

# FEMINISTS IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Stories from Central and Eastern Europe



# FEMINISTS IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT



This publication was produced as part of the project “Feminists in the Environmental Movement” organised by the Green European Foundation (GEF) with the support of Cooperation and Development Network Eastern Europe (CDN) and with the financial support of the European Parliament to the Green European Foundation.

The Green European Foundation (GEF) is a European-level political foundation whose mission is to contribute to a lively European sphere of debate and to foster a greater involvement of citizens in European politics. GEF strives to mainstream discussions on European policies and politics both within and beyond the Green political family. The foundation acts as a laboratory for new ideas, offers cross-border political education and a platform for cooperation and exchange at the European level.

## **Green European Foundation**

Rue du Fossé – 1536 Luxembourg  
Brussels Office: Mundo Madou –  
Avenue des Arts 7-8, 1210  
Brussels Tel: +32 2 329 00 50  
E-mail: [info@gef.eu](mailto:info@gef.eu)  
Website: [www.gef.eu](http://www.gef.eu)

## **Cooperation and Development**

Network Eastern Europe  
Rue du Taciturne 34, 1000, Brussels,  
Belgium  
E-mail: [office@cdnee.org](mailto:office@cdnee.org)  
Website: [www.cdnee.org](http://www.cdnee.org)

Disclaimer: The articles reflect the opinions of the individual authors and/or interviewees, not necessarily those of GEF or any of the partners. The European Parliament is not responsible for the content of this publication.

Authors:

**Karla Kurtoić, Anamarija Divković, Özge Doruk,  
Natalya Sofronova, Maja Klimentić, Elena Petrovska, Palina Burko**

Editorial team:

**Maja Klimentić, Pablo Pastore, Masha Pashkova-Dzneladze.**

Coordination of publication development:

**Maja Klimentić**

GEF Project Coordinator:

**Sien Hasker**

Other project partners:

**Visio (Finland),  
Green Economics Institute (UK);  
Green Thought Association (Turkey);  
Oikos (Belgium),  
Fundacja Strefa Zieleni (Poland)**

Proofreading:

**René Báez-Humanes**

Design:

**Lucija Gudek**



Published in Belgrade, December 2022

## Table of contents

- 2** Introduction
- 4** Times of change: nature and humans
- 8** Women and nature in the context of climate crisis
- 14** Environmental activism in rural Croatia: the case of Konjščina
- 40** Farming and empowerment: resilience of women in Podrinje, rural Bosnia and Herzegovina
- 74** The town of thermal power plants: Çan
- 88** Gender Inequality within the Environmental Movement: Voices from Turkey
- 100** Endurance of a culture: story of Tipshirma, village in Chuvash republic, Russia
- 120** How people become environmental activists
- 128** The Black Triangle: story of water loss in Uhelná, Czech Republic
- 142** Highway construction in Čačak, Serbia: No-way to the High-way!
- 159** Network of women for the nature and environmental protection in Serbia
- 166** Shades of the Baltic Sea: stories of coastal Latvia
- 188** Reflections from the editorial team
- 192** Team behind the project

## Introduction

Dear reader,

We are happy to present to you this publication that explores the connection between feminism, youth and the environmental struggles in Central and Eastern Europe. In previous years, we have deeply explored these concepts within urban areas, but the struggle in rural and de-urbanised areas remains under-examined. While green successes and support often concentrate in urban centres, engaging and mobilising rural communities is crucial to achieve many of our goals, particularly in our fight for a socially just green transition.

Having realised how relevant these discussions are, the CDN's Executive Committee and the Gender Working Group decided to team up with several organisations in the Green European Foundation's project *Feminists in the Environmental Movement*. The project explores the intersections of gender and environmental justice across Europe, with a range of activities from developing e-learning resources on green feminism to hosting round-table reflections on ecofeminism. With CDN's support, this included an extensive research on the lives of young activist women in rural and de-urbanised areas. We aimed to share with the world the stories of their struggles, victories and hopes for the future, and spotlight these voices that are rarely heard on the European stage.

The authors of the articles in our publication exploring local stories are seven young women living in the Czech Republic, Latvia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey and the Chuvash Republic in Russia. The project was developed in autumn 2021 and kicked off in the beginning of 2022. The local reporters attended training in March 2022, where they learnt about practicalities, methods and ethics of reporting and article writing. Just a few days before the training, the full-scale war in Ukraine started, and related struggles have continued to be a looming presence in the work of the reporters. The events that have taken place in Central and Eastern Europe in 2022 have led us all

to re-evaluate the priorities and focus of our work as Greens. However, we can see the timeless motives in the stories of the local reporters as a means to promote resilience and positive change on a local level, despite the ongoing changes in the global political dynamics.

