benevolently or even ironically— referring to the property he developed during and after the protests as a "hacienda" or "hotel." Yet there were no pushbacks against his influence on the village's local council, which he presided over, nor against the renovation and rural tourism priorities he and his closest associates managed. The only confrontation came from another strongman who owned a tourist estate of seven houses and had high entrepreneurial ambitions but too little influence over the village's governance. In the oligopolistic microcosmos of this mountainous village, political power rested in Marko's

hands. The critics were benevolent when praising Marko's communal commitment as caring, exemplary, and essential for the village's defense and revival. Issues of class fragmentation, centralization of political power, and the deployment of conservative, anti-communist, and revisionist ideology (Đunda 2023; Rajković 2023) became more acceptable in the combative atmosphere of resistance and the subsequent promises of renewal.

The resources, connections, logistics, and discipline he provided to the barricade were not only essential for the village's mobilization but also for the strategy of the authority-making environment in the case of SHPPs. The public followed Marko's posts on social media regarding the barricade, with elders often in the first plan. Observers empathized with the peasants' suffering, celebrated their combativeness, and sometimes even romanticized their life in nature. The investor and state representatives could see that constructing the SHPP would come with high economic and political costs. In conceptual terms, Marko's contributions were less about *jumping scale* (Smith 2010)—the primary mode of authority-making in Tekija (Chapter 1)—and more about *reinforcing the local scale* to oppose threats from the national level. While the former strategy appealed to supreme national power to bypass the municipal authority, the latter focused on strengthening the local council's autonomy, closing the ranks, and widening the mobilization by attracting outside supporters. Jumping the scale did occur, at least to some degree, in Topli Do and other villages, but it mainly served to garner resources to strengthen local autonomy, and thus increase the odds of the authority-making environment.

Why did strengthening and not jumping the scale become the dominant strategy? Less because Marko chose so, and much more because a dismissive attitude toward politics was so pervasive. Locals and activists believed that national politics were responsible for the disaster of SHPPs. Corrupt politicians only cared about wealth, and investors in SHPPs were their lower associates helping them enrich themselves. That was how politics operated, regardless of whether it was

Vučić who ruled or the opposition, which introduced SHPPs and then tried to yield the political benefits of the protests. The protests themselves drew heavily on long-standing apolitical sentiments that had flourished since the regime change in the early 2000s. Ivana Spasić (2013) has described this as an amoral refusal of anything related to political parties, politicians, and state institutions. Politics meant a dirty and corrupt business; politicians were interested only in enriching themselves, and the state served to enable this. Nevertheless, the state remained the only object of popular "yearning" in the absence of an alternative vision or hope for political change, particularly in the conjuncture of the neoliberal restructuring of the Yugoslav welfare system (Jansen 2015; Spasić 2013), as I also analyzed in Chapter 1. The state represented both the main perpetrator and the primary locus of hope for improvement. Such a set of opposing sentiments, Spasić argues, had a de-mobilizing and depoliticizing character.

In that very context, the turn to local autonomy as the basis of the authority-making environment was both instinctive and intuitive. Local institutions that mediate between the community and higher state levels can act either as gatekeepers and local ideologues of authority (as we encountered in Rakita here and in Chapter 4) or provide the connective tissue for strengthening the local ranks and engaging the broader public (as occurred in Takija, Chapter 1). This shifting of local institutions between the environment and authority is a precondition for local mobilization.

Thus, local strongmen in Topli Do, together with support from urban centers and diaspora, could temporarily establish an alternative provision of care and small-scale infrastructure that the central and municipal state failed to provide. That care was not a novelty, particularly not in remote areas with centuries-long traditions of communal labor and solidarity. Moreover, local autonomy, epitomized in the institution of the *mesna zajednica* (local council), represented the last line of defense from "dirty politics" and a "corrupt state." To politicize the

environment amid the ashes of a depoliticized state meant reviving motifs of local autonomy and self-reliance that long predated the conflicts over SHPPs but that the protests could effectively draw upon. Unlike the de-mobilizing effect Spasić (2013) identified, such politicization not only consolidated local organization but also assembled the ideologically broad national front that I outlined in the first section.

