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# On Dammed Landscapes and Invasive Infrastructures

MILIJA GLUHOVIC

■ The Zalomka, the Nevesinjsko Polje, May 2022.



One sunny morning in early May of 2022, I walked from Biograd, a small village in the Nevesinjsko Polje, to the banks of the Zalomka, one of the largest sinking rivers in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the world. I've been returning to this village for many years, mainly during the dry season, when the river dries up significantly on most of its course. That morning I followed its course until I reached Pošćenje, the site where a hydropower dam will be built, just three kilometres upstream of the main sinkhole – one of the largest in the Dinaric Alps' karst – where the Zalomka dramatically disappears. Performing a stunning hydrological feat, the river gushes into this chasm only to appear again in a place called Parila under sharp cliffs between the two villages of Hodbina and Malo Polje, fourteen kilometres

south from Mostar. Together with the Buna, it flows west for approximately ten kilometres and joins the Neretva River, the largest karst river in the Dinaric Alps, which empties into the Adriatic Sea. Walking back to the village, I witnessed the brilliant shimmer of the biosphere – lush fields of wheat, rye and barley interspersed with beautiful meadows covered in wildflowers busy with insects and songbirds. During my walk I came periodically across black and white metal poles dug into the ground, which were meant to mark different water levels, when the Zalomka gets dammed and a good part of the Nevesinjsko Polje, including the village of Kosovača, becomes submerged and transformed into a mere reservoir of energy (for the supposed greater good of economic progress). Part of the

water from this reservoir will be used for the planned hydro power plant, HPP Nevesinje, and part will be diverted through a derivation tunnel to Dabarsko Polje, where another hydro power plant, HPP Dabar, will be constructed. The next day, when I visited the sites where the tunnel with the entrance building and the HPP Dabar were being built, the construction work



seemed well underway. From the Dabarsko Polje, these waters will go through another tunnel to Fatničko Polje and then be channelled through the polje to the tunnel that will finally divert these waters to Bileća and existing Bilećko Lake on the Trebišnjica River.

In this article I turn my attention to these two hydropower plants, part of the massive Upper Horizons scheme, which is currently the largest infrastructural project in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Built by the China Energy Gezhouba and financed through a EUR 180 million loan from the Export–Import Bank of China, the project forms a part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, an unprecedented global development programme that involves nearly half of the world’s countries. Threatening to

entangle people, animals and water in its nets, the emerging contours of the Upper Horizons, an alien-looking structure, are presently graspable only in parts – with utopia and disaster both lurking just over the horizon. While the local government symbolically asserts its presence in the regulation of the project and promises development and well-being for the local population, the project also elicits a sense of menace, a shadow that affects ecology and economy, especially downstream. Its critics argue that the changes in the hydrology of the river brought about by the building of the dams will have far-reaching detrimental consequences for the biospheres and affected communities. As Rob Nixon has argued, the mega-dam projects in many postcolonial nations have ‘depended’ on both physical structure and metaphorical discourse on ‘submergence’: of ‘disposable people and ecosystems, but also on the submerged structures of dependence that lay beneath the flamboyant engineering miracles’ (2011: 167). Drawing on these reflections and insights from the energy humanities, blue humanities and infrastructure studies, I consider dams as concretizations that ‘harness, produce, materialise, and symbolise’ (neo)colonial power relations (Haiven 2013: 215).

Thus, from this perspective, this infrastructural project could be seen not only as ‘Chinese invasion’ through the Belt and Road Initiative, but also an invasion of nature by the nation state, often constituted as the necessary means to pursue a view of national and regional integration towards globalized modernity. Finally, I discuss an invasion of the dominant narrative by resistance, turning attention to the anti-damming intersectional and coalitional work in the Balkans, which includes protests, marches, forums, artistic interventions and legal pressure aimed at stopping both local and the Chinese state-owned companies from dredging and blocking the rivers. Intervening in the normalized view of the extractive zone, these acts of resistance form part of a broad struggle against what the anthropologist Anne Spice calls ‘invasive infrastructures’ (2018) that numerous communities are fighting against in the region.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on an instance of grassroots democratic environmentalism in the village of Kruščica,

■ The Zalomka, the Nevesinjsko Polje, May 2022.

