

ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

FROM THE SECURITY
PERSPECTIVE

AUTHORS

Iva Marković and
Žaklina Živković

Belgrade
June 2026



Introduction

Despite the global technological progress, human ecology is becoming an existential issue: will we survive at all, what will society look like after the environmental collapse, and - in the best case scenario - what should we do to reduce the crisis? For the population of Serbia, this issue is exacerbated by the existing problems of galloping privatisation and destruction of public goods, especially natural resources. In the last decade, two sides of the environment have emerged and intensified in the local public. On the one hand, polluted air, endangered water resources, soil degradation, non-transparent or harmful mining and infrastructure projects, as well as insufficient enforcement of regulations, are increasingly affecting people's health, local development, safety of the communities, and citizens' trust in institutions. On the other hand, citizens are increasingly engaging, organising, educating themselves and defending their right to a healthy environment. The resulting conflicts have intensified in recent years and now encompass an entire range of security challenges, including violence, threats to life and property, legal pressures, and media and other forms of attacks. In these conditions, environmental security must be viewed not only as the ability of the society and the state to recognise, prevent and mitigate risks to the environment and health, but also as finding models that ensure that citizens participate in decisions that affect the conditions in which they live.

Although similar dynamics of environmental conflicts can be observed around the world, Serbia's environmental problems are taking place in the context of particularly weak institutional capacities and limited public control. Insufficient implementation of existing regulations, unclear division of responsibilities between competent institutions, absence of multi-sector cooperation in solving environmental and health problems, absolutely inadequate monitoring, lack of reliable data on the state of the environment and its impact on health, as well as the absence of systematic monitoring of the health of the population in contaminated localities, are often found in practice. The environmental crisis is not the result of just individual incidents, but also long-term institutional inaction and insufficiently developed accountability mechanisms. This constitutes an extremely suitable ground for corruption and malfeasance by local and – especially in recent years - global actors, particularly from the mining and energy industry from both eastern and western geopolitical spheres¹²³.

Also, there has been a noticeable change in the last few years: environmental topics have moved from professional and local frameworks to public interest at the national level. This was contributed to by the increasingly frequent and more connected struggles of local activists (e.g. against small hydropower plants), protests against air pollution, and the mass mobilisation against Rio Tinto's Jadar project. The Jadar project became a symbol of the wider conflict between the development model based on extractive industries and privatisation, and the demands of citizens for the protection of water, soil, health and the local communities. After the project was temporarily halted in 2022, the topic of lithium was reopened in 2024, sparking a new wave of protests and bringing the mining issue back to the centre of political and social conflict. Reports from 2024 record the arrests of activists during anti-lithium protests, including cases in Loznica and Belgrade, as well as reactions of domestic and international organisations over the treatment of environmental human rights defenders⁴. However, requests for permits for mining exploration have since then become more frequent, while the existing exploitations are expanding their capacities.

At the same time, the position of environmental activists is becoming more and more sensitive in terms of security. The pressures are no longer limited to public polemics or local conflicts. They now include media targeting, legal pressures, SLAPP lawsuits, misdemeanour and criminal charges, physical intimidation and violence, arrests, digital attacks and surveillance⁵. Particularly concerning are the findings of Amnesty International from December 2024⁶, according to which the police and the security agencies in Serbia have used advanced digital forensics tools and spyware to unlawfully target journalists, environmental activists and other civil society actors. This change shows that environmental security no longer encompasses only the protection of natural resources, but also the protection of people who point to environmental risks.

This report starts with the assumption that environmental activists in Serbia play a crucial role in defending the public interest. They often take on tasks that should be part of regular work of institutions: reporting on the situation on the ground, monitoring public input for projects, analysing planning documents, warning of risks, organising communities, initiating actions and demanding accountability. Therefore, their protection cannot be viewed as a secondary issue of the civil sector, but rather as one of the conditions for preserving the democratic space and the citizens' right to a healthy environment. The purpose of this text is to show environmental security as a useful perspective, either for the actions of the activists themselves or for those who want to help them by reducing or preventing conflicts. To achieve this, it is necessary to present the environmental activists in Serbia, the problems they are pointing to, the state of the environment, the institutional and security context in which they are operating, the risks they are facing, and the sort of support they need. The report deals with the actors of the environmental movement, the forms of their actions, the pressures they are exposed to, including legal, physical, digital and media threats, as well as the need for legal aid, security protocols, professional support, access to data, reliable financing, communication skills and psychosocial protection. Special attention will be paid to possible directions of cooperation between the civil society, institutions and the donor community, so as to develop sustainable and contextually adapted support mechanisms.

The expansion of mining and energy projects has been intensifying over the last few years in more and more new locations; the affected communities are currently mobilising, stimulated particularly by the new directly democratic assembly model, and are rapidly connecting with each other and with other social actors. It is therefore reasonable to expect that this report will actually present just the beginning of larger conflicts and pressures, both on the environment and on activists.

Context in Serbia

More and more clearly, the state of the environment in Serbia reflects the wider crisis of institutions, the rule of law, and the way in which public policies and the so-called development projects are enacted and implemented. Serbia does not have a valid Development Plan, or the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia. According to the Law on the Planning System, the Development Plan of Serbia is the country's hierarchically highest long-term development planning document, adopted by the National Assembly for a period of at least 10 years⁷, while the Spatial Plan is based on the Development Plan. In their essence, these documents should represent an elaborate and operational framework that defines key investment directions, public policies and territorial development for a period lasting at least a decade. Their adoption, as well as any subsequent amendments, falls within the purview of the National Assembly, which should ensure democratic control over long-term development decisions.

Although Serbia does not have umbrella documents, sectoral laws and strategies with enormous consequences on environmental security are regularly adopted swiftly and without adequate public dialogue. For example, in November 2024, at the session of the National Assembly which included more than 60 legislative proposals and amendments, amendments to the Law on Energy that abolished the ban on the construction of nuclear power plants (which had been in force in Serbia for more than 30 years⁸) were adopted amidst the smoke caused by torches that were carried inside by the opposition MPs. Amendments to the Law on Communal Activities, which opened the door to the takeover of local communal services and their privatisation,⁹ were adopted at the same session. Under the pretext of alignment with the European Union, the Strategy for the Management of Mineral and Other Geological Resources of the Republic of Serbia, which was widely criticised for marginalising both the environmental issues and the role of local communities, as well as for the fact that large mining companies such as NIS and Zijin had participated in its drafting while the civil society or the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts had not, was also adopted in April 2026¹⁰. The avoidance of parliamentary procedure concerning strategic processes, together with the practice of setting sector priorities arbitrarily, without clear criteria and with frequent changes, shows why the legal obligation to draft a Development Plan remained unfulfilled for years. Planning is done from one project to the next, and the population learns about the plans no earlier than when the excavators appear. This is especially obvious in the field of environmental protection, where institutional capacities are at the lowest level.

