



Local Resistance in Environmental Struggles: The Case of Zall-Gjoçaj, Albania

Event Analysis

Philipp Freund

PhD-Candidate, University of Graz
philipp.freund@edu.uni-graz.at

Pavjo Gjini

PhD-Candidate, University of Graz
giinied@hotmail.com

Christopher Lam Cham Kee

PhD-Candidate, University of Graz
christopher.lamchamkee@gmail.com

Diana Malaj

PhD-Candidate, University of Graz
diana_malaj@hotmail.com

Sophia Schönthaler

PhD-Candidate, University of Graz
sophia.schoenthaler@edu.uni-graz.at

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2021, 9(1), 65-77

DOI 10.25364/02.9:2022.1.5



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

Local Resistance in Environmental Struggles: The Case of Zall-Gjoçaj, Albania

Philipp Freund*, Pavjo Gjini*, Christopher Lam Cham Kee*, Diana Malaj*, Sophia Schönthaler* *

Keywords: environmental activism, Zall- Gjoçaj, local actors, multinational corporations, hydropower plants

Early into the Covid-19 pandemic, in the spring of 2020, a long-standing struggle over the slated construction of a hydropower plant (HPP) in a part of the Zall- Gjoçaj region covered by the Lurë-Mali i Dejës National Park (the National Park) in mountainous north-eastern Albania came to a head. On 18 March, while the country was under a strict national lockdown, an excavator used in the construction of a controversial dam was set on fire in the remote Flim Canyon, far from the capital. Another truck had been blown up a couple of weeks before, evidence of the rising tensions surrounding the hydropower project.¹ In both cases, the saboteurs were careful not to hurt anyone and no workers were on site, but the message was clear: "No machines are welcome inside the national park."

By that point, the local community had already been campaigning to raise awareness about the situation among public authorities, the public, and the media for over a year. With the pandemic's emergency measures, pending court hearings, and heavy machinery being moved into the national park, the situation felt increasingly tense. Regular blasts opening the access road for the construction of the contested HPP bore witness to the attempt to "occupy and steal [their] drinking water," as the community puts it.

*Philipp Freund is a PhD-Candidate at the Centre of Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz (CSEES). He holds an MA in International Peace and Security from King's College London and a BA in International Relations from Webster University Vienna.

Pavjo Gjini is a PhD-Candidate at the CSEES. He holds a MA in Political Theory and a BA in Political Science at the University of Tirana.

Christopher Lam Cham Kee is a PhD-Candidate at the CSEES. He holds a MA in Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg, and a BA in Political Science at McGill University.

Diana Malaj is a PhD-Candidate at the CSEES. She holds a MA in Criminal Law and a BA in Law at the University of Tirana.

Sophia Schönthaler is a PhD-Candidate at the CSEES and a Junior Researcher at EURAC Research, Bolzano/Bozen. She holds a MA in International Relations from the University of Bologna, a BA in Political Science and a BA in Cultural and Social Anthropology from the University of Vienna.

¹ Reporter.al. 2020. Digjet makineria e firmës që po ndërton HEC-et në Zall Gjoçaj, shoqërohen banorët. *Reporter.al*, 3 March 2020.

To understand the escalation of events described above and their significance, as well as the activists' struggle, it is necessary to delve into the context and history of the activists' struggles over the HPP project in the National Park. Located in north-eastern Albania, the park is home to a host of rare and endangered animal and plant species including brown bears, lynx, wolfs, pine martens, roe deer, and golden eagles, as well as virtually untouched river and lake ecosystems.²

Albania gets roughly 95% of its domestic energy production from hydropower.³ However, since it lacks pumped storage, excess electricity must be sold cheaply to neighboring countries during peak rainfall seasons in spring and fall, while additional electricity must be imported at high prices in summer and winter. Therefore, the International Renewable Energy Agency's March 2021 report on Albania has warned that additional hydropower plants are not conducive to increasing Albania's energy security.⁴

In addition, the impact of climate change means that the region will see less rain and snowfall, leading to less water in Albanian rivers, with estimates predicting a decrease of up to 20% by 2050.⁵ However, the hydropower industry is deeply entrenched in Albania's economy and politics, and projects are often mired in allegations of fraud, corruption, and abuse of office. This, combined with the fact that new HPPs are often built in pristine natural ecosystems, helps to explain why they are such a controversial and loaded issue in the country.