The topics explored varied between countries with the overarching goal of giving space to young women affected by the environmental issues in rural and de-urbanised areas. In the process, we discovered even deeper connections between the main aspects (gender, environment, youth), and intersections with politics, economy, culture and many other topics and specific local contexts. When we apply an ecofeminist lens to these stories, it is not only to understand how the people involved relate the different aspects of their identity to the environmental struggles that they and their communities face, but also to recognise the parallels across time and place. Where do they find agency? Where do they encounter resistance? And what are the tools and support they long for as grassroots activists, but which they may not receive in the same ways as their urban counterparts?

While reading the different articles, you will explore the lives of women in rural areas, their perspectives and tools to cope with the local issues, and the multiple forms of oppression they face. We invite you to truly hear them out, explore further intersections between the topics mentioned, compare them to your personal experience with activism, and consider the importance of similar stories from your region. Let's stand in solidarity and truly "leave no one behind" in our path towards a just society!

EDITORIAL TEAM

## Times of change: nature and humans

BY: MAJA KLIMENTIĆ

In the history of Earth, scientists have found proof of 5 great extinctions, periods of a few million years during which about 75% of world species were lost forever. These mass extinctions so far have been caused by natural phenomena, such as volcanic eruptions or asteroid impacts<sup>1</sup>. While having a huge impact on the ecosystems and atmosphere of Earth, they shaped the world as we see it today, and they are a natural part of a planet's life. However, the great extinctions are not the only events to shape the earth – many catastrophic events in Earth's history have shaped it, but the major difference is that the great extinctions triggered a chain reaction in the planet's chemistry that led to massive changes<sup>2</sup>.

The last mass extinction, the one which erased dinosaurs from existence, occurred 65.5 million years ago. Today, many scientists claim we are facing the 6<sup>th</sup> great extinction. However, this one is not caused by a natural phenomenon, but by human activity and unsustainable use of land, water, and energy resources<sup>3</sup>.

In the past 100-200 years, 30% of the land that sustains biodiversity has been converted for mass food production – industrial agriculture is responsible for 80% of global deforestation. Species that depend on these resources are banished to unfavourable environmental conditions, which causes wildlife populations to plummet by almost 70%<sup>4</sup>. If these numbers are not shocking enough, let's rephrase: during Earth's history, approximately 10 to 100 species went extinct per year, and in the near future, this number is expected to be around 55.000

to 73.000 species per year<sup>5</sup>.

Although there are many examples of human behaviour that is harmful for the planet, it is difficult to determine which is the leading cause of climate change, but it all comes down to unsustainable, profit-driven practices. Deforestation, industrial emissions, soil degradation, toxic waste disposal, the introduction of invasive species – they are all caused by humans striving for their own piece of land. Unfortunately, many don't realise the interconnection of actions and their effects in nature, which ultimately all come back. In fact, despite our insatiable eagerness to gain control of land, we cannot control it.

Here's one of many examples of how vulnerable we are to changes in the climate: Laki volcanic eruption in 1783 ejected large amounts of volcanic ash into the atmosphere above Europe. Aside from causing biodiversity loss, plague and famine in proximity of the eruption, ash particles spread worldwide and caused a mini climate change that lasted for decades. Due to decreased sun access, drop in temperatures and extreme weather, agricultural crops yields were reduced. In the times when the majority of the population depended on agriculture, these changes caused famine and social changes, and many believe this was the precursor of the French revolution<sup>6</sup>.

This is an example of something we also see today in different parts of the world, which proves that climate change does not only affect nature's dynamics, but it is also a leading cause of social changes. Hence, despite the social, political, and economic challenges we face today, we must add the environment onto almost every agenda.