Serbia has never completed the development of institutional capacities in the field of environmental protection. A key set of systemic laws in the field of environmental protection was adopted in 2004, mainly as part of the process of alignment with the European Union acquis and the modernisation of domestic legislation. That is when the Law on Environmental Protection, the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment, the Law on Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment and the Law on Integrated Prevention and Control of Environmental Pollution were adopted, while institutional and management capacities in the field of ecology were additionally strengthened in 2007 and 2009 by the establishment of a special ministry in charge of environmental protection and by the adoption of a number of sector laws (Law on Waste Management, Law on Packaging and Packaging Waste, Law on Nature Protection, Law on Protection from Noise in the Environment, Law on Air Protection, the Law on Chemicals and Law on Biocidal Products).

This period was too short to truly lead to the establishment of the necessary capacities. With the change of government in 2012 and the arrival of the Serbian Progressive Party, the process stopped. The independent Ministry of the Environment was abolished and its purview was moved several times from one department to another (energy, agriculture, etc.), which lessened the political weight of ecology in the state administration. The Environmental Protection Fund was closed at the same time, and its funds were practically redirected to the general state budget. In that period, the Chemicals Agency, the institution which was specialised for the control of chemicals and the implementation of European standards in that area, was abolished and its responsibilities were transferred to a ministry that did not possess adequate capacities. In addition, there were also frequent changes to the law. The inspection services were weakened, decision-making was centralised, conscientious employees were fired without valid grounds¹¹, and important institutes were unlawfully privatised¹². A large number of today's environmental problems are the result of this backlog.

For several years now, in its progress reports, the European Commission has been pointing out major problems in the area of creation and implementation of environmental protection policies: weak administrative capacities, insufficient inter-sector coordination, and limited public participation in decision-making¹³. They particularly emphasise that the legal framework formally does exist, but its application remains uneven, which creates space for selective enforcement of the laws. The EC report also points to continuing challenges in the field of justice, such as slowness of proceedings and insufficient protection from political influence. Such conditions negatively affect the ability of citizens and organisations to protect their environmental rights in legal disputes¹⁴, which raises the question of where and how citizens can protect their rights at all.

The trend of weakening the rule of law in Serbia¹⁵ enables the realisation of investments that contribute to the deepening of the already captured state, as indicated by international research centres such as the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)¹⁶, while recent analyses by Carnegie Europe show that, in Serbia and the region, large projects are often based on legal exceptions and political agreements, rather than on stable and predictable norms¹⁷. The concept of "corrosive capital", as defined by Carnegie Europe, is particularly visible in the environmental sector, where investments come in conjunction with the weakening of regulatory and institutional mechanisms. In practice, this is reflected in several recurring patterns.

First, projects in the areas of mining, energy and infrastructure are often subjected to accelerated or simplified procedures, with environmental impact assessments reduced to a formality or carried out without adequate public debates. Second, there is a pattern of normative lowering of standards, where domestic regulations are adapted to suit investors, instead of being aligned with existing environmental rules - including flexible pollution limits, changes to planning documents, or redefining the statuses of protected areas. Finally, "corrosive capital" often goes hand-in-hand with closed negotiations and interstate agreements that bypass standard procedures of transparency and public review, which further reduces the possibility of control. Such projects are often accompanied by pressure on local communities and activists, ranging from targeting in public space to various legal and administrative obstacles, which - in the medium and long term - weakens social resistance to environmentally harmful projects. These patterns show that the problem is not limited to individual investments, but that there is a systemic influence that changes the legal system and the rules of the game to suit the short-term economic interests of favoured individuals, groups or companies, to the detriment of the environment and the public interest.

Formally, Serbia is a signatory to the Aarhus Convention¹⁸, but problems related to institutional capacities, especially the functioning of the judiciary and access to justice, still seriously limit the ability of citizens and organisations to challenge government decisions. In practice, this means that local communities often receive information late, that consultations are formal instead of substantive, and that legal protection takes a long time or is unaffordable and uncertain. When we add pressure on actors who protect the public interest to this, the situation becomes even more serious. In the 2025 report, the European Commission explicitly stated that civil society organisations operate in a difficult environment and that they are subjected to ever increasing pressures and attacks. They were particularly concerned about the use of spyware targeting human rights defenders and journalists, as well as the cases of Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPP)

Instead of a segment of the state of the environment, the position of environmental activists should be viewed as an indicator of the state of democracy. According to reports from Front Line Defenders, environmental defenders around the world, including Europe, are facing increasing pressure: from SLAPP lawsuits and discrediting campaigns, to threats and even physical attacks¹⁹. Although Serbia is not among the countries that experience extreme examples of violence such as the murders of environmental activists, patterns of intimidation, arrests and police torture, as well as institutional ignoring and legal uncertainty are increasingly present, which leads to a reduced trust in the possibility of institutional protection and can lead to the radicalisation of activist activities. During the summer of 2024, and especially since the beginning of the student-citizen protests, state pressure on activists who oppose lithium mining plans has escalated and shown how quickly environmental problems related to the fight against corruption can become a matter of personal physical security and political polarisation.

International Framework

The local context is further exacerbated under the influence of international trends that shape the global environmental and climate agenda of today. After the energy crisis, the pandemic, the aggression against Ukraine and the straining of relations between the West and China, climate and environmental policy is becoming less and less a matter of decarbonisation, and more and more a matter of security, geopolitical alignment and supply chain security²⁰. The American-Israeli aggression against Iran and the genocide in Gaza represent the continuation of global instability, through the uncertainty of trade routes and the supply of critical resources such as oil, but also - and much more perfidiously - through the establishment of precedents in the massive violations of human rights and international law. Normalisation of such practices confirms a new vision of the world in which coercion and violence, along with totalitarian digital surveillance and control, are becoming legitimate instruments for achieving political and strategic goals. Besides denial of access to drinking water, ecocide - a systematic and permanent destruction of the basic living requirements and the elimination of the possibility for the population to return - is now increasingly talked about in the Middle East as a legitimate model of warfare²¹. While part of the public is horrified by this, repressive apparatuses around the world, and primarily on our continent, are swiftly following and adopting the lessons learned.