One of the contested HPPs by the name of Zais would now be located inside the National Park were it not for a controversial change to the park's borders on 28 February 2022, long after the construction was finished. The water which flows through it is the sole source of drinking water for the local community, as well being vital for irrigation and livestock; instead of its natural course, it flows through a system of pipes, making it inaccessible for those relying on it.

Residents have therefore been protesting the proposed plant for several years, claiming that their livelihoods are at stake and that construction work has already done irreparable damage to the environment. They insist that the area, especially the National Park, must remain intact. Locals have also filed multiple court cases and complaints against the companies and government officials, including with the Special Court Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), citing abuse of office, forgery of documents, and unlawful construction in a protected area. However, the wheels of justice turn slowly in Albania, where courts face years-long backlogs of files. Meanwhile, construction work on the Zais project concluded.

² Citizens Channel. 2020. "Bukuria e panjohur e Lurës nën kërcënimin e HEC-eve". *Citizens Channel*, 6 May 2020.

³ Irena, *Renewables Readiness Assessment, The Republic of Albania*. (accessed 9 March 2022).

⁴ Irena, *Renewables*.

⁵ Irena, *Renewables*.

The following analysis seeks to demonstrate the changing dynamics of the resistance against hydropower projects in Zall-Gjoçaj over the past years from an activist perspective. It builds on interviews with members of the local community and activists, on newspaper articles, and on legal documents. Two of the authors, Mr. Gjini and Ms. Malaj, are themselves part of the activist group in Zall-Gjoçaj. Two overarching questions orient this paper, namely: 1. What mechanisms have been visible in the activities of groups opposed to the project; and 2. How did these activities and mechanisms evolve within the context of the pandemic's emergency measures? Through these questions, the context of the hydropower plants in Albania, the dynamics of corruption that have characterized it, and the specific interactions around Zall-Gjoçaj's case will be mapped out.

The construction of hydropower plants in Albania: the historical and political context

Since 2007, the country has seen an increase in the construction of private hydropower plants. This broader trend in the Western Balkans region has been further accelerated by an EU directive to foster renewable energy production.⁶ Small HPPs cover approximately 19.5% of the national demand⁷, but for local communities, the production does not make up for the damages caused to the environment and their livelihoods.⁸

Given the rise of HPPs in Albania, private companies and state authorities have intensified their collaboration, which has deepened concerns about potential corruption. In 2011, the close relationship between HPP companies and officials even affected national politics; the Vice-Prime Minister at that time, Ilir Meta, was caught on video with the ex-minister of the economy, Dritan Prifti, demanding a bribe to approve the construction of a HPP.⁹ This videotape incited a major demonstration against corruption which led to the killing of four protesters by the national guard.

Despite such instances of corruption coming to light, charting the relationship between HPP companies and officials remains a challenge. Local activists claim that public authorities are not transparent in providing the exact number of licenses given for such projects. In 2019, the competent public authorities held that there were 391 signed contracts and preliminary agreements. In reality, due to exemptions from certain licensing requirements for HPPs smaller than 2MW, the total number was 714. When Artan Rama, the journalist leading this investigation, requested this information from public authorities, they refused under the pretext of state secrecy. This refusal can be traced back to electoral politics since most

⁶ [Renewable Energy Directive Revision of Directive \(EU\) 2018/2001](#) (accessed 9 March 2022).

⁷ Eco-Albania. [The economic and social impact of small hydropower in Albania. Justification of incentives system.](#) (accessed 9 March 2022).

⁸ Euractiv. 2020. [Activists win battle, not war, against hydropower in the Western Balkans.](#) *Euractiv*, 6 October 2020.