In addition to being a driving force of resistance, local autonomy was also a source of inspiration for alternative organization. Since the central state appeared as a criminal don of the SHPP scheme—only interested in "plucking the last valuables: air, water, minerals, until everyone disappeared," as Jovanović said—local councils briefly experimented with governance models that were different from the hierarchical state. ORSP activists and the most engaged local representatives from Dojkinci, Temska, and Topli Do established a mountain-wide Association of Local Councils to amplify the local opposition and coordinate protests. Even though the Association lacked legal standing, its founders emphasized that its power rested in its exemplarity for society at large. Its legitimacy, they said, stemmed from the collective voice of otherwise isolated communities that were all individually subordinated to the municipality. Thus, they traversed vertical subordination by creating a horizontally connected association. This and similar initiatives show that village autonomy, flourishing through strong leadership and apolitical sentiment, represented the cornerstone of the authority-making environment.

Even when the anti-SHPP protests succeeded in forging a nationwide articulation, its strategic grounding in local contexts remained vital. The protests did not follow a linear trajectory that rendered grassroots dynamics obsolete; rather, village politics formed a foundational layer for the broader authority-making environment. As the protests reached urban centers, including the capital, their momentum continued to draw strength from ecological conditions and

political dynamics unfolding in the mountainous villages. A conceptual shift toward articulation as a strategy helps to illuminate this enduring relevance. Articulation is not only a theoretical lens for analyzing how political fronts take shape; it also offers a framework for intentional political intervention that can reinforce or challenge existing socio-political structures. Articulation "provides a mechanism for shaping intervention within a particular social formation, conjuncture or context" (Slack 2006, 113).

The previous sections have shown what happens when we enter the terrain of political intervention: even the most progressive agendas encounter uneven outcomes, unintended consequences, and internal contradictions. The same forces that sustained the environmental front also exposed its limitations. Rakita's negative case of contested articulation showed how the social and ecological dynamics obstructed the protest's efforts, while the case of Topli Do illustrated how local autonomy and resistance flourished under strong village leadership, providing a platform for broader challenges to authority.

Liminal political engagements

The protests established political spaces even as they drew heavily upon populist anti-establishment and apolitical attitudes. These spaces extended beyond villages, with the politicization of the environment gradually engaging disenchanted people in politics while allowing them to continue believing they remained outside party politics. This paradoxical result was possible due to the synergic effect of the depoliticized attitude towards politics and the state, on the one hand, and the narrative that painted SHPPs as the eradication of the nation, peasants, and nature, on the other. The politicization of the environment appealed to broad strata of society that had been desensitized to the old tropes of EU accession, post-war reconciliation, and rule of law, countering depoliticized and de-mobilized politics (Spasić

2013; Jansen 2015). Those tropes still amplified grievances against SHPPs—not through leading narratives but through an ecological vocabulary. Therefore, the authority-making environment in which the protest assembled not only reinforced local autonomy but also provided a possibility for self-declared apolitical subjects to engage in national-level politics through ecological activism.

It is no wonder, then, that SHPPs became such a resonant issue. The flourishing of concerns over health and ecology fit neatly within the representations of an endangered, depopulated, and ecologically degraded nation. Protesters who became activists did so for "us"—neighbors, peasants, the nation—and not for corrupted parties and the state. Their actions had nothing to do with politics and self-interests, they insisted. Yet, step by step, they employed a variety of means and strategies, from protests to discourse-creation, mobilization, physical clashes, care work, filing institutional initiatives, media engagement—the list goes on. Their involvement deepened to the point that even the protest leaders, who were averse to party politics, established civic associations, joined coalitions, or became electoral candidates. Other activists who did not follow this path remained halfway in political life, participating in subsequent single-issue mobilizations.

What appeared as motives above corrupted politics and institutions allowed for a form of *liminal politics,* positioned between disengagement and full institutional participation. It invited people to take part in political affairs while simultaneously allowing them to maintain a sense of distance from "business as usual," thus maintaining the status quo that had kept them outside politics for such a long time. Apart from canceling many SHPP projects, creating the conditions for such a liminal engagement was perhaps one of the strongest authority-making effects. This effect was more immediate in the SHPP protests than in Tekija, where it directly concerned the functioning of the local party. For the former, it consisted of establishing a legacy

for defining political issues and modes of collective action. Since the SHPP protests, ecological topics have become dominant mobilizing themes, with the repertoire of eradication narratives and inter-ideological positioning structuring many subsequent protests.