<sup>1</sup> In *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), Rosa Luxemburg posited that capitalism’s conquest of noncapitalist societies ‘begins in most cases with magnificent constructions of modern transport, such as railway lines which cross primeval forests and tunnel through the mountains, telegraph wires which bridge the deserts, and ocean liners which call at the most outlying ports’ (Luxemburg cited in Campos Johnson and Nemser 2022: 4). Here primitive accumulation and colonial disposition travel through infrastructures that configure a spatial order of extraction.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, where local women had occupied a bridge over their river for 534 days, preventing the construction of two hydropower plants, I argue that this and similar examples of environmental activism in the Balkans offer understandings of sustainability that counter a logic of so-called green extractivism that threatens their lives, livelihoods and territory.<sup>2</sup> In preventing dam construction, the protests in fact propose an alternative vision of infrastructure enabling the networks of human and other-than-human relations that continue to make survival possible for local communities. I also discuss briefly an artistic intervention on the Ibar Dam, also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to argue that aesthetic practice aligned with environmental movements can work to affirm and defend other life projects responding to world visions and epistemologies whose very existence is obscured within dominant ideology.

#### NARRATING THE CHINESE THREAT: THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

Today the Silk Road is known around the world as a vast premodern Afro-Eurasian trade network between Byzantium and Beijing, Samarkand and Timbuktu that somehow historically anticipated our hyperconnected, globalized world and that might, through collaboration across traditional divisions, offer ways to rethink the present and to reimagine the future. (Chin 2013: 194)

As a depiction of trade routes between the East and the West and of religious and cultural exchanges across Asia, the term gained currency over the course of the twentieth century and came to be associated with discourses of peace, international harmony and cosmopolitanism, downplaying ‘inconvenient’ or confrontational parts of history in the process. As Tim Winter makes clear, the ‘old’ Silk Road was as much an invention as these new ones, having emerged in the nineteenth century from ‘an episode of exploration and research that took shape within the competition for control over Central Asia’ (2019: 60).

Launched by Xi Jinping in September 2013 during his ten-day tour of the Central Asian Republics, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been framed in Chinese official political

rhetoric as the ‘revival of the Silk Roads for the twenty-first century’. By building or expanding railways, roads and ports across Eurasia, Asia and parts of the African continent, the BRI seeks to connect China with the economies of both developed and developing states, enabling Chinese goods to reach new markets more quickly, and helping deliver necessities to China’s markets, above all in the energy sector. ‘In this Silk Road, Belt and Road nexus created by China,’ writes Winter, ‘we are witnessing the commingling of a geocultural imaginary of antiquity – which privileges ideas of transoceanic and transcontinental exchange, harmony, and open borders ... – with what is arguably the most ambitious foreign policy ever undertaken by a single country’ (2022: 5). In the Balkans, the fundamental intermixing of Silk Road pasts with Belt and Road futures – manifest in the structures built and economies fostered there by China – profoundly shapes social landscapes, ecological geographies and cultural imaginaries.

Chinese economic presence in Europe is primarily discussed as a security threat, while less attention has been paid to its impact on environment, health, labour standards, local communities and culture. For example, the Cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries Framework (China–CEEC Cooperation), which was established in 2012, has often been seen in a negative, alarming and threatening light, and as undermining the interests of the European Union as a whole. According to these narratives, China is aiming ‘to establish dependences to gain an ability to exercise political influence in the European Union, and even turn European countries into China’s “client states”’ (Pavličević 2022: 84). There are sharp disagreements about whether the Belt and Road Initiative, which has become the public face of contemporary China’s engagement with the region, is inherently exploitative and extractivist or benevolent. According to its critics, China is using developing nations to guarantee its own continued access to valuable resources and profitable markets, while its proponents argue that these large-scale loan-based infrastructure investments provide Western Balkan nations with much-needed funding.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Zhanping Hu defines green extractivism as ‘the discourses and practices of extractivist mode implicated in green policies and projects’ (2023: 3). See also Macarena Gómez-Barris’s (2017) *The Extractive Zone: Social ecologies and decolonial perspectives*, where she traces the political, aesthetic and performative practices that emerge in opposition to the ruinous effects of extractive capital.b1

<sup>3</sup> China’s financing in the region since the announcement of its Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 makes it the fourth most important external economic actor in the Balkans. According to a recent briefing for the European Parliament, from 2009 to 2021, approximately 32 billion euros flowed from China into the Western Balkans, 10.3 billion of which went to Serbia alone.