⁹ Euractiv. 2011. [Albanian deputy PM quits following videotaped bribe scandal.](#) *Euractiv*, 18 January 2011.

licenses were given in election years, raising the reasonable suspicion that political or monetary support was expected from the licensee companies in the electoral process.¹⁰

While close collaboration between private investors and public authorities has increased over time, local communities have started mobilizing and protesting the constructions of HPPs. The lack of transparency and public consultation, as well as the damage caused to locals' livelihoods has led to numerous protests and contestations.¹¹ It could be argued that no issue in Albania has caused more protests than the construction of HPPs. However, despite the dissent, most HPP projects went ahead.

As this phenomenon has developed for over a decade, some environmental activists and representatives of local communities have managed to form environmental organizations and incite movements that try to tackle the problem more systematically.¹² Two notable examples of such movements are the "Do not touch Valbona" initiative¹³ and the the "Save the Blue Heart of Europe" coalition¹⁴.

The "Do not touch Valbona" initiative opposed the construction of a series of HPPs in the valley of Valbona, which is a major alpine tourism destination in Albania. While the initiative successfully organized roundtable discussions, community meetings, and protests, it did not manage to halt construction. Thus, it brought the case to court. In the summer of 2021, the Albanian supreme court ruled in favor of the local community and prohibited the production of energy by the HPP, which was already operational by then. The situation is still developing as the company does not obey the court's ruling, and private and public executors cannot force the company to halt its operations.¹⁵

"Save the Blue Heart of Europe" is a national and international coalition of NGOs, environmental activists, scientists, media personalities and celebrities. Together, they aim to prevent the construction of HPPs along Vjosa river, the last wild river of Europe. The national government has declaratively supported the campaign, although not through its policies. Thus, caution and lack of trust towards the authorities remains, and the campaign is still ongoing.

The case of Zall-Gjoçaj

The opposition to the construction of the HPP in this case can be seen as illustrative for the broader struggle against new HPPs in Albania. It is characterised by its

¹⁰ Porta Vendore.al. 2019. [Hidrocentralet, rreth dy herë më shumë](#). *Porta Vendore.al*, 4 August 2019.

¹¹ Eco-Albania. [Water Conflict Study](#) (accessed 9 March 2022).

¹² CDInstitute. [Citizen Movements and environmental protection in Albania](#). (accessed 9 March 2022).

¹³ WWF. 2016. [Albanians rally against hydropowerplants in the Valbona National Park](#). *WWF*, 4 November 2016.

¹⁴ Save the Blue Heart of Europe. [The Campaign](#) (accessed 9 March 2022).

¹⁵ Reporter.al. 2022. [HEC-et në Valbonë: Qeveria bën një sy qorr ndaj vendimit të Gjykatës së Lartë](#). *Reporter.al*, 20 January 2022.

active local community that has been engaged in the struggle for almost four years. Even during the pandemic's emergency measures, it has deployed a myriad of resistance methods to protect the water on which the locals' livelihoods and unique ecosystems depend.

For the past 30 years, the area of Zall-Gjoçaj has suffered from mass emigration related to the lack of infrastructure, public services, and investments in agriculture. Many parts of Zall-Gjoçaj do not have cellular networks or internet access, and the only way to access the area is via a single, badly maintained road. In addition, despite the authorities' repeated promises, there is still no public water supply in the area.

The struggle before the Covid-19 pandemic

To better understand the ongoing struggle, one needs to look at the National Park's origins. In 1996, the Zall-Gjoçaj National Park was established to protect the area's high biodiversity and natural monuments, which attract a considerable number of visitors yearly. In 2018, it was merged with the adjacent Lura National Park to form the Lurë-Mali i Dejës National Park, guaranteeing its status as a Protected Area of Second Category. Under Albanian laws, this prohibits human exploitation, intensive activities in the park, the use of heavy machinery, urbanization, and the construction of HPPs.¹⁶