The climate change happening today has a leading place in the discussions about urgent actions we need to take to ensure we have a (better) future. It is often mentioned in the narrative of "we have this many years to make some change before it becomes too late". However, its catastrophic effects don't have the same schedule every-

1 *What is a great extinction and are we facing a 6th one?* November 2022 <https://www.nhm.ac.uk>

2 *Understanding evolution* November 2022 <https://evolution.berkeley.edu>

3 *What is the 6th mass extinction and what can we do about it.* November 2022 <https://www.worldwildlife.org>

4 *Living planet report 2022*, November 2022 <https://livingplanet.panda.org/en-US/>

5 *How many species go extinct on average per day and per year*, November 2022 <https://a-z-animals.com>

6 Momčilović, Predrag. *Održivost, odrast i hrana* (2019). Institut za urbane politike, Beograd & zajedničko.org

where, nor do they impact different parts of the world equally. Today we can see droughts, floods, fires, mass migrations and many other effects, which are expected to get only worse<sup>7</sup>. In such conditions, beside making sustainable changes worldwide, especially in target areas such as energy, industry and agriculture, we must give attention to those who are suffering right now. And those are the ones living in close contact with nature, to whom slight changes in temperature or pollution levels could mean a whole year-worth of resources. An example of such communities that need to be prioritised are those in the underprivileged and exploited regions of the world, where extreme weather conditions are seen both in high and low temperatures, and exploitative practices by “more advanced economies”. In Europe, these communities are the ones that are dependent on natural resources for their economies<sup>8</sup>. However, this dependence is often coupled with agriculture – and agriculture is the branch of economy that is most sensitive to climate changes. Ironically, industrial agriculture is also one of the largest contributors to climate change, in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions<sup>9</sup>. Considering this, we should urgently open considerations on differences of climate change impacts on urban and rural areas, in terms of direct dependence on natural resources.

Although regulating the leading causes of climate change requires a massive amount of both political and systemic changes, it is important to consider the importance of personal lifestyle changes and incorporating sustainable practices. These lifestyle changes are becoming somewhat popular trends worldwide and are the backbones of entire movements. But in hidden parts of the world that are isolated from social trends, we can find communities which have upheld such practices for centuries. They don't do it because of political values or trends, but because this is the lifestyle that is in harmony with nature. Residents of rural communities worldwide deeply depend on nature

and its resources, therefore, any little changes in the climate or even in the biodiversity can affect their well-being significantly<sup>10</sup>. Some rural communities, because of long-lasting agricultural tradition, fall victims of the exploitation of their resources for profit, or are impacted by other harmful activities in their proximity. In the stories to follow, we will see some examples of those communities, as well as the ones which have managed to turn the situation around. Despite the climate crisis, they can show us how to live more sustainable lives, adapt to new realities, and preserve our environment.



<sup>7</sup> *Effects of climate change*, November 2022 <https://www.worldwildlife.org>

<sup>8</sup> *Countries most affected by climate change*, November 2022 <https://www.iberdrola.com>

<sup>9</sup> Momčilović, Predrag. *Održivost, odrast i hrana* (2019). Institut za urbane politike, Beograd & zajedničko.org

<sup>10</sup> *Rural communities*, November 2022 <https://nca2014.globalchange.gov>

## Women and nature in the context of climate crisis

BY: KARLA KURTOIĆ

**M**okosh is a goddess in Slavic mythology. Her name is derived from the incantation repeated by people when they prayed for the land to become moist, wet (Proto-Slavic: *moknŕti*, “to make moist”). She is considered the Mother, the goddess of life and fertility. To the world of the living she brings the moisture, “the wet”, necessary to give and sustain life. Every year, she unlocks the door of the underworld, imagined as the lush, green land of “the wet”, from which she brings spring to the world above by releasing warm spring dew<sup>11</sup>.

She is not the only female goddess of life worshipped as Mother Nature – there are also Thesis, Aphrodite and Heba in Greek mythology, the Iranian goddess Anahita, Lakshmi in Hinduism, Pachamama for the Incas... Examples are plenty all over the world.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her famous book *The Second Sex*, speaks about the stage of human cognition and civilization where women were regarded as holders of a mystical power endowed with fertility. There was a time when humankind still didn't have the means to understand the way nature works, both in the agricultural sense and in the sense of creating offspring. When it comes to the land, there were no advanced technologies to cultivate the fields, and the destiny of the crops was believed to be in the hands of a mystical force. Through the notion of fertility, women were equated to mother nature as such. The woman was expected to stay with the land and to work on it, as they hold the same characteristics, while the man could roam around for the purpose of hunting or war. Therefore, the woman was used for procreation, but it was not yet recognised which mix of factors this mechanism of procreation needed to function, and therefore it could

<sup>11</sup> Katičić, Radoslav. “Gospa Međugorska i mokra Mokoš.” *Ethnologica Dalmatica*, September 15th, 2012. <https://hrcaj.srce.hr/file/158401>.

not yet be controlled. There was still no master of a woman's destiny, much like the land was out of human control and subject to unknown outside forces. Nature was still revered and dreaded.