The numerous mine, port, energy and infrastructure projects that form the spine of these new Silk Roads across the Balkans are certainly strategic vectors of alliance like their counterparts during the Cold War, when targeted Soviet and Chinese aid resulted in the construction of hydroelectric dams, steel mills, cement factories, ports and airports, as well as road and rail networks across Asia and Africa. However, today there is much less of the discourse of South–South solidarity that marked the previous era, and more of an economic calculation, as China uses its BRI projects to consolidate and expand capitalism ‘with Chinese characteristics’ (Khalili 2021: 6). While the Silk Road creates visions of Eurasian and global connectivity, where countries and civilizations are aligned into modes of cooperation for the apparent win–win dividends that come from ‘mutual respect’– the so-called ‘shared destiny’ of Belt and Road cooperation – these imaginaries also harbour new forms of power within a language of friendship, dialogue and cooperation.

Backed by the Chinese government’s programmes known as ‘Going Out’ strategy and later on through the Belt and Road Initiative project, Chinese companies and banks have in recent years significantly expanded their involvement in the global market of hydropower. Chinese capital fuels the main investments in big, medium size and small dams at the global level, including the Western Balkans, which is also indicative of broader geopolitical trends towards increased South–South cooperation and a larger role for China on the world stage. According to Yifu Lin and Yan Wang (2017), China’s dams provide developing countries with much needed and clean sources of power, while Chinese SOEs make money. As demonstrated later through the example of the Upper Horizons project, this ‘win–win’ scenario does not examine closely who benefits financially and materially from Chinese investment, and how the ‘winning’ might well result in social, political and environmental losses.

HYDROPOWER DAMS AS ‘A NATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART’?

During the twentieth century, ‘the hydroelectric



■ The Zalomka, the Nevesinjsko Polje, May 2022.

dam has become an icon of a century of electrification consonant with imperialist themes of modern progress and enlightenment, national uplift, and the triumph of man over nature’ (Haiven 2013: 69). Following decolonization, megadams served as highly visible, spectacular statements that ‘rendered material the trope of nation building: to erect a megadam was literally to concretize the postcolonial nation’s modernity, prosperity, and autonomy’ (Nixon 2011: 166). The Soviet Union and China highlighted their dam construction

■ The Nevesinjsko Polje, near the village of Biograd, May 2022.





■ The Zalomka, the Nevesinjsko Polje, May 2022.

as evidence of their engineering prowess and domination of nature. Dams also provided massive collective projects thought capable of unifying diverse and factionalized post-colonial polities such as India and Egypt. However, as Nixon posits, the mega-dam projects that were integral to the ‘glamorous hydrological regimes of independence’ in many post-colonial nations and served to concretize the idea that developing nations are ‘catching up’, depended on vast loans (typically from the World Bank, the United States or the Soviet Union) that shackled new nations with high levels of debt, while also unleashing torrents of political indebtedness to the first- and second-world superpowers (167). Today, dams continue to animate the imagination. Nixon sees the global phenomenon of megadam fetishism as a kind of ‘national performance art’ (156). Independent of its utility, the megadam instantiates ‘the monumentality of national modernity’ and a country’s power to alter the world and move its people (157). Xi Jinping’s recent tour of China’s most important technological ‘triumph over nature’, the Three

Gorges Dam, in the spring of 2018, illustrates the point well. As Julia Strauss notes, in this carefully staged performance, ‘The achievements and aspirations of individuals (in this case technical workers and engineers at the dam) are conflated with the Chinese nation, and both are identified with the Chinese Communist Party as embodied by Xi in the China Dream’ (2021: 414).

While China’s mega-dams have come to symbolize its rapidly expanding sphere of influence across the global south, they have also become a topic of global concern, due to deep ecological and humanitarian worries. *The Wall Street Journal* has reported recently that many of China’s Belt and Road infrastructure projects are plagued with construction flaws (Dube and Steinhauser 2023). The giant Coca Codo Synclair hydroelectric plant, Ecuador’s biggest power source, is a case in point. While the enthusiasm of so-called emerging economies for ecologically disastrous mega-projects has garnered much criticism, the social and environmental consequences of implementing Chinese infrastructure projects in the Western

Balkans, including effects that are unintended and unanticipated, have slipped under the radar. The Upper Horizons HPP system on the Zalomka River, which will connect karst fields of different altitude by collecting and tunnelling the Zalomka water for energy production, is a case in point here.