However, approximately a month before the merger guaranteeing this stronger protection, on 3 October 2018, the Council of Ministers and the National Council of the Territory issued two construction permits for a complex of two HPPs, one of them inside the National Park. Ever since, the private company Seka Hydropower has been at the centre of these developments. The company is administered by Albanians but financed by Italian capital. It had already received the concessionary permit for the HPPs in 2013. Between the concession and construction period, there have been reports of falsified documents on the amount of water that the river contains, manipulated public hearings, and community consent being propped up with the signatures of individuals who are not locals and thus not impacted by the planned project.¹⁷

The local community's mobilization against the HPP construction began at the end of 2018. They reached out to environmentalists, NGOs, representatives of Albanian communities facing similar situations, and national media outlets to raise their concerns and garner support. To obtain more detailed information about the planned HPPs, the community organized two meetings with Seka Hydropower's administrator, Bardhyl Muceku. During these encounters, the company guaranteed that the locals would only benefit from the project as only a small percentage of the river's water would be used. Furthermore, new roads, water and electricity

¹⁶Law nr. 81/2017. *"For protected areas"* (accessed 8 February 2022).

¹⁷Nyje. 2019. Protesta e Zall-Gjoçaj: HEC-et kapak varri për zonën tonë!. *Nyje*, 17 November 2019.

infrastructure, as well as jobs were promised. However, none of these came to fruition.

The local community was also denied access to official information related to the construction projects' processes by Seka Hydropower and the authorities. With construction beginning in the area while being unable to secure additional meetings with representatives from the company and public institutions, the affected people decided to organize. A group of locals and seasonal residents met with journalists, lawyers, and environmentalists to raise awareness on the issue and ask for help. They also joined protests against the construction of hydropower plants in Albania to raise their concerns together with other affected communities.¹⁸

Amongst the first actions of the local community was the attempt to stop construction machines from reaching the construction site by putting up a tent at the only access route, in Flym Canyon. This canyon has a historical significance for the residence since it is remembered as the location where foreign armies, such as the Serbs', had been stopped. Appeals to this history were used by the local community to draw parallels in accusing the company of being an "invader" and "conquistadors".

Despite the efforts to stop the construction of the HPP, the company continued its work. In a similar vein, the local municipality also did not address the locals' concerns, although a request to stop the construction was submitted to all the relevant authorities signed by 178 members of the community.¹⁹ In response, the local community intensified its protests from the autumn of 2019. Representatives of other Albanian communities facing similar issues joined the protests. Activists pressured the subcontractors and their workers on-site to force them to leave work and go home. In fact, several of these protests ended with the workers leaving for the remainder of the day, a minor success in the eyes of the local community. Because of this intervention, police officers threatened some local activists with prosecution.

Meanwhile, representatives of the community reached out to NGOs in Tirana. After some initial setbacks, the community encountered ATA, an informal youth group in the city of Kamza, where many former inhabitants of Zall-Gjoçaj had migrated. ATA provided legal help and assisted in finding a lawyer capable of handling the case. These activists also received a supporting grant from a consortium of three foundations financed by the Swiss embassy which they used to finance their activities. Over time, ATA and the local activists established a close collaboration through their activism and common interests.

¹⁸ Reporter.al. 2019. *Dhjetra qytetarë kundër HEC-ve: Kjo është luftë për jetën e fëmijëve*. Reporter.al, 17 July 2019.

¹⁹ Citizens Channel. 2019. *Reportazh: "Matjanët që u bashkuan në mbrojtje të natyrës"*. Citizens Channel, 18 November 2019.

The local community continued its resistance and appealed to the local and central institutions, but it did not receive any response. Nevertheless, the pressure created by the community did not go unnoticed. In an attempt to calm the situation, Zamir Dedej, the head of the Public Agency for the Protection of Protected Areas, made a media appearance; he claimed that if the HPPs were to create problems for the local community, he would support the suspension of their permits.²⁰ He also emphasized that the development of tourism was the priority in the area, thus superseding any projects going against such interests. Despite these claims, Dedej did not take any action.