In the current heyday of neoliberal and illiberal post-socialism in Serbia, environmentalism has become a political terrain for exploration and practice among those deeply concerned for the common good but even more deeply distrustful of political elites who claim to protect society. Ecology thus remains liminal to politics, allowing a broad range of actors to step in while believing they are situated outside it. As I have shown in this chapter, the liminal space of environmental politics is not discursively pure as it contains various scientific, cultural, and conspiratorial references. Nor are its outcomes universally progressive, for they range unevenly from local instances of deliberative democracy and the centralization of power to socio-political fragmentation and the return of absentees to politics.

Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the formation of the authority-making environment that opposed SHPPs. It explored how and why a diverse mobilization succeeded in coming and remaining together until reaching the goal of banning new SHPP projects. The analysis traced the discursive articulations of the protests and outlined the links and temporary alliances between their key actors. The loss of water as a form of eradication proved to be one of the most dominant discourses. The involved groups—scientists, villagers, left-liberal activists, and right-conservative activists—interpreted SHPPs as mechanisms of erasure but emphasized different aspects: ecology, autochthonous mountain communities, destitute populations, or the Serbian nation as a whole. Some surprising overlaps existed between these interpretations, including between the conspiratorial and scientific ones. Through these diverse discourses, multiple

contours of the environment emerged, including local landscapes and the nation more broadly. Equating SHPPs with national loss also meant that the state represented the main responsible iteration of authority.

Furthermore, the repurposing of conspiratorial beliefs for ecological issues, combined with the movement's loosely defined organizational structure, contributed to the persistence of the alliance against SHPPs. I would, however, strongly caution against reading this as a case of conspiracy theories gaining widespread acceptance across the ideological spectrum, or as evidence of a fundamentally conservative mobilization. Instead, it was a convergence of narratives from opposing ends of the political spectrum based on shared sentiments of dispossession, injustice, and destruction. Despite the different vocabularies, narratives like "SHPPs as another step in the privatization of public goods" and "SHPPs as the next step in displacing the Serbian people" relied upon similar common sense. Though the victims and culprits differed, the narratives converged around placing the blame on national or international capital, and more often on the corrupted state and spoiled politics. It was perhaps this underlying structure of feeling that sometimes appeared conspiratorial in form that allowed distant ideological poles to stand together in protest, on barricades, and in collective acts of rural renovation.

The authority-making environment that emerged was both an outcome of the local social and ecological conditions and purposeful acts against authority. Its trajectory demonstrates that an effective environmental agenda requires not only fertile historical ground and moral conviction but, above all, continuous, careful guidance, devotion, and committed work across scales and between often disparate groups, sometimes using questionable means, sometimes with strayed effects, but never with guaranteed results. Environmental politics remains an open-ended

process, one that continues to reveal ample space for hope during unexpected moments of bravery.

CONCLUSION

Recapitulation

In 2005, my elementary school brought me and my twelve-year-old classmates on a two-day excursion to the Iron Gates gorge. On the first day, we visited Roman excavations and the breathtaking archeological museum, *Lepenski vir,* which exhibits collections from the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, all excavated in the gorge. The museum now looks incredible, but I do not remember how I experienced it back then. Perhaps like most children would—boring to observe but exciting to run around the step-like structure with its greenhouse-like panoramic glass windows. We stayed at Kladovo's *Hotel Đerdap* overlooking the Danube and the gorge, a hotel built during the dam's construction.

The second day, we went to the Iron Gates I power plant and the sailing complex. This was already more fun: to stand above the mighty Danube and observe how the ship locks intermittently filled up or pumped out water. Like a tide, the water lifted or lowered the ships that patiently waited to cross the dam and overcome the difference in height between the upstream and downstream sections. The operation seemed so effortless, so smooth, as if we were staring at ships in a bathtub rather than thousands of tons of steel in concrete chambers. Then we entered the production hall of the power plant, where the turbines spun like mad, making such a racket that we could barely hear ourselves. That is all I remember— endless spinning and deafening sounds. I see now, looking through photos, that the hall looked remarkable as well, with a steel cog-like installation across the entire wall. The windows created an atmosphere characteristic of galleries and luxurious halls rather than a power plant. Since then, my memory of the school trip faded until it became just a reference in time, saying, "I was there as a kid."