In the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), the European Union has set the goal that, by 2030, at least 10% of its needs for strategic raw materials be provided from domestic exploitation, 40% from domestic processing, and 25% from recycling, with the limitation that a maximum of 65% must not come from a third country²². In April 2026, the EU also launched a new platform for the joint procurement of critical raw materials, which emphasises that it also applies to raw materials required for batteries, energy and defence²³. In other words, the vision of the green transition is becoming increasingly intertwined, and is getting lost in industrial policy and security priorities. For Serbia, as a country on the border of the EU, this means that external pressure to position itself as a supplier and producer of raw materials and a location for the so-called “strategic projects” is growing²⁴, while domestic institutions do not yet have sufficient democratic capacities to guarantee that such projects will be implemented with the highest standards of environmental protection and human rights.

A process of deregulation and reduction of environmental protection standards is currently taking place in the European Union itself, with no end in sight. Although policies such as the European Green Deal have set ambitious goals, in practice the regulatory framework is being adjusted by way of more flexible standards, exceptions and moving deadlines, especially in the agriculture, industry and energy sectors. In parallel, civil society organisations and environmental activists in the European Union are facing increasing pressures, from limiting access to funding and public processes, to legal and political pressures. Organisations ClientEarth and European Environmental Bureau indicate that the space for civil society action in the EU is narrowing²⁵, while the influence of industrial actors on the shaping of policies is simultaneously growing²⁶. This is especially dangerous for countries such as Serbia: external demands for raw materials and energy security are increasing, while, at the same time, the global framework in which the standards for the protection of nature, climate and human rights should represent a firm border rather than an object of political trade, is weakening²⁷.

The Green Agenda and decades of efforts to establish a framework for global cooperation in the fight against climate change are collapsing under the pressure from major powers and political twists and turns. The new withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement, which formally entered into force on 27 January 2026, created an additional political instability in this area. The withdrawal of the US as one of the largest emitters is significantly weakening global cooperation and may encourage other countries to relax their own obligations, undermining the entire system of international climate governance. Quantitative analyses show that non-participation of the US could cancel more than one third of the planned global emission reductions (about 38% of the total effect). At the same time, such a development is reducing the financial and political support for climate policies, slowing down the energy transition and increasing the risk of higher emissions and health consequences, while on the international level it is undermining the trust and stability of climate diplomacy²⁸. It is important to point out that the main requirement for any global fight for climate, nature, biodiversity or clean water is peace. However, there are currently about 60 active conflicts²⁹ in the world that are directly causing pollution, while an enormous part of the industry is oriented towards militarisation, which further prevents the development of a sustainable economy and creates pressure for the exploitation of raw materials. This trend has not bypassed our country either.

Narratives about environmental activists as terrorists have already become a regular occurrence in countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany³⁰, and lessons about surveillance and dealing with those who are “disobedient” have found their way to Serbia.

Namely, while our arms and ammunition industry produces and exports weapons to Israel, spy software and surveillance technology - imported from the same country - has found its application in tracking Serbia's activists and journalists³¹. This dual cooperation will continue with the announced drone factory in Šimanovci under joint ownership³². Criticism of the exploitation of people and nature within the dominant economic and political system, as well as global anti-colonial resistance, are an integral part of today's fight for the protection of the environment. Environmental activists of today are part of global anti-war activism because they see, more than ever, that the fight against war and militarisation is inseparable from the fight to protect the environment.

If the climate and environmental agenda in Serbia is reduced to the "delivery of resources" to more powerful actors, and if institutions remain weak and susceptible to political influences (i.e. captured), international trends such as militarisation, increasing the security of borders and infrastructure, ensuring strategic supply chains, and reducing dependence on China will not manifest in Serbia as a development opportunity, but as additional pressure on natural resources, local communities that depend on them, and those who defend them. In such a framework, the fight for air, water, land and biodiversity simultaneously becomes a fight for the rule of law, the right to participate in decision-making, access to justice, and the basic security of citizens and activists.

The consequences of this combination of local weaknesses and global pressures are visible on several levels. At the local level, communities are facing a loss of access to natural resources, a decline in the quality of life, and an increase in health risks. At the national level, dependence on external actors is growing, while at the same time the space for autonomous development decision-making is narrowing. At the individual level, activists and citizens who are trying to protect the public interest are becoming the targets of various attacks, often left without adequate institutional protection.

These trends will probably further intensify in the coming period. Pressure to exploit resources will increase, climate risks will become more pronounced, and geopolitical tensions will continue to shape energy and industry policies.

State of the Environment

Environmental protection is one of the topics that managed to mobilise an enormous number of Serbian citizens in the last decade. Civil protests against the construction of mini-hydroelectric plants and the mining of lithium and other critical minerals have contributed to the increase in citizens' awareness of the threat to the environment and public health caused by direct air, soil and water pollution, but also of corruption and lack of institutional capacities to respond to environmental risks. A brief overview of the most important issues confirms the need for even greater engagement and shows in which sectors whistle-blowers may appear in need of support.

The situation in the area of water is alarming, and the reasons for it are many. Water is threatened by pollution, uncontrolled exploitation and galloping climate changes. According to UN data, 25% of the population in Serbia occasionally or permanently has no access to clean drinking water, while only 24% have access to sanitary services³³. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia noted that only about 15% of urban waste water in Serbia is treated³⁴, while almost all waste water in Belgrade is discharged directly into the Sava and Danube rivers.

At the same time, new mini hydropower plant projects are still allowed and subsidised. Despite the strong mobilisation of the professional community and citizens, and the EU-funded project for the creation of a new cadastre, the cadastre of potential locations for mini-hydropower plants from 1987 is still valid.