Agron Malaj, the mayor of Mat, a municipality where Zall-Gjoçaj is located, has publicly stated a similar position on the construction project. He has defended it by claiming that the construction of the HPP would not affect the locals' water supply, as only a tiny amount of water would be used, echoing Seka Hydropower's earlier claims.²¹ However, his statements were not corroborated.

The vice mayor, Myslym Zeneli, for his part, opted for a different line of argumentation, saying that the construction of HPP did not affect anyone since the area is abandoned.²² Interestingly, he is meant to represent the people in that very area, which would raise questions about how he was elected in the first place. As for the private company, they hardly appeared anywhere in public.

Amid the pandemic and beyond

The protests and activities of local activists, ongoing since 2018, were born and took place on the streets, but with the pandemic the situation changed dramatically. In March 2020, the government of Albania declared a national lockdown to fight the pandemic. Everything besides essential services was closed. Nobody was allowed to go outside, except under strict procedures and for a limited time on certain days of the week. Protests and assemblies were banned, and work was not allowed. The courts were closed as well. Despite the national lockdown, the construction of the Zais hydropower plant continued.

For the local community, the national lockdown marked a new stage, as protests on the streets or on site were prohibited, and court cases were on hold. Under these new circumstances, they had to adapt their tactics and strategies of resistance to the new situation.

The legal struggle

Due to the pandemic, the courts were closed from early March on. Five lawsuits brought by the local activists against Seka Hydropower, the local municipality of

²⁰ Klan Plus. *Zall Gjoçaj, "lufta" për ujën – Përtej në Klan Plus (10 nëntor 2019)* (accessed 9 March 2022).

²¹ Leviz Albania. 2020. *Devijimi i lumenjve të Matit për interesa të HEC-ve dënon me thatësi fshatrat malorë*. *Leviz Albania*, 9 July 2020.

²² 2020. *#LevizAlbania per #NAD2020*. *Leviz Albania*, 22 October 2020.

Mat, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, the Agency of Protected Areas, and the heads of these public institutions were suspended. In May, while the company was continuing its construction work inside the park, and most businesses were allowed to reopen, courts remained closed except for urgent cases; the cases brought by the opponents of the Zais HPP were not considered as such. In June, the court decided against a safeguard measure and did not stop the construction on site. Open cases in the court of appeal were left suspended for more than a year, leaving the community with no legal recourse in its struggle.

In this situation, and with the construction works close to finishing, the community of Zall-Gjoçaj decided to organize a protest in June 2021. Taking place in front of the Administrative Appeal Court, it demanded the case to be processed as soon as possible. The activists named their protest "For whom the bell tolls" to emphasize the feeling of emergency in the face of a dying nature in the national park. Fittingly, the protest was accompanied by the ringing of animal bells. The court reacted and processed the case immediately after.

As the court's decision drew near, a ten-day online campaign involving activists, NGOs, and artists called upon the judges to side with the local community and the environment. This campaign managed to attract the attention of a broader audience which saw public personalities and activists showing solidarity with the local community. This was also accompanied by many national media appearances in support of the activists' cause. Another symbolic action with banners in front of the Administrative Appeal Court was staged on 10 November 2021, when the court's decision was being anticipated. The court decided in favor of the inhabitants, confirming the court's first instance decision which had revoked the energy production license of the concessionaire company.

The courts' decision was met with great enthusiasm by the activists, environmentalists, NGOs, and citizens who had been following the case. The community was praised as an example of how resistance is built, and justice is sought and found. However, the company did not obey the court's decision regarding the construction in the national park; on the contrary, it continued operations in its HPP and continued producing and selling electricity. Different institutions, private executors, and the public entity for regulating the Albanian energy sector started to dodge the responsibility of forcing the company to stop producing energy and free the river.

While seeking the execution of the court's ruling from one institution to another, the local community organized another protest in mid-January 2022. This one aimed to force the company to "free the river", so the local community symbolically freed the water flow by blocking the water inlet of the HPP with a plastic tarp.