Only recently, while writing up this dissertation, was I prompted to recall more details of this school trip. Even though the memories remained largely faded, my understanding has grown. I understand now that the attractions I visited were places of struggle, both real and imagined. Archeologists raced against the dam's construction to dig out and preserve precious heritage, working together with the construction companies to overcome the rising waters and establish the museum at a safe height. Workers struggled with the Danube, with the technical complexity and physically demanding tasks, tight deadlines, and the burden of building a flagship energy hub. Several lost their lives in that struggle. The proud stance of the hotel in Kladovo stood in stark contrast to the experiences of the villagers and townspeople in Tekija and other relocated settlements. Yugoslavia's planners wrestled to meet rising domestic and industrial energy demands, while the national leadership sought to position the country more advantageously in global economic and political relations through projects like Iron Gates I (Chapters 1 and 2).

The more I researched, the more I understood how these struggles were intricately connected to similar struggles elsewhere, even though they were all distant in space and time. From several planned but only one constructed nuclear power plant in late Yugoslavia, over endless lignite mines that still supply most of Serbia's electricity, to depopulated villages in Stara Mountain, and who knows how many other instances in which institutions tried and often successfully realized energy infrastructures, but rarely without encountering discontent. The more connections I established, the more I realized that energy projects were not just places that produced electrical power but also arenas of contestation between political and economic power on one side, and popular and expert groups on the other.

When I began this intellectual journey in 2019, villagers, local activists, academics, and NGOs had already formed their ideologically diverse and organizationally loose mobilization against SHPPs. This mobilization merged the issues of ecological degradation, marginalization in the

decision-making process, and decades-old mistreatment. Its framings of SHPPs varied along the continuum of eradication—from the destruction of precious natural habitats to the disappearance of authentic rural life, and even the abolition of the Serbian nation (Chapters 4 and 5). The institutional power this mobilization opposed was complex and often blurred. The central and local state, alongside local investors, appeared as the most responsible culprits, while the role of the EU governance structure remained largely undiscernible in the protest's account, except for its financial contributions to the projects. However, this dissertation has argued that the conflicts on the ground were closely related to political-economic competition at the EU level. Energy policies around renewables concern not only sustainability but also questions regarding the Union's political integration, ownership and control over national energy sectors, and relations between capital fractions. In this context of competing agendas, SHPPs became a "Trojan horse"—a technology seemingly intended to increase Serbia's share of renewables while simultaneously slowing down the effects of EU-led liberalization and carving out space for domestic capital (Chapter 3).

The sequence of events traced back to state socialism and its major shifts in energy governance and environmentalism. This dissertation identified three such shifts, in which the use of energy sources and the modes of mobilization changed alongside Yugoslavia's evolving position in global integration and its institutional organization (Chapter 2). Institutional power over the domestic environment shifted from 1) the bipolar influence of the central federal state and the Western capitalist and military alliances, to 2) the diffused power of the decentralized state within a multilateralist geopolitical order, in which Iron Gates I played a prominent role, and finally to 3) a period in which internal ethnic tensions pushed policy towards internal fragmentation and ever-growing pressure on domestic energy sources. These shifts had profound consequences but also created openings for environmental mobilization: from indirect protests such as peasant revolts defending more traditional forms of social and

economic organization; to local contestations at energy construction sites as forms of "environmentalism of the poor," integrating livelihood concerns with those revolving around ecological harms (Chapter 1); and federation-wide ecological actions that relied on previously established strategies while introducing new modes of organizing through the anti-nuclear protests. Even though the power imbalance dictated the direction of change and largely benefited institutional power, such mobilizations also imposed considerable limits on that power, especially in conjunction with institutional openings and the rise of global environmentalism.

From Iron Gates I in the 1960s to SHPPs in 2020, the dissertation traced the arc of energy and environmental politics from Yugoslavia to present-day Serbia. Conflicts surrounding Iron Gates I, nuclear power plants, and SHPPs served as its empirical departure points. The dissertation approached energy infrastructures as instruments for realizing developmental or extractive agendas and, as such, framed them as sites of social and ecological struggle. More than commemorating remarkable conflicts, its analytical goal was to identify how institutional and economic power conflicted and coevolved with environmental mobilizations. Through the concept of *environment-making authority,* it identified key political and economic actors, the shifting modes of institutional organization, and the ways of using energy sources. By employing the notion of the *authority-making environment*, the dissertation presented not only the cases of resistance characteristic of each period of authority but, more crucially, argued that environmental mobilizations altered the very constellations of authority. In this way, it has shown that in a mutual yet uneven relationship, authority and environment confronted and reshaped each other over time.