Mokosh stands for “the wet” which gives life. Her symbolism was by consequence also connected with male sperm as life-giving matter when introduced to a fertile environment<sup>12</sup>. This introduction of the male element is interesting, as it implies that women were no longer regarded as the ones who give life, but only as those who bear. In that sense, they were still parallel to mother nature, which also receives seeds to grow crops and produce. However, the power dynamics is different from this perspective as now the man is perceived as essential for giving life, he makes it possible. Mankind becomes aware of the basic functioning of procreation, which is not happening by mere lucky chance. This is not yet a fully male-centred religion, but it is worth mentioning that some ecofeminists believe the shift from worshipping goddesses to worshipping male deities is what prompted the subjugation of women, as the two are connected. Fertility was no longer seen as sacred and mystical, but something that was man's creation<sup>13</sup>.

In the Marxist theory that seeks to explain the history of the oppression of women, the work women do, or rather the value of their work, is defined as the motive for the oppression. The hypothesis, set by Engels, is that women are oppressed because their work is not seen as equally important as traditional male work, which would mean that their subordination is created on the same basis as the subordination of the working class. Before extensive agriculture, even though the woman was in charge of the land and stayed at home, her work was important and valued – man and woman were equal<sup>14</sup>. But then, the invention of the plough dramatically increased the area of soil man

<sup>12</sup> Katičić, Radoslav. “Gospa Međugorska i mokra Mokoš.”

<sup>13</sup> Gaard, Greta, and Lori Gruen. “Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health.” Wesleyan University, 1993. <http://lgruen.faculty.wesleyan.edu/files/2011/05/Gaard.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> de Beauvoir, Simone. “Chapter 3: The Point of View of Historical Materialism.” Essay. In *The Second Sex*, 87–94. New York, United States: Vintage Books, 2011.

could control. In this way, the results of man's work were multiplied, and with the same amount of effort he could produce a lot more. Intensified production also required intensified labour. As private property is born, the man who is the master of the soil can demand labour from other fellow men, becoming their master as well. The products of woman's work, then, became only additional to that of man, and no longer regarded as essential. This is when the women's oppression starts. The goal of Marxists was to abolish discrimination towards and among workers. According to the theory, socialism would be the solution for not only the oppression of the working class, but also the problem of women's subordination.

It's true that, traditionally, women's work is often not considered "real work" since it's not a part of the economic system; thus, this type of work is systematically excluded from it. Household work and care, for example, is work that is performed primarily and overwhelmingly by women, and from which the community indeed benefits. However, in the current economic system, it doesn't generate value<sup>15</sup>. Not because it's inherently worthless, but simply because the system is based on exploitation for the sake of profit instead of being focused on the well-being of society. In terms of the environment, the essay *Toward global justice and planetary health* by Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen, points out that a clean lake is worthless in our economic system. But when it is polluted, the companies have to pay for it to be cleaned up. This task can then be performed by a business and generate profit within the current economic system, which makes it seem useful, and it is usually performed by men<sup>16</sup>.

However, in its core, the subordination of women is, according to Simone de Beauvoir, unique and anchored in the same characteristic that women share with nature – fertility. Eventually, humans discover new metals, new agricultural technologies and methods, and learn more about the way they can influence fertility of land. Man becomes

<sup>15</sup> Gaard, Greta, and Lori Gruen. "Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health."

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

its master. This also influences the way human communities are organised, and so begins the process that brought us to the traditional image of a family that we have today. The idea stayed the same – the woman stays at home while the man goes out for "more important" work, even though the nature of the work changed completely. With scientific progress, so were revealed the secrets of human procreation. Nature was analysed and experimented with, seen as no longer alive, but mechanical<sup>17</sup>. These changes in mindset contributed to the domination of women by men. An interesting take on this relation can be found in the book *Hysteric* by Nelly Arcan. She writes that equality between man and woman could exist if ovulation was prompted by an orgasm, and not simply ensured by an independent system that doesn't take into consideration the emotional state and the sensations of the woman. By the very fact that they can bear offspring, women are only superficially respected, but really treated as instruments of production with the sole purpose of procreation.