Another legislative process, initiated by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, threatened the community by changing the National Park's borders. Approved on 28 December 2020 by the Albanian National Council of the Territory and ratified on 26 January 2022, this change of borders shrunk the National Park's area by 954

hectares. Significantly, the border change excluded the site of the Zais HPP from the protected area. Thus, instead of addressing the issue pertaining to a HPP being located within the National Park despite its protected status, the authorities cut a portion out of it.

This redrawing of borders was questioned on legal grounds, since the Council of Ministers, which operates under the directive of the Prime Minister, failed to cover several bases. For example, the process was not made transparent to the public, and prior consultations with experts were not carried out. Most importantly, the local communities which are most affected by such changes were not consulted either. In fact, out of the 28 municipalities that were affected, 26 were left unaware of this change being underway.²³

Direct action

In parallel with the legal actions, the locals organized direct actions on site. At the beginning of the pandemic, many of those involved felt disarmed by the emergency health measures. Thus, they sought different ways of getting their cause noticed. On the night of 19 March 2020, one of the construction company's excavators was blown up, after making sure that no worker was on site. Around the same period, three other trucks met the same fate, eventually forcing the subcontracting company to leave and be substituted by another company from Seka Hydropower.

Once the government relaxed its anti-pandemic measures in June, environmentalists called a protest in Tirana on 24 June. There they were joined by representatives of the local community of Zall-Gjoçaj, activists from the ATA group, environmental activists, and others. Even though the number of participants was small, and they mainly followed the distance rules, the police intervened and arrested 13 participants, stopping the protest with the argument that there is a normative act in power banning public assemblies. Meanwhile, construction on site continued.

In July 2020, ATA organized a roundtable with environmentalists, professors of natural sciences, experts, activists, and NGOs to recognize the ecological values of the park. ATA activists and locals' representatives also started to participate in environmental conferences to present their struggles. At that time, the local community of Zall-Gjoçaj got involved in environmental protests and gatherings to protect other rivers in Albania, emphasizing the need for all similar communities to come together and show solidarity. Field research was done in October to document the damage done to the environment. During one of the visits, the group found evidence that the concessionaire company was exploiting 100% of the river to produce energy, not leaving water for the inhabitants as is provided by law.

²³ Nyje. 2022. *Për kë bie Kumbaro? Të pavërtetat e ndryshimit të kufijve të zonave të mbrojtura*. Nyje, 28 January 2022.

Despite all the pending legal cases against the company, it managed to obtain the license to produce energy in September 2020. When entering its construction site, one of the first things that strikes the eye are two billboards on the dam stating: “For the inhabitants, the hydropower plant has built 50 km of car road; 4 bridges; 14 km of electricity network; 8 km of drinkable water supply,” and “The hydropower plant has built: roads that pass on the porch of each house; drinkable water supply and irrigation water infrastructures; a new electricity grid.” These promises have yet to be fulfilled; roads have only been built to facilitate construction, ignoring areas used by the inhabitants. Meanwhile, no other infrastructure has been provided for the locals. Ironically, these signs also represent the only form of communication with the local community.

15 January 2022 marked a turning point, as the company’s owner made a public appearance. Prior to that, he had only communicated through his lawyers in legal proceedings. However, following the protests, he started appearing in media interviews, accusing certain activists from the local community of demanding money in the initial phase of the project and denying claims that his HPP was not contributing to the wellbeing of the community. However, he did not respond to a journalist's questions on why his company was not obeying the court’s decision.

Online turn

Besides the legal and direct actions, an emphasis was put on social media work to address the arbitrariness of the anti-Covid measures; the company was continuing its construction work despite the community’s protests and thanks to the courts remaining closed. An online campaign, which started in the summer of May 2020, was organized through the official Facebook and Instagram pages of the local community. It aimed to demonstrate and denounce these uneven consequences of the national lockdown.