Due to old pipes, leaks and inefficient system management, a significant amount of the produced drinking water never reaches the users. Estimates show that Serbia is losing between one third and almost half of the water that ends up in the distribution system. Approximately 43% of produced water was lost in 2023, which means that all of four litres out of every 10 are lost before they reach the citizens³⁵. Water management is not only an ecological, but a public health problem. Polluted waters or degraded river ecosystems reduce the quality of life, increase health risks, damage biodiversity, threaten tourist and other potentials, and make future investments in infrastructure even more expensive. This trend is particularly worrisome as climate change is further reducing both the quality and availability of water resources³⁶.

Air pollution is one of the biggest environmental and public health risks in Serbia. The European Environmental Agency states that the concentrations of PM2.5 particles in Serbia have experienced a gradual decline in the period 2015-2023, but that pollution still remains a serious health problem, with insufficient local implementation of plans to improve air quality³⁷. The World Health Organisation estimates that, in Serbia, exposure to PM2.5 particles is associated with approximately 3,585 premature deaths per year, while recent analyses indicate that Serbia is continuing to record one of the highest death rates in Europe related to air pollution³⁸. Unpleasant winter smog is a direct risk factor for the development of cardiovascular diseases, stroke, exacerbation of allergies and chronic respiratory diseases, as well as for the occurrence of numerous malignant diseases.

The largest structural source of emissions is the energy sector. Serbia's official climate documents state that the energy sector generates about 80% of the total greenhouse gas emissions³⁹. This means that without a serious reduction in dependence on fossil fuels, primarily coal, it will not be possible to achieve a significant improvement in air quality, improve climate safety, or reduce health costs. The energy transition in Serbia has so far often been guided by a wrong approach, because it was presented primarily as a technical issue related to technological innovation, while the aspects of public health, investment and development policy, and social justice were neglected.

Soil degradation, poor waste management and pressure from extractive industries make up the next layer of problems. The European Environment Agency states that in 2023 the municipal waste recycling rate in Serbia was only 15.5%, while as much as 79.4% of the waste ended up in landfills, only some of them sanitary⁴⁰. Such a waste management model is expensive, inefficient and unsustainable in the long run: it leads to the leakage of pollutants into the soil and water, increases the risk of fires at landfills, and transfers costs to local governments and citizens. When we add the expansion of mining and other extractive projects, the consequences become even more serious – there is habitat fragmentation, loss of agricultural land, pressure on water sources, and increased tensions and conflicts between local residents and investors in local communities. In its Report on Serbia for 2025, the European Commission specifically pointed out the need for better coordination in the area of environmental impact assessment and climate policy, precisely at the moment when Serbia was entering into new arrangements related to raw materials and industrial value chains⁴¹.

Loss of biodiversity and pressure on forest ecosystems also indicate a systemic weakness in natural resource management. In its Report on the State of the Environment from 2024, the Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) stated that protected areas covered 6.6% of the territory of Serbia⁴², while the European Environment Agency (EEA) pointed out at the same time that Serbia was still significantly lagging behind the European goal of at least 30% of protected territory by 2030. Forests cover about a third of Serbia's territory; however, based on satellite images, the Global Forest Watch platform states that Serbia had lost 84,200 hectares of forest area in the period 2000-2025, which is equivalent to a 3% reduction in two and a half decades⁴³. The Global Organised Crime Index report says that Serbia has an active illegal logging market, which has been on the rise in recent years. These crimes occur in private forests, where protection is insufficient, but also in those owned by the state, where theft is often facilitated by corrupt forest rangers. Control of illegal logging and theft of wood is weak, because the institutions responsible for fighting these crimes are often subject to bribery, and it is known that the forest rangers themselves are involved in these activities⁴⁴. Data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia show that 98 fires were recorded in state forests in 2024 alone, resulting in 3,573 hectares of burned area⁴⁵. This shows that forest ecosystems are no longer only a matter of nature protection, but also a key factor in protecting soil from erosion, preserving water resources, mitigating extreme temperatures, and strengthening the climate resilience of entire regions.

Climate risks are already showing what the future could look like if such a development model continues. In its Climate and Development Report for Serbia, the World Bank warned that the country is exposed to floods, landslides, droughts, heat waves and fires, and that, in the next decade, adaptation will require about USD 9.5 billion in investments. In July 2024, the region was hit by an extreme heat wave. According to the American news agency Reuters, on July 16 the temperature in Belgrade reached a record 38.4°C. The Rusanda salt lake dried up. In the following year, 2025, the drought in south-eastern Serbia left villages and livestock without water, causing serious losses in agriculture. These events show that the risks of drinking water shortages, falling yields, rising food prices and new health shocks are no longer a futuristic scenario, but a process that is already under way. The problem, however, lies not only in the lack of adequate corrective environmental measures, but also in the development model in which the costs of pollution, disease, climate damage and loss of nature are systematically transferred to society and citizens, while profits are concentrated in a narrow circle of private and related interests.

Environmental Activists

Environmental activists in Serbia are a heterogeneous group of actors who act in the union of environmental protection, local democracy, human rights, public health and the struggle for institutional responsibility. Instead of being viewed as a single social movement, a campaign, or a formal civil society organisation, they can rather be described as a network of local communities, informal initiatives, experts, scientists, farmers, rural residents, urban movements, students, public figures and individuals who mobilise and engage in situations of perceived threat to the environment, health, property or local way of life. In this sense, environmental activism in Serbia has a distinctly territorial and existential dimension: it often occurs precisely where citizens feel that they are directly affected by infrastructural, energy, mining, industrial or urban projects, without being timely informed about them or meaningfully involved in decision-making processes.

Although the data of the Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) show that the largest share of environmental and urban initiatives is made up of citizens between the ages of 30 and 55, we can assume that when we exclude the younger population in the cities that deals mostly with urban projects, those who make up the environmental movement in Serbia and constitute its most prominent part belong to the older category of the population. With the inclusion of a few students in certain environmental initiatives, the above average age probably drops slightly; however, that younger section is currently still separated and primarily oriented towards student organising, which will certainly change in the future. Gender representation has not been sufficiently researched, but there is a clear presence of women among rural activists (at least an equal number), while in urban areas women are noticeably more active than men⁴⁶. This does not deviate from the average percentages noted in the environmental movements of the world because women, including those who are not considered eco-feminists, have shown themselves everywhere to be more threatened by environmental crises, as well as more active in defending the environmental rights of communities. The environmental movement in Serbia normally does not have its own umbrella structure, but since 2020 it has the Women's Network for the Protection of Nature and the Environment, where activists from all over, of different age, education, work and other statuses directly exchange ideas and communicate.