This is what the premise of ecofeminism is based on – women and the environment are subject to parallel oppression. Françoise d'Eaubonne has, in her book *Feminism or Death*, invited the reader to abolish this subordination of women and nature or otherwise be the cause of their own downfall. If there's any way nature is different from a woman, it's that it cannot be subjected to ideology. Nature will not internalise and rationalise the patriarchy. With scientific punctuality, it will destroy whoever tries to pose themselves above it. From an ecofeminist perspective, both the oppression of women and the capitalist over-exploitation of land and other resources are the result of patriarchal activity. The inherent values are masculine and the highest gain is defeating all those weaker than oneself to impose one's own will over them, regardless of what might be lost in the process. Profit of one is above all else and is the root of both environmental deterioration and social oppression.

In that sense, even if the problem is twofold, it can be solved by im-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



plementing only one solution. By making one change, we can create a more just society and establish a harmonic relationship with nature. This is what ecofeminists strive for – they do not see these two struggles as separate<sup>18</sup>. Ecofeminism actually points out that, even though environmental pollution and climate change obviously affect everyone, women are first in line to suffer the consequences as they are in charge of maintaining the normality of life and stability of nourishment. Just one of many examples can be found in India, in the western state of Rajasthan, which is hit with a groundwater level crisis. Women are in charge of groundwater management and responsible for drawing the water. Groundwater shortages mean they have to work harder and longer to get water, and organise the household tactically so that there is enough water for hygiene, growing vegetables and other needs. The project with the goal of training women to do groundwater measurements is ongoing, and this would allow them to exchange information about groundwater among themselves and empower each other in their community<sup>19</sup>. Generally, in the future that we are preparing for, which is one of more common natural disasters, the tasks related to care-giving will fall even heavier on the backs of women all around the world. So far, we have seen that women are generally harshly afflicted by such events, as was the case, among many others, in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina in southern Louisiana<sup>20</sup>.

What ecofeminism also advocates is inclusiveness and unity. The contributions of all of the members of the community should be respected and everyone's perspective should hold equal weight. The systems we operate within today are privileging certain groups over others, and to this ecofeminism opposes dialogue and consensus. Many perceive feminism in general as a movement by which women

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

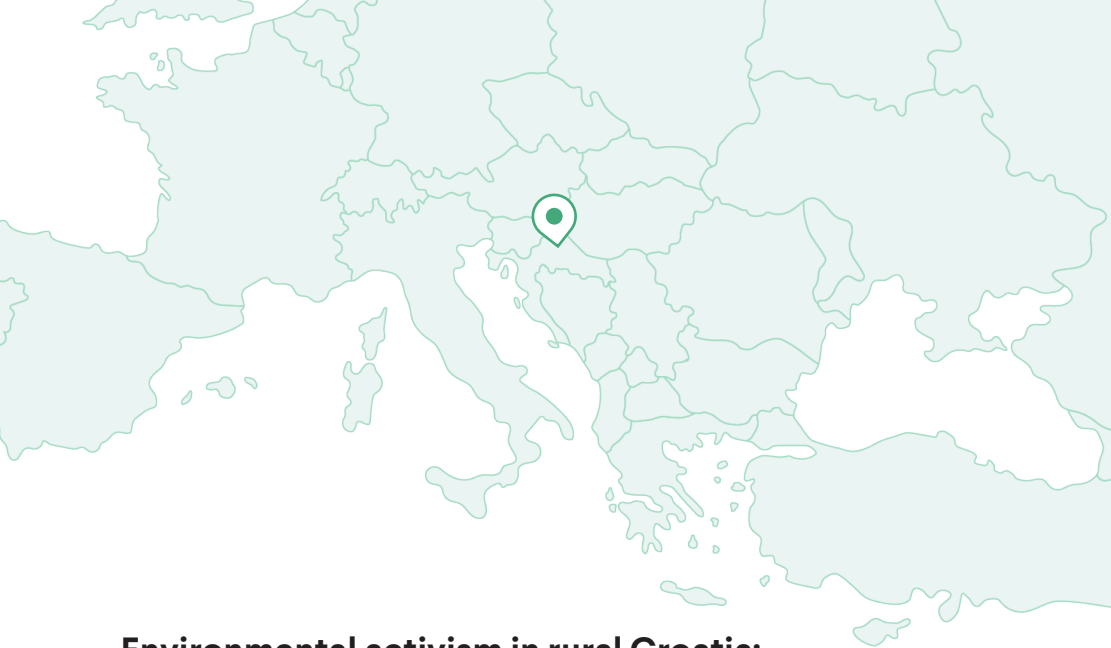
<sup>19</sup> Sahana Ghosh, "Bridging the Gender Gap through Groundwater Monitoring in a Rajasthan Village," Mongabay, June 30, 2020, <https://india.mongabay.com/2020/06/bridging-the-gender-gap-through-groundwater-monitoring-in-a-rajasthan-village/>.