While there were still restrictions on public assemblies, a hybrid form of online and direct action was organized in front of the special court against corruption and organized crime in February 2021. A small number of activists gathered in front of the court to submit a new lawsuit against the heads of all the local and central institutions related to the case for being involved in organized corruption. A zoom meeting link was handed out beforehand for other activists and supporters of the cause to join the action online. The zoom screen was projected in front of the court while the online protests and speeches were heard through loudspeakers, denouncing the authorities’ corruption, and supporting Zall-Gjoçaj case.

In the summer, another campaign was launched, this time as an online discourse articulating the importance of national parks. The movement sought to highlight the importance of the Lurë-Dejë national park, as one of the court cases based its most substantial legal claim upon the fact that the HPP was being constructed inside a legally protected area. On these online pages, videos demonstrating the damage being done to the park were posted, as well as legal arguments in protection of national parks. Meanwhile, the local community contacted every public institution

responsible for monitoring the territory in an attempt to spur them to action, but no response was received. Their passivity was displayed online as well. As the anti-pandemic measures started to relax, the organizing groups around the cause visited the area to shoot a documentary and materials for media reports. The documentary was posted online and screened in many social centers.

The importance of online campaigns for building a multilayered political discourse was highlighted during the pandemic. It helped the activists to support their other forms of actions through textual and visual arguments. Moreover, it helped build a stronger and more sustained solidarity with other activists, communities, and environmental NGOs.

Conclusion

While the struggles surrounding HPPs construction is a national issue, Zall-Gjoçaj's case has illustrated the dynamics to a greater extent than any other environmental fight in the country. Forced into defending their livelihoods, the locals have had to deploy a wide range of resistance methods to make their voices heard. These have been categorized under three different sections in this article: the legal aspect, direct actions, and the online adaptation.

The legal actions have been largely successful despite the obstacles along the road. Through the organization of various campaigns to push their legal cases through, opponents to the hydropower projects were able to obtain court decisions in their favour. Regarding the direct actions, these ranged from roundtable talks to active protests. Symbolism was often deployed in those instances to increase the awareness about the issue at hand. As for the online aspect, it has come to represent a contemporary aspect of activism, attempting to increase the movement's reach.

Even during the pandemic, these methods were applied. In fact, the intensity of the interactions that were already present appeared to be accentuated by the onset of the Covid-19 measures. The restrictions set by the government favoured one party overwhelmingly; the construction companies were allowed to carry on with their projects, while their opponents, the local population, were restricted in their ability to protest them or even to carry on with their legal challenges as court cases were suspended. Thus, a situation that already appeared to be an uphill battle prior to the health measures became even more uneven.

Nevertheless, activists in Zall-Gjoçaj's case doubled down on their cause, finding new ways to make their voices heard. This was especially noticeable in the online turn, which brought a new facet to the awareness campaigns and their organization. Given the restrictions on movement and assembly, the online world became a solution to the issue at hand. Direct actions were also affected, as the protestors were disallowed from organizing public protests. Thus, the destruction of the corporations' machinery was outlined as a creative way to make their stance clear; this proved to have some impact as the construction had to be temporarily halted.

These protests carried on even after the end of the measures, keeping the movement alive across the period of investigation.

Despite the successes achieved through these modes of resistance, the end results appear to remain the same as the status quo is upheld. Thus, while the overarching movement against the construction of HPPs could be hailed as exemplary activism, it has not been able to reverse the construction of HPPs, nor guarantee the future safety of their rivers. An even more pessimistic take could argue that the victories, for example the legal ones, were only conceded by the authorities once it was too late; as such, they would have been only performative and to appease the protesters. Exploring this aspect in further depth might reveal that the assumed collusion between the HPPs private corporations and the government, as well as their behaviour towards the local population, has not changed despite four years of activism. One might conclude that the authorities, albeit on occasion lending performative support to the activists' cause, were dominated by long-standing vested interests of the hydropower industry and its economic importance for the country.