The satisfaction of constructing this arc of energy and environmental politics could not overpower the unease I felt for putting such diverse cases together. The unease did not stem

from fear of making incorrect arguments but rather from the real-life differences between the cases. Even my interlocutors insisted that we cannot compare the dams from the Yugoslav years with the SHPPs they personally opposed, as the former represented "real" projects with significant contributions to the country's energy system, while the latter were nothing more than the corruptive mirage of renewable energy. I would even add that the large dams were outcomes of a time when Yugoslavia still possessed sufficient autonomy, social and technological capacity, political vision, and a favorable international position. The SHPPs were the opposite of that—and appear even more so today, when Serbia and other post-Yugoslav states remain trapped in the carcinogenic gases of thermal power plants. Their leaderships seem unable to look beyond capitalist class interests or to form a vision of transformation that could overcome the mountain of excuses and inertia they have accumulated since the 1990s. And, of course, the global and political contexts are worlds apart from the period when Yugoslavia participated in forging more just and multilateralist international relations. So, the sense of unease accompanied me throughout the dissertation's journey. Nevertheless, despite it, I believe that the analytical yield stemming from the dissertation's historical perspective outweighed my nostalgia and skepticism. Its main contribution lies in the enhanced understanding of how energy infrastructure reproduces uneven spatial development, and more contextually, in elaborating how environmentalism emerged over time in Yugoslavia and Serbia.

Takeaway points

Let me first elaborate on uneven development. Various constellations of authority sought to enable industrialization, demonstrate progress, bring about sustainability and liberalization, or improve Yugoslavia's and Serbia's position in the global economic and political order. By

doing so, they imposed systems of valuation and devaluation onto the built environment and cemented certain power relations through energy infrastructure. The power at work was not only material but also political, cultural, and social in nature. At times, disparities appeared as unintended consequences, but more often than not, they were the main channels through which infrastructure-led development was realized. The chapters have highlighted multiple sources of harm, ranging from restricted access to land, water, and employment; to the legal and institutional mistreatment of populations; to institutional invisibility and lasting deprivation—both in geopolitics (as latecomers to EU accession) and domestic affairs (the continued invisibility of peasants); as well as rapid ecological restructuring and accelerating social and material decline.

One of the consistent findings of the dissertation is that these power relations formed part of the broader dynamic of uneven geographic development that continuously shaped energy infrastructure in Yugoslavia and Serbia. Spatial differentiation took multiple forms—from the rise and demise of places to their subsumption as sources of resources, to the unequal distribution of costs and benefits. For instance, in Chapter 4, I argued that the rural experience of emptiness—depopulation, infrastructural decay, and poverty—provided a fertile ground for SHPP investments. In Chapter 1, on the Iron Gates I dam, I reconstructed the expropriation and relocation of locals that governed the infrastructure-led modernization of the country. In both cases, policies undervalued locals' private property, thus putting rural communities hosting the energy projects at the far end of the developmental vision. Finally, Chapter 5 showed that depopulation figured in recent ecological protests as a symbol of endangered habitats and national eradication.

In the dissertation's long temporal perspective, uneven development figured not only as an omnipresent outcome but also as a multiscalar and multi-dimensional force that is reproduced

through the environment-making authority. The cases of the dam, peasant revolts, oil and technology transfers, anti-nuclear protests, and rural decline seemingly had little in common, yet they were all, to a significant extent, shaped by the same developmental socialist project, at the core of which stood a derogatory approach toward peasants. In Rakita, Dojkinci, Temska, and Topli Do, this took the form of mobilizing labor for the industries of nearby urban centers. In the Iron Gates gorge, it appeared in the disadvantageous expropriation policy that devalued rural property, shifted productive and reproductive practices away from agriculture, transformed the regional climate and geography, and, consequently, erased the river-based economy. Unlike the simultaneous and directly related restructuring of the 1960s in the Iron Gates gorge and Stara Mountain (Chapters 1 and 4), the reproduction of inequality traced across the three major shifts (Chapter 2) and the EU accession process (Chapter 3) was subtler and unfolded over decades.