Environmental actors are heterogeneous in political and ideological terms as well. In Serbia, they do not have a single political orientation. At the moment, they can roughly be described as "opposition-oriented", which is primarily caused by external, environmentally risky and harmful projects implemented by the state. Environmental problems unite people who would otherwise find themselves in different, even opposing, ideological positions. Both progressive and conservative cultural matrices can be found in local struggles for water, air, soil, forests or public health, while economic policy is marked by anti-colonial and sovereignist attitudes, as well as opposition to the privatisation of public goods and natural resources. Authoritarianism is present to the extent that it is generally present in society in Serbia. However, due to the nature of the movement's organisation it is impossible to implement it in practice, so in the end, environmental activism, on average, has a higher degree of internal democracy. There are pro-EU citizens, Euro-sceptics, traditionalists, feminists, nationalists, monarchists, socialists and anarchists, but there are also people who do not see themselves as politically engaged at all. In the context of the post-conflict region, environmental initiatives cooperate, exchange knowledge and information, join hands and visit one another in all the republics of former Yugoslavia, but exclusively on the topic of local environmental struggles. It is this breadth that shows that environmental protection often overcomes the existing political and ideological divisions in society and projects a dichotomy that is easier to identify with and relate to: diverse and vulnerable people against powerful and unscrupulous companies/authorities.

It is important to stress that the exceptionality of this movement in relation to other parts of the civil sector is that, despite the negative narratives that accompany all forms of activism, including this one, it has managed to enjoy great trust in the wider public and reach citizens who are otherwise not active or determined⁴⁷. Its strength, but also its complexity, lies precisely in the fact that it brings together actors of different experiences, identities, values and political beliefs. What unites them is not a common ideological platform (which would exclude others), but the demand that decisions affecting the environment, health and local communities be made lawfully, transparently, professionally, responsibly and with the real participation of citizens.

With a demand like this (and with an obvious “adversary” which, from time to time, adds more reasons to fight) it was not difficult to keep the mainstream support for this long.

Roughly speaking, the actors in the broader environmental movement in Serbia can currently be classified into 11 categories:

- 1) Local population more or less directly affected by harmful projects, mostly in rural or suburban areas. It is often an (on average) elderly population that actively participates in direct actions, where a certain degree of independence from the usual levers of pressure is ensured by the fact that many of them are retired or independently engaged in agriculture. This is precisely why they are not always directly dependent on local employers, institutions or party structures, although in small communities they are still exposed to strong social (especially women!), political and economic pressures.
- 2) Smaller or local formal and informal citizen associations that are not necessarily exclusively ecological; they may operate in different areas, but they support local struggles and get involved in them through organisation, mobilisation, communication, logistics or public advocacy.
- 3) Larger and older civil sector organisations with experience in various social movements, work with local communities, public advocacy and international communication. They often have more developed organisational, legal, communication and financial capacities, as well as experience in connecting local struggles with broader political and international frameworks.
- 4) Strictly thematically oriented organisations and individuals, e.g. those who provide legal aid, digital security support, logistical support, environmental expertise, research analysis or communication assistance.
- 5) Local assemblies, which were created and strengthened in response to the student movement’s call for local organising of citizens, based on a model that is close to that of a plenum and direct-democratic decision-making. A large part of their activities are focused on spatial, ecological and communal issues.
- 6) Publicly prominent individuals from the world of art, media, culture, science and politics, who - with their public authority and visibility - contribute to spreading the messages of the movement and legitimising local struggles.
- 7) Members of the academic community, more often as individuals and less often through formal associations and institutions, e.g. through the Council of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts for the Environment, the Society of Architects of Belgrade and similar professional platforms. Their role is particularly important in interpreting studies, challenging inaccurate claims of investors or institutions, and providing expert support to local communities.
- 8) The student movement, i.e. parts that integrate specific environmental cases into their activities. They are the demographically youngest actor, but often also the actor with the most modern education, developed digital skills, and experience in new forms of horizontal organisation.
- 9) Individuals, i.e. numerous citizens, who get involved primarily at the invitation of other above mentioned actors for direct action, protest, petition, blockade, public event or solidarity campaign. Although they do not have to be permanently organised, their presence is crucial for the massiveness, visibility and social legitimacy of the movement.

- 10) Political organisations born out of environmental activism. Although they are (no longer) a part of the environmental movement, their role is to propose and articulate topics and ask questions in the National Assembly or, more often, in local government assemblies, where many environmental problems of a local nature can be influenced more directly. Sometimes they are the only ones who can inform other actors about potentially problematic laws in a timely fashion.
- 11) Hubs, i.e. regional or national organisations and individuals that connect different actors, facilitate the exchange of information, transfer experiences from one local struggle to another, and facilitate cooperation between local initiatives, experts, lawyers, media, civil society organisations and international partners.

A single actor can assume multiple roles. The above mentioned categories are often transitional and overlapping, especially due to the lack of capacity of all actors in relation to the “other side”, i. e. investors, institutions, political structures and related economic interests. Although each of these actors plays an important role and contributes to the movement, they differ from each other in terms of their own goals, resources, experience, degrees of exposure to pressures, and relationship to institutions. These differences direct some actors towards a greater degree of cooperation with existing local and national institutions, while others are directed towards protests, blockades and other forms of non-institutional action. There are pressures on all of them, but they are not of the same character. Some are exposed to media lynching, some are having their funds cut off, while others are threatened with endangered physical security, etc.

The development of the contemporary environmental movement in Serbia can be traced through several interconnected waves of mobilisation. The first important wave was related to the fight against the construction of small hydropower plants in rural and mountainous areas⁴⁸. In those cases, in the period 2017-2020, local communities in south-eastern and part of western Serbia organised themselves to protect rivers as basic natural, economic, cultural and symbolic resources. The second wave developed in urban areas, primarily through initiatives against air pollution and, somewhat less, those that were centred around green areas, where citizens, experts and civil society organisations used spatial plans or air quality data to challenge institutional passivity and point out health risks⁴⁹. The third and most politically visible wave was formed around the opposition to lithium and boron mining, especially in connection with Rio Tinto’s Jadar project, but also with other mining projects throughout the country⁵⁰. As part of that process, local resistance from the Jadar valley in western Serbia grew into a national mobilisation that included environmental organisations, scientists, civil initiatives, students and the general public⁵¹.