While the proponents of the project, including the Government of Republika Srpska on whose territory the project is situated, highlight its supposed benefits, critics have raised concerns. For instance, in the Balkans institutional capacity to implement or enforce environmental impact assessments (EIAs) is often low, technical guidelines limited, stakeholder participation inadequate and social impacts ignored. The Upper Horizons scheme as a whole has never been subject to either a strategic environmental assessment or an EIA, although an EIA was carried out for the Dabar hydropower plant in 2012. The potential impacts of the project are debated and not well understood due to the complexity of the karst underground but may be extremely far-reaching. It is likely the project would decrease the flow of the river Neretva, whose delta in Croatia is an important agricultural area already suffering from salination. As in some other locations across the Global South (including conservation sites), where Chinese investors often make previously inaccessible resources accessible, this project will have detrimental and irreversible effects on some of the country's most valuable and intact rivers, in this case hotspots for Europe's freshwater biodiversity. It will endanger the water flow to the sinking rivers of the Dinaric karst – Buna, Bunica and Bregava – that are crucial to towns like Blagaj and Stolac as well as being home to protected species.

As the editors of *Nature Performed* note, “nature” – biotic and a-biotic life intertwined – is “naturally” seen as a co-performance of a number of different, interacting and evolving individuals, species and processes – including human beings’ (Szerszynski *et al.* 2003: 3). They recognize ecosystems as performative in that ‘certain phenomena only exist in the doing of them – that they have to be continually performed to exist at all’ (2–3). Rather than approaching the Zalomka as a site of vibrant

social and ecological sustenance, the proponents of the Upper Horizons project see the river merely as water to be harnessed for electricity through the technics of hydroelectric dams. While the opposition to the project is gaining momentum among the communities in the Federation (downstream from the Upper Horizons HPP), the communities in the Republika Srpska (located upstream) so far have not been vocal in raising their concerns or voicing any opposition to the project. This despite the fact that a large part of Nevesinjsko Polje will be submerged once the Nevesinje dam is constructed. Here, as in the countries of the Global South, national governments remain key, alongside the private sector, in propelling dam projects forward despite environmental, social and financial challenges. Meanwhile, performative presentations of the unbreakable bonds between the two nations tend to place emphasis on building trust and security, to reduce friction that arises from heterogenous and unequal encounters ushered by the arrival of Belt and Road.<sup>4</sup> The Republika Srpska Government represents the dam as a sustainable project that would provide clean energy to the country. It also argues that it could be built in a way that would develop the region and minimize the negative effects. Crucially, the Republika Srpska Government frames this infrastructural project as of the national interest – as the common good of the national society (the Republika Srpska), set off from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the international environment, making it more difficult for dam-affected residents and their advocates, both in the Republika Srpska and the Federation, to voice their concerns to the state through protest and social movements.

If material infrastructures could be modes of imagining the national community and producing/performing state forms, as Nixon has suggested, then it could be argued that the Upper Horizons infrastructural project has come to play a vital role in the attempted rekindling of the identity of both the regime and the Republika Srpska entity (especially in the context of RS's latest aspirations for a greater degree of autonomy and perhaps even a secession from the federal state). This massive

<sup>4</sup> For cogent readings of the performance/state power nexus, see Ball 2022 and Werry 2011.

investment in hydro-infrastructure, co-funded by the Chinese companies, dovetails with the political rebalancing of a political system in crisis, turning dam-builders into nation-builders. As long as the ruling party delivers economic progress and guarantees stability, its



■ The construction of a derivation tunnel for HPP Dabar, the Zalomka near Biograd, the Nevesinjsko Polje, May 2022.

<sup>5</sup> There are many other examples where the attempts to defend the region's rivers took the form of physical confrontation and violence from the police and private security, for example at the rivers Zeljeznica, Kruščica and Neretvica in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the Stara Planina area of Serbia, the Bukovica and Bare Kraljske cases in Montenegro and the Lumbardhi case in Kosovo. People who took part in these struggles have often faced arrests, lawsuits and fines.

monopoly on political power should in theory and in practice remain incontestable. Dams and other hydro-infrastructure are seen as vital in ensuring this continued success, implying that state activity does not merely reflect function, but also the ability to project authority through symbolism that makes it legible, meaningful and efficacious. While this hydrological imaginary does not, however, take us as far away from the politics of the land, it still brings a new metaphorical and formal register into play, refracting practices of nation-building in a novel light.