This long temporal logic was apparent in the case of SHPPs, which appeared twice on the energy policy agenda. In the 1980s, they were initially introduced to enforce the imperative of domestically produced, cheap energy that could stabilize the late socialist economic system shaken by the oil shocks. Then, in the 2000s, they resurfaced as a "Trojan horse" to advance liberalization of the state-led electricity sector. In both cases, SHPPs were a creative response to external forces. Different forms of authority employed SHPPs to accommodate internal and external pressures, along the way prioritizing energy security or the domestic capitalist base. Thus, the dissertation highlighted the temporal and spatial connections between depopulation, modernization, reliance on cheap energy, EU integration, and environmental protest. Uneven development operated through all these instances, each revealing how political and economic power played out through energy infrastructure.

The second contribution of this dissertation lies in offering a historically informed account of environmentalism in Serbia and Yugoslavia. The dissertation proposes an alternative genealogy of environmental politics under state socialism. Contrary to common assumptions linking environmentalism to anti-nuclear protests, I argued that mobilizations were as old as Yugoslavia's infrastructure-led development. Their seeds were peasant revolts that defended communal autonomy and traditional organization against top-down agricultural policies. These seeds grew into a stem of "environmentalism of the poor"—local forms of mobilization embedded within local ecologies, dependence on land, and traditional socio-cultural values as the main motives threatened by infrastructure-led development. The full branching took place in the 1980s, when environmentalism became more of a trans-local alliance consisting of the previously mentioned groups and various ecologically minded experts and activists who added references to species protection, the nation, and the planet. At that point, environmentalism in Yugoslavia was, for the first time, able to confront institutional power at the republic and federal levels—the very sources of that power.

Strategies of mobilization shifted over time, but a few traits remained constant. In each environmental constellation, the spatial scale of the conflict differed, beginning with the local scale of villages and infrastructural construction sites up to the federal and national levels. The reader may notice an interesting discrepancy: while the dissertation often emphasized the roles of international institutions in the authority's organization, mobilizations rarely addressed these directly. The case of the anti-SHPP protests is particularly illustrative. The fact that the anti-SHPP mobilization did not problematize the international dimension of SHPPs does not necessarily make it shortsighted (even though protests did address the EBRD). The pressure this mobilization exerted upon national institutions, investors, and banks resulted in the cancellation of most unbuilt SHPPs. Thus, the strategies of the mobilizations presented here

reflect an estimation—or rather a gut feeling—that key responsibilities, the greatest potential for influence, and direct attainability all rested with local and national-level actors.

Depending on these estimations, different alliances emerged, ranging from communities that united with their political leaders to confront municipalities and appeal to higher institutions (Chapter 1) to professionally and ideologically diverse alliances opposing the national-level state (Chapters 2 and 5). Furthermore, with varying constellations and strategies, the consequences for the authority also differed. Some consequences were easily discernible, like institutional reforms, project cancellations, and concessions to popular and expert demands. Others were less evident and consisted of the loss of political legitimacy (as we encountered in Chapter 1), the pressure to regroup the constellation of economic and political actors (Chapter 3), or the activation of political absentees, which broadened both the social base and the protest field (Chapter 5).

Through this historical account, the dissertation argues that what the environment represented as a socio-ecological entity, as well as who spoke on its behalf, shifted with the scales, strategies, and alliances of mobilizations. However, these shifts were not outcomes of a linear, purposeful learning process—in fact, the involved actors never referred to instances and successes of previous protests. Thus, my growth metaphor—from seeds to stem to a fully branched tree—may be misleading as it invokes a straightforward growth with a predetermined outcome. Perhaps more accurate would be to envision the emergence as indirect institutional memory-forming. Such institutional accumulation consisted of broadening the already available means, exploiting the spaces provided by reforms or enabling global contexts, and chipping away at the already existing cracks in the relations within authority during domestic and international crises.

Further directions

When initially conceptualizing my research, I drew some deliberate boundaries. Beyond those boundaries lie several relevant themes that future research could explore further.