Environmental activists operate via a combination of institutional and non-institutional strategies. Institutional action includes submission of requests for access to information of public importance, participation in public debates, submission of objections to spatial and urban plans, initiation of administrative and judicial proceedings, petitions, legislative initiatives, addressing independent institutions, and actions of political organisations in the National Assembly and local self-government units. A drastic example of bypassing the institutions of democracy was the famous “disappearance” of the People’s Initiative on banning lithium and boron mining in the territory of Serbia, which was signed by more than 38,000 citizens despite a rigorously formal and short procedure. It was allegedly lost by the National Assembly and has not been found to this day⁵².

Extra-institutional action includes protests, roadblocks, public campaigns, local assemblies, media appearances, civil disobedience and digital mobilisation. It is important to point out that the practice of environmental initiatives in Serbia is still that every non-institutional action, although less visible from the outside, is always preceded by several attempts to solve the problem through institutions. During the protests of 2021 and 2022, expressway blockades and mass gatherings, as well as petitions and popular initiatives, became a recognisable form of pressure. The withdrawal of the amendments to the Law on Expropriation and the amendments to the Law on Referendum showed that the environmental movement can produce the greatest political effect precisely when it combines institutional and non-institutional methods, with great visibility in the general public⁵³.

Pressures and Challenges

High visibility does not mean that a movement is institutionally protected. On the contrary, environmental activists in Serbia operate in an environment that is characterised by different forms of pressure, especially on local actors. Activists from rural areas are a particularly vulnerable group. Legal, organisational and media support is often not available to them, they are less digitally literate and protected, and are directly exposed to pressure from powerful local individuals, investors or politically connected actors. In small communities, activism often carries a high social cost, because opponents of infrastructure projects are often presented as an obstacle to development, investment, and employment (of neighbours and fellow citizens!) in their own environments. Media targeting further increases this vulnerability, especially when activists are labelled as “foreign mercenaries” of the East or West, that is, as politically instrumentalised actors, uneducated or conservative opponents of economic progress, or even as a threat to national interests.

The challenges activists face can be characterised as physical, legal, digital, administrative, media and psychosocial. Physical risks include intimidation, threats, the presence of informal provocateur groups at protests, incidents during road blockades, as well as - in some cases - violent actions by the police, apprehension, and detention in unknown facilities belonging to members of the security service or unidentified persons. The Polekol report on the repression of environmental activists in Serbia for the period August-December 2024 shows the intensification of these pressures, especially during the anti-lithium protests, when more than 41 activists were arrested, often with vaguely explained charges and disproportionate measures of detention or punishment⁵⁴.

Decades of negative narratives about the civil sector have not bypassed the environmental activists, with the additional dimension of conspiracy theories. Tabloids and the very top of the state present them as an obstacle to development, political opponents, terrorists or representatives of foreign interests. Interestingly, for internal purposes, they are regularly labelled as foreign mercenaries of the “West”, while to the West, if they oppose the projects of local companies, they are presented as instructed by the East and inundated with anti-Western ideas. The loaded question of who stands behind relatively successful environmental initiatives undermines the trust not only of the public, but also of potential allies such as new local initiatives. The movement largely depends on that trust. Other, less aggressive narratives that make action difficult stem from a misinterpretation of the role of the civil sector as a relevant and legitimate representative of the public interest.

Environmental initiatives cannot and should not act on behalf of the state or certain companies, but rather on behalf of local communities and the right of all citizens to live in a healthy environment. They cannot do the work of institutions and such expectations should not be promoted, because they lead to disappointment in the public at a time when trust and legitimacy are the most important support needed for action.

Legal pressures represent one of the most significant and often less visible forms of activist exhaustion. They include misdemeanour and criminal prosecution, police interviews, house searches, equipment seizure and SLAPP lawsuits (Strategic Lawsuit against Public Participation⁵⁵) which are used to intimidate, financially drain, and deter further public action⁵⁶. Such actions are not systematically recognised as a separate form of pressure, nor is there an effective mechanism of institutional protection of activists against their misuse. The state uses criminal law to discourage or intimidate citizens who publicly criticise the government, investors or harmful projects. The Report on repression further points to the tendency to criminalise freedom of speech and assembly by using criminal law provisions to qualify public statements and posts on social networks, or by framing non-violent civil protests as security threats. In this way, public criticism, protest and civic organising are moved from the sphere of legitimate democratic participation to the sphere of security risk and criminal prosecution, which can discourage activists and citizens from speaking publicly and acting to protect the public interest.

Digital risks have become one of the key challenges for contemporary environmental activism. They include account hacking, unauthorised posting of personal information on the Internet for the purpose of intimidation, harassment or revenge (doxxing), coordinated discrediting campaigns, unauthorised data collection, surveillance of communication, and compromising of electronic devices via spyware tools and software. Amnesty International's "Digital Prison"⁵⁷ report and Polekol's report on the repression of environmental activists specifically point to allegations of the use of invasive digital surveillance tools, including cases where activists' telephones were confiscated, searched and compromised while they were detained in police stations or while in contact with security intelligence services. Such pressures show that the control of civil society no longer takes place only in the physical, legal and media space, but also by way of technological mechanisms of digital surveillance. Digital security must therefore become an integral part of the protection of environmental activists, because the compromise of a single device, account or communication group can endanger not only an individual, but also a wider network of people, contacts, documents and action strategies.

In addition, activists and civil society organisations are subjected to the abuse of financial surveillance and public disclosure of sensitive data. The Polekol report states that certain pro-regime media campaigns have used financial data of civil society organisations, including information on transactions, donors, employees and personal data which are available to competent tax and financial institutions, in order to present them as agents of foreign influence or actors engaged in unlawful activities. Apart from damaging the reputation of individuals and organisations, such campaigns are a direct security risk for individuals and citizen associations. Publishing names, photographs, addresses, employment information, donations or other personal and organisational data can lead to targeting, harassment, threats, and additional pressure on activists, employees and their families. Therefore, the purpose of defamation is not to objectively inform the public, but to produce suspicion, stigmatise organisations and intimidate people who participate in the protection of the public interest.