#### ECOLOGICAL POPULISM: ACTS OF RESISTANCE IN DEFENCE OF HOME

No other environmental issue has attracted so much public opposition across southeast Europe as the expansion of dams. This resistance has taken many forms: from grassroots political action by everyday people in defence of the places they call home – via mass grassroots movements comprised of affected villagers and their urban kin, ecologists and nature lovers, and citizens

mobilized through online platforms – to legal actions on behalf of rivers and public campaigns such as 'Save the Blue Heart of Europe', which has been coordinated by the international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) Riverwatch and EuroNatur and implemented jointly with partner organizations in the Balkan countries. Public resistance has been successful in stopping the construction of projects on the Vrbas, Una and Neretva (Konjic) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the Mavrovo National Park in North Macedonia and on the Vjosa in Albania (Gallop and Rallev 2022: 12). A documentary film entitled *Blue Heart: The fight for Europe's last wild rivers* (2018), directed by Britton Cailluette, documents some of these efforts, such as the battle for the largest undammed river in Europe, Albania's Vjosa. The film highlights the women of Kruščica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, who participated in one of the first well-known mobilizations against the building of the small hydroelectric dams in the central Bosnian village Kruščica. The women barricaded a local bridge, preventing the entry of construction machinery until, in the early hours of 25 August 2017, special police broke their barricade by arresting and beating the unarmed women. This act of brutal violence helped garner broader support for their cause, and it eventually led to the suspension of the construction of the two micro dams planned at this location<sup>5</sup>.

Unlike the return of barricades at Cairo's Tahrir, Madrid's Puerta del Sol, Athens's Syntagma, Kiev's Maidan and Istanbul's Taksim Square, which provide some of the most symbolically charged sites for protest and oppositional political claims in recent years, these environmental protests and blockades often take place in remote locations cut off from public view or photography, and difficult to reach for ordinary citizens. As a long-standing repertoire of collective action, barricades have served both as an emblem of and metaphor for resistance, and their material recurrence throughout the past several centuries has come to signify self-sacrifice, insurgent heroism, martyrdom and the politics of antagonism. However, the spontaneous uptake of the barricade as a structure by the brave women of Kruščica perhaps has less to do with the particular political, rhetorical and





■ A signboard for the construction site for a derivation tunnel for HPP Dabar, the Zalomka near Biograd, the Nevesinjsko Polje, May 2022.

aesthetic traditions established around it, than a politics of self-defence in which everyday people act politically to defend their homes. Perhaps barricades here ‘embody the ways in which something of a structure emerges when bodies that are moved by or are beside themselves with indignation, desire, grief, or desperation act in concert’ (Ertür 2016: 101). As Başak Ertür writes,

What moves us to collective action, even when it is most unexpected, is the felt necessity to reclaim anew a world that fails to contain the ecstatic dimensions of our being, a world that abandons us to our private political irrelevance, if not destitution. (Ertür 2016: 118)

As the example of the ‘brave women of Kruščica’ demonstrates, resistance to contemporary infrastructures of invasion requires standing in place, in their community land, and insisting on their prior and continuing relationships to the wider resources that the land held communally provides: the river, the forest and the multispecies kin relations threatened by those infrastructures.<sup>6</sup> This and similar blockades and encampments slow and disrupt flows of extractive capital while also strengthening

alternative relations needed for maintenance of life. Holding projects in suspension is a key tactic of communal resistance but, as Shirin Rai reminds us, ‘anticipating harm to the environment in which people live their everyday lives can in itself be depleting’ (forthcoming: 2).<sup>7</sup> ‘Transformatory imagination in times of crises can also be a burden’, she elaborates (3). To bring it into being requires not only mobilizing to stop harm from happening but also ‘a democratic space for participation’ and ‘time for taking action under conditions of threat as well as existing social inequalities’ (ibid.). Dam building on Kruščica has not started yet. In the meantime, the local women continue to carry the triple burden of doing paid, unpaid and community work of struggle to preserve their sense of well-being and of their traditions of the good life.