One such direction concerns the topic of change. Even though this topic lies at the heart of this dissertation, it was rarely developed conceptually. Several chapters were explicitly concerned with temporality, transition, and change—particularly Chapter 2, which dealt with major shifts in energy and environmental policy, and Chapter 4, which investigated the alternation of socio-economic growth and decline as instances of (de)valuation. Temporality organized the narratives of these chapters, but due to my eagerness to first identify the relevant processes, actors, and underlying mechanisms, I treated that topic as a matter of narrative structure rather than engaging in a deeper conceptual discussion.

Future work could make more explicit the kind of change the dissertation has implicitly addressed: non-linear, conjunctural, and contingent. Drawing on elements already present in the analysis—tipping points, shifting relations, and changing purposes and meanings—I would conceptualize temporality in energy and environmental politics as a conjuncture of actions, path dependencies, momentums, opportunity structures, and recalibrations of meanings. In this sense, I would follow change as a bundle and co-product of simultaneous processes: the slow-paced, almost subterranean emergence of potentials, with sudden shifts when contexts permit and long periods of incorporation characteristic of both social and technological systems. This approach would resemble something similar to what Saskia Sassen presented in *Territory, Authority, Rights* (2008), and what I have already begun doing in my analysis of SHPPs (Chapter 3) when drawing on Sassen's concepts of *systemic logics*, *capabilities,* and *turning points*.

The second conceptual avenue that the dissertation opens is the comparison of energy and environmental politics between the socialist and post-socialist periods. Like with temporality, the dissertation laid the groundwork for such an approach—from identifying global forces, relations of uneven development, constellations of economic and political actors, modes of mobilization, and the different meanings of the environment. Because my interest was more in the temporal logic of the argument—in establishing the threads and tracing continuities and transformations—I engaged comparative methods only occasionally, as a stronger focus would have steered the dissertation's arguments in a different direction.

Future research could therefore entail comparing and contrasting the modes of production of the environment: the simultaneity of global embedding in political and economic circuits and the local disembedding of social and ecological relations, as well as the potentials for and methods of mobilization that such production opens up. Such a comparison would need to be symmetrical, requiring substantial data to capture both distant and recent times with equal attention. A significant amount of historical evidence would also be necessary to match the abundance that participant observation, expert interviews, and digital sources can afford. Thus, I would need to supplement archival sources (which already require a great amount of time and energy) with oral histories, particularly for the cases that I analyzed in the first two chapters.

Finally, I chose to conclude my analysis with the case of SHPPs and not extend it further into the present. Since then, some significant shifts have occurred in the domains of both energy and environmental politics in Serbia. The case of the Jadar lithium and boron mine, for which the Rio Tinto corporation obtained a concession, has drawn wide domestic and international attention because of the scale of the protests against the project, the involved actors—including the German state, the EU, and global corporations—and the global context of restructuring in the automobile industry. This case offers several relevant points for future analysis.

First, the protest drew on a similar organization and discursive repertoire as the anti-SHPP movement, emphasizing national eradication, traditional values, the need for pan-ideological unity, and the destruction of water sources and agriculture. It added new elements as well, such as anti-imperial narratives and tighter collaboration with international organizations and global Indigenous movements. The national mobilization was so widespread that the government canceled the project to avoid electoral defeat, only to relaunch it after re-election. Thus, while there were strong continuities between the SHPP and lithium protests, there were also some crucial additions.

Second, the constellation of authority appeared similar on the surface, but its internal dynamics changed. The national government was still the dominant national actor, maintaining tight control over local administrations. The EU continued to play a key international role, but the interests of the German state, the automobile industry, and global mining corporations added new contours to this international constellation. Within this constellation, the EU designated the mine as one of its strategic projects and served as an umbrella organization for other involved actors. The crucial difference from the SHPP case was that the Jadar mine was too large, too valuable, and too strongly contested to be buried under technocratic rule and liberalization standards. Instead, overt geopolitical and economic interests, neo-imperial extractive approaches, and direct deal-making with President Vučić became the primary forces and means of environment-making.

It remains to be seen how far this novel constellation of authority can push. The hope remains that the mobilization will continue to sustain pressure as it has been doing so far. Whatever happens next, the optimistic message of the dissertation endures: the history of environmental and energy politics is and will continue to be about shifting political and economic power relations and evolving patterns of mobilization.

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