Administrative obstructions reflected in limited access to information, untimely publication of studies and planning documents, non-transparent procedures, short deadlines for public debates and formalistic implementation of consultations are also significant challenges for environmental activists. The most recent example of preventing public participation occurred during the public debate on the Draft Strategy for the Management of Mineral Resources, which was held at the Chamber of Commerce of the Republic of Serbia. Environmental activists, as well as academics and professors, were prevented from entering the hall by security officers under the pretext that there was not enough space, although photos that were published at the same time showed that rooms were half-empty⁵⁸. This sort of practice reduces the space for citizen participation and public oversight to procedural formality, while key decisions are often made in advance or without a real possibility for the public to influence them. It is especially problematic when institutions do not provide independent monitoring, relevant data or timely information, and then use the absence of data as an argument to challenge the critical analyses of experts and activists.

Pressures also affect the academic community when its members become publicly involved in environmental disputes⁵⁹. Scientists, researchers and university professors who point out environmental, health or economic risks of large projects may be exposed to professional integrity challenges, pressure to withdraw papers⁶⁰, media attacks or threats. This endangers not only individuals, but also the public function of science: making expert knowledge available to citizens, and serving as a corrective to political and economic interests. That is why the protection of academic freedom and the integrity of experts is an important part of protecting the public interest. Expert knowledge must be available to citizens and local communities without fear of reprisal, discreditation or professional consequences for those who share it publicly.

In addition to external pressures, the movement's internal weaknesses also represent significant challenges. The environmental scene is geographically, culturally and politically fragmented, and many initiatives often depend on a small number of highly engaged people, short-term donations, volunteer work and informal solidarity networks. Although this shows the breadth of the movement, it also makes coordination, exchange of knowledge and joint strategic action difficult. Insufficiently developed coordination between local and informal initiatives, urban (and registered) organisations, experts and national networks limits the long-term sustainability and ability of the movement to respond to crises in a swift and systematic fashion. In practice, individual groups alone bear the burden of legal proceedings, communication with the media, community mobilisation, document analysis and logistics, despite the fact that they are facing problems that exceed their capacities.

In addition, prolonged exposure to pressures, uncertainties and conflicts leads to psychosocial burnout. Activists simultaneously perform organisational, legal, communication, research and logistical tasks, often without adequate institutional, financial or emotional support⁶¹. Therefore, strengthening the environmental movement does not only mean responding to repression and external pressures, but also investing in internal infrastructure: better coordination, division of responsibilities, more stable financing, mutual support, transfer of knowledge, care of people, and mechanisms that protect from burnout. Only a movement that develops its own capacities and protects the people who carry it forward can remain resilient, connected and able to defend the public interest in the long term.

Needs and Recommendations

Key needs of environmental activists and recommendations emerge from the above listed challenges. First of all, it is necessary to change the way in which the public understands the role of environmental activists. Their actions should not be viewed as a substitute for institutions, or as an extension of political or economic interests, but as a legitimate form of protection of the public interest and citizens' rights to a healthy environment. It is therefore important that institutions and donors change their approach to environmental activism and stop reducing engagement to activities that support these wrong assumptions (such as activities related to cleaning up garbage or planting trees, for example). To change the narrative, it is necessary to develop an action and communication strategy that would systematically challenge discrediting narratives, strengthen the ability of local initiatives to communicate their demands in a clear and reasoned fashion, and return the focus of public debate to key issues: the legality of projects, transparency of procedures, environmental and health risks, and the accountability of institutions. It is especially important that communication be based on facts and verifiable data, with a clear articulation that environmental protection is not an idea that is against development, but a condition for development that is responsible and lawful.

Second, it is necessary to develop a transparent, regular and inter-institutionally connected system for monitoring the state of the environment and public health. Data on air, water and soil pollution, permits, inspections, health consequences, public investments and spatial plans must be public, searchable, up-to-date and understandable to citizens. In situations where institutional monitoring is absent, late or not reliable enough, non-institutional forms of monitoring should be supported as well - independent measurements, civil monitoring, expert analyses and cooperation with the academic community, while still insisting that the responsibility for systemic monitoring remain with the institutions.

Third, expert support is crucial. In practice, citizens are frequently faced with public inspections, debates, planning documents, impact studies, permits or inspection procedures only once the deadlines are already running. These deadlines are often short, while documents are technically complex. Therefore, it is not enough to provide occasional trainings or general legal manuals. It is necessary to establish a system of quick and accessible expert support to environmental activists and local communities that will be fast, understandable and available the moment a problem arises. Such a system should include lawyers, urban planners, hydrologists, biologists, forestry experts, doctors, epidemiologists, engineers, economists, as well as experts in public health, climate risks, mining, energy and spatial planning. Support does not always have to be provided in the form of a comprehensive study; a short expert opinion, review of a disputed document, help in formulating objections, interpretation of permits, analysis of an impact study or an explanation for the media are often sufficient. It is crucial to make expert knowledge accessible, comprehensible and applicable in public debates, addresses to institutions, media appearances and legal proceedings.

Fourth, it is necessary to strengthen legal protection against pressure, intimidation and SLAPP lawsuits. Activists need available and ongoing legal support for SLAPP lawsuits, misdemeanour and criminal cases, police pressure, withholding of information, misuse of data and other forms of legal exhaustion. They also need training concerning their rights,

especially at protests. Support should also include the establishment of solidarity funds for legal protection, networks of lawyers, and clear protocols for emergency response so that legal support is available at the moment when the pressure arises, not once the damage has already occurred or deadlines have been missed.

Fifth, it is necessary to develop security protocols for responding to crisis and emergency situations and establish a rapid response network that can provide legal advice, media response, digital assistance, psychological support and, if necessary, international visibility and representation in cases of serious pressure. Systematic training in digital security should become a standard part of support, especially for vulnerable groups of activists, including older and less digitally literate ones who are increasingly exposed to more sophisticated forms of surveillance and pressure.

Sixth, donor support must be more flexible, adapted to crisis situations, and stable in the long term. Environmental crises often arise suddenly: public review may take several days, documentation may be released during a holiday, machinery may be out in the field over a weekend, and a community may urgently need a lawyer, transportation, printed materials, a press conference, or an independent measurement. That is why there is a need for small and flexible funds for emergency interventions that enable a quick reaction within the short public procedures deadlines, but also multi-year basic support required for the work of organisations and networks. Long-term funding should cover coordination, administration, communications, equipment, travel, security, expert support, and the time of people who constantly work. Without such support, the movement will remain overly dependent on the enthusiasm, volunteer work and personal capacity of individuals.