The struggle of this community, which foregrounds the material connection between the health of their river and the future they want to inhabit, and the future in which they want future generations to be able to live, shows that what is in dispute on the ground is not only the dam’s construction, but also

<sup>7</sup> In her book *Depletion: The human cost of care and the struggles to reverse it*, Shirin Rai (forthcoming) explores the idea of depletion through social reproduction and anticipatory harm through examining the story of communities of the Xolobeni region in the Wild Coast region of South Africa, whose world is now threatened by mining.

<sup>6</sup> On rivers as subjects of rights, see Werry 2019.

■ The author and his niece Mihaela Lažetić, the village of Biograd, the Nevesinjsko Polje, May 2022.



different versions of sustainability. The Kruščica campaigners are not idealizing their way of life. They want ‘development’ – but on their own terms and within their own frame. If we consider these women as well as other communities opposing dams – whose stories remain untold, invisibilized – not as protestors but as protectors of other life projects and ways of life, we would see in them embodied performers of other modes of sustainability. These other visions of sustainability remain largely invisible within the aesthetic-ideological coordinates the dominant social order imposes.

The campaign of this community to protect its everyday way of life brings to mind an example of the artistic figuration of environmental protests, an impressive mural that was painted on a decommissioned dam on the Baščica River in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the summer of 2017. This fifty-foot tall mural also appears in the final shot in the *Blue Heart* documentary, whose premiere took place against the spectacular backdrop of the Idbar dam wall. Painted by campaigners from across the country to protest the more than 300 planned hydroelectric dams in the region, the mural portrays a giant woman – whose hands clutch a sledgehammer raised over her head – preparing to smash the dam.

The bottom of the mural features an inscription: ‘Sloboda Rijekama!’ (Free the rivers!). Asking us to imagine the eventual destruction of the concretized infrastructures of hydropower, the mural is reminiscent of many narratives of dams cracking or bursting that appear throughout global and postcolonial hydrofictions (Deckard 2021), as well as eco-protests such as Earth First!’s ‘Crack the Dam’ intervention.

In 1987, the Earth First! Collective simulated a massive crack on the face of the Glines Canyon Dam, which sits on the Elwha River in the United States. In this instance, the crack was mimetic, suggesting ‘that the real pressure of water behind the dam *could* overwhelm the dam’ (Standing 2012: 154). In contrast, the hole at the bottom of the Idbar dam mural is not mimetic but real, emphasizing the power of water itself to sabotage dams over time; it invokes the finitude of dams as well as the power of rivers to escape the limits of human environment making. With its depiction of a woman raising a sledgehammer ready to deal the first blow, the mural invokes the power of the people – local neighbours, farmers, and fishermen – acting jointly with rivers ‘to refuse the hydrocolonial power relations concretized in the hydroelectric dam’ (Deckard 2021: 146).

In all of these cases, everyday people took up grassroots political action in defence of the ecological settings they call home, ‘against elites who would treat those homes as appropriate sacrifices for the sake of profit and progress’ (Koutnik 2021: 46). They had realized they could not place their trust solely in prevailing institutions or the benevolence of elites to protect their homes, broadly conceived. Their struggles against the economic norms and institutions that threatened them with invasion and destruction inspired the performance of a broader political resistance to the destruction of homes as such. These rivers have emerged here as sites of new kinds of political friction and popular resistance, which cannot be reduced to the issues of nation, citizenship and class. As Ivan Rajković writes, ‘water here functions as what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) called an empty signifier, a nexus in creating an alternative universality’ (2020). For Laclau and Mouffe, notes the author, ‘populist mobilization

starts from no essential entities, such as ethnicity or class. Rather, “chains of equivalence” are formed between different groups who find a common enemy to fight and a common sense to gather around (Laclau 2005)’ (2020). Seen in this light, a pluralist and egalitarian populist politics to counter developmentalist policies that threaten to destroy the habitats and dwellings we call home could be certainly seen as a part of a wider wave of ‘ecological populism’ (Koutnik 2021). What we are witnessing in the Balkans in the present moment are environmental struggles that start to generalize other social frontlines. Only time will tell whether these fugitive democratic experiments will be able to generate the first cohesive, transethnic social movement Bosnia and Herzegovina have seen in more than twenty-five years since the end of the 1992–5 war, and whether various communities across the country, and across the ethno-national and administrative dividing lines, will mobilize in defence of the Zalomka River and its tributaries.

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