This case raises a series of questions about the balance of power between the private companies, the local communities, and public authorities, which, albeit beyond the scope of this article, would warrant additional research, including: who is considered to be "living in the area" and who is not, who is heard and who is not, who appears in the public sphere and who does not, who is subject to the law and who stands above it? These enquiries emerge from the overarching issue concerning the rule of law which has been observed repeatedly across the description of the case presented above. Whether it be from court decisions not being respected, politicians not being held accountable, or even the change of the National Park's borders, these all point towards a larger systemic problem in Albania.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the described environmental activism is pointless. For one, the ability to learn from these experiences is useful in building a robust civil society able to represent its interests. Such a knowledgeable and capable civil society is the foundation of any vibrant democracy. Furthermore, taking a wider regional scope, recent events in the region have shown that environmental concerns are an issue that can rally the people in a way that will force the authorities to hear them out. This can be observed most recently in Serbia, regarding environmental activism against lithium mining.

These events are particularly encouraging in the region, as several countries in the Western Balkans face similar issues involving environmental struggles within an EU directive context. Thus, any level of success, whether it be on the activism side or on the rule of law issue, might prove to be important in carrying the momentum for environmental movements in the region. This type of observation raises questions about the conditions of success for these movements, as well as possibilities of strengthening the rule of law. While such questions extend beyond the scope of this article, they certainly open the door for future research.

Bibliography

- CDInstitute. *Citizen Movements and environmental protection in Albania*. (accessed 9 March 2022).
- Citizens Channel. 2019. Reportazh: “Matjanët që u bashkuan në mbrojtje të natyrës”. *Citizens Channel*, 18 November 2019.
- . 2020. “Bukuria e panjohur e Lurës nën kërcënimin e HEC-eve”. *Citizens Channel*, 6 May 2020.
- Eco-Albania. *The economic and social impact of small hydropower in Albania. Justification of incentives system*. (accessed 9 March 2022).
- . *Water Conflict Study* (accessed 9 March 2022).
- Euractiv. 2020. Activists win battle, not war, against hydropower in the Western Balkans. *Euractiv*, 6 October 2020.
- . 2011. Albanian deputy PM quits following videotaped bribe scandal. *Euractiv*, 18 January 2011.
- Irena. *Renewables Readiness Assessment. The Republic of Albania*. (accessed 9 March 2022).
- Klan Plus. *Zall Gjoçaj. “lufta” për ujin – Përtej në Klan Plus (10 nëntor 2019)* (accessed 9 March 2022).
- Law nr. 81/2017. *“For protected areas”* (accessed 8 February 2022).
- Leviz Albania. 2020. Devijimi i lumenjve të Matit për interesa të HEC-ve dënon me thatësi fshatrat malorë. *Leviz Albania*, 9 July 2020.
- . 2020. #LevizAlbania per #NAD2020. *Leviz Albania*, 22 October 2020.
- Nyje. 2022. Për kë bie Kumbaro? Të pavërtetat e ndryshimit të kufijve të zonave të mbrojtura. *Nyje*, 28 January 2022.
- . 2019. Protesta e Zall-Gjoçaj: HEC-et kapak varri për zonën tonë!. *Nyje*, 17 November 2019.
- Porta Vendore.al. 2019. Hidrocentralet, rreth dy herë më shumë. *Porta Vendore.al*, 4 August 2019.
- Renewable Energy Directive Revision of Directive (EU) 2018/2001 (accessed 9 March 2022).
- Reporter.al. 2022. HEC-et në Valbonë: Qeveria bën një sy qorr ndaj vendimit të Gjykatës së Lartë. *Reporter.al*, 20 January 2022.
- . 2020. Digjet makineria e firmës që po ndërton HEC-et në Zall Gjoçaj, shoqërohen banorët. *Reporter.al*, 3 March 2020.
- . 2019. Dhjetra qytetarë kundër HEC-ve: Kjo është luftë për jetën e fëmijëve. *Reporter.al*, 17 July 2019.
- Save the Blue Heart of Europe. *The Campaign* (accessed 9 March 2022).
- WWF. 2016. Albanians rally against hydropowerplants in the Valbona National Park. *WWF*, 4 November 2016.