Seventh, care of people must become an integral part of the environmental activists support. Environmental activism in Serbia often takes place in emotionally and existentially difficult circumstances, which in the long run can lead to activists' burnout, exhaustion and impaired health. Therefore, there is a need for spaces for rest, mutual support, reflection, psychological counselling and distribution of responsibilities within initiatives. The sustainability of the movement is not measured only by the number of actions, campaigns and media announcements, but also by the ability of people to remain engaged in the long term without endangering their health, safety and livelihood.

Eighth, it is necessary to invest in education on the topic of environmental protection, but also of broader economic and political systems that produce environmental conflicts. Activists need not only technical knowledge of laws and procedures, but also the ability to understand why public goods are treated as a resource that can be used for profit, why local communities are excluded from decision-making, why "development" is often used as a justification for the degradation of nature, and why women, poorer communities and rural areas are often disproportionately affected. Political-environmental education helps to view local struggles not as isolated incidents, but as part of a wider system, providing activists with arguments and confidence to link their demands to public health, labour rights, local self-government, social justice, gender equality and democracy.

Ninth, long-term sustainability of the environmental movement requires the involvement of young people and the systematic transfer of knowledge and experience between generations. Activism schools, field visits, mentoring programmes, local workshops and inter-generational exchanges can help educate young people and involve them equally in planning, researching,

organising and conducting campaigns, communicating with the community, and gradually taking responsibility with the support of those with greater experience. Older activists contribute local knowledge and experience, while young people bring new skills, digital tools and forms of communication. Such transfer of knowledge strengthens the continuity of the movement and prevents local struggles from depending on a small number of exhausted individuals.

Tenth, it is necessary to strengthen the horizontal networking of local initiatives and their connection with civil society organisations, the academic community, independent media, lawyers, doctors, trade unions and international actors. Such networking should be functional and focused on specific forms of support: legal aid, expert analysis, communication, media visibility and response in crisis situations.

Environmental problems often go beyond the local level, so regional and international cooperation are important mechanisms for strengthening capacities and protecting the public interest. Cooperation should be practical and may include, for example, exchange of experiences, joint campaigns, access to European institutions, international pressure in the event of the absence of action by domestic institutions, comparative review of legal models from other countries, development of model laws, translation of documents, and contacts with journalists and experts. In this way, local communities receive confirmation that they are not alone and that their struggles are not small or isolated, but part of a broader defence of public goods.

In the long term, the sustainability of the environmental movement depends on a combination of legal protection, security support, the available expertise, more stable funding, local mobilisation infrastructure, mutual coordination, care of people and protection from repression, political-environmental education and real participation of citizens in decision-making. Environmental activists act not only as guardians of natural resources, but also as actors of democratisation because they insist on transparency, accountability, access to information of public importance, and the right of communities to decide on the conditions affecting their own lives. Their protection is therefore not a narrow sector-issue of environmental protection, but a matter of public interest, the rule of law, and society's ability to protect those who point to risks, malfeasances and institutional failures.

Conclusion

This report shows that the issue of environmental protection in Serbia cannot be viewed separately from the local crisis of institutions, the rule of law, public health and democratic decision-making, or from the global tendencies of repression of activists and increasing pressures on the environment. Environmental problems are not only the result of individual failures, technical deficiencies or insufficient investments; they reflect a deeper pattern of governance in which decisions of great public importance are often made without a clear strategic framework, without sufficient transparency, and without real participation of citizens. The absence of key planning documents, weak implementation of the existing regulations, insufficient inter-sector coordination and limited institutional capacities create a space in which development, mining, energy, infrastructural and industrial projects are viewed primarily through economic or political benefits, while their environmental, health and social costs are relegated to the background.

In such a context, environmental activists assume a role that goes beyond the classical understanding of civic activism. They act not only as opponents of individual projects, but as actors who defend the public interest, the right to a healthy environment, access to information, and the right of communities to participate in decisions that directly affect them. They often act where institutions fail: when information is not available, when public debates are conducted only formally, when monitoring is not reliable, when there is a lack of health care for the population in vulnerable locations, or when local communities are faced with projects about which they were not informed in a timely fashion.

The report particularly points to the diversity of the environmental movement in Serbia, which consists of local communities, residents of rural areas, farmers, informal initiatives, civil society organisations, experts, scientists, urban movements and individuals. It is precisely this diversity that is its strength, as it enables the connection of local experience, expert knowledge and broader social mobilisation. However, at the same time, it also creates challenges: fragmentation, uneven capacities, difficult coordination, and dependence on a small number of individuals who often work without sufficient support. Activists from smaller and rural areas remain particularly vulnerable, as they are more exposed to pressures, social isolation, media targeting and security risks.

One of the key findings is that pressures on environmental activists come through multiple interconnected channels. They can be physical, legal, digital, administrative, communication and psychological. SLAPP lawsuits, misdemeanour lawsuits, intimidation, smear campaigns, withholding of information, complicated procedures and digital attacks do not occur in isolation. Their combined effect is to exhaust, discourage, and send the message that public engagement carries a high price.

Unfortunately, this report does not explain newer phenomena that are just taking the stage in environmental battles, such as data centres, wind-parks, drone production and other high-tech equipment for the military industry, which will certainly need to be paid attention to in the upcoming period. Until then, we should rely on experiences outside Serbia's borders, especially those from neighbouring countries, as these can indicate how the development of the environmental movement will unfold and what will be needed in the future.

Recommendations from this report indicate the need for multi-layered and long-term support. Activists need legal protection, security protocols, digital security, expert assistance, access to data, flexible funding, communication skills, psychosocial support, and better connections with allies in the country, region, and international community. However, it is equally important that institutions change their attitude towards civil society. Environmental activists must not be treated as obstacles to development and political opponents, but rather as legitimate participants in decision-making processes and a corrective mechanism where public policies do not sufficiently protect citizens and nature.

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ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

FROM THE SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

Publisher:

The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

Đure Jakšića 6/5, Belgrade

www.bezbednost.org

Authors:

Iva Marković and Žaklina Živković, Polekol

Design:

Srđan Ilić

ISBN-978-86-6237-275-8

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55042/GH016372>

June 2026 - Belgrade