<sup>20</sup> Elaine Enarson, "Women and Girls Last? Averting the Second Post-Katrina Disaster," Items, May 30, 2019, <https://items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/women-and-girls-last-averting-the-second-post-katrina-disaster/>.

try to become like men. It is thought that women strive towards being perceived as independent, as the winners of some game. But this is not equality, this means that these values, inherently masculine, are still more respected than the feminine, relational values. Many believe that by providing equal rights to women within an inherently oppressive and unjust system is when feminism reaches its goal and ends. Yet feminism strives for ending the domination over the oppressed, not extending domination. Ecofeminism, with the same goal, stretches itself even beyond the gender dimension and into environmental practices.

Overall, taking the gender dimension into account when discussing climate change and environmental policies offers a more comprehensive image of the problem, and therefore makes it possible for a more efficient solution to be found. This publication should be interesting and eye-opening for anybody who is interested in the injustices of our society and the solutions that the oppressed found to resist it.





## Environmental activism in rural Croatia: the case of Konjščina

BY: KARLA KURTOIĆ

When we think about environmental activism today, what first comes to mind for most people are big organisations like Greenpeace and huge protests such as Fridays for Future. These protests usually convey general, all-encompassing messages, and although the goals of these types of activism are extremely positive, admittedly, they can be vague. But climate activism also has a smaller-scale, more concrete dimension, which this story is going to present. We typically don't imagine a small community fighting against a specific problem, but this type of action can bring great results and create a butterfly effect. The environmental struggle in rural communities is an interesting phenomenon. Rural areas are usually considered as the “less proactive” and more rigid counterpart to urban areas. But when the times get tough, people truly unite and tangible results are achieved. This could also be connected with the idea of shared responsibility – in rural areas there are fewer inhabitants and people are naturally instigated to act with the “if not me, who?” attitude. Also, what they are fighting for or against is a specific problem that would directly impact

their lives, which gives them further motivation to make things right. Precisely such a thing happened in Konjščina (pronunciation: Konshchina), a small town in the county of Krapina-Zagorje in north-western Croatia. The entire municipality counts only 3318 inhabitants, with no more than 914 people living in the actual town, and the remaining population of 2404 scattered in the surrounding countryside.<sup>21</sup> Citizens in these respective territories sometimes exhibit an almost comical tension towards each other – it's the “ones from the centre” (the town) versus the “ones from the villages”. It's usually about who has better roads or where the street lights should be on all night – but all these differences were forgotten when the time came to unite in action for a common cause.

In 2019, the community in Konjščina started their struggle against the construction of an incineration plant. The plans for the plant were shrouded in mystery and the citizens felt that they had too little information about what was actually happening. They organised themselves and created a green citizens' initiative KESK (Krizni Eko Stožer Konjščina, rough translation: Eco-Crisis Management Committee) in order to block the plans for the incineration plant.



Image 1: Konjščina Castle and Church

<sup>21</sup> <https://dzs.gov.hr/vijesti/objavljeni-konacni-rezultati-popisa-2021/1270>

The story we are about to tell will not only point out the problems of a plant or the poor environmental practices in a single municipality; rather, it will uncover the dysfunctions of broader systems of waste management and corruption. This is a story about how the fight for environmental justice can change political power dynamics. But before we get to the present and future state of the issue at hand in Konjščina, let's take a look at the background of the problem and see what it is all about.

### **Waste management in the EU**

The word *waste* designates all the items and substances we don't use anymore and want to get rid of. Europe is the world leader in recycling, but still creates a lot of waste. According to Eurostat, EU created altogether 4.8 tonnes of waste per capita in 2020<sup>22</sup>. In Croatia, the waste generation per capita amounted to 1483 kg of waste in the same year, which is certainly on the lower end of EU statistics. This makes sense – Croatia is among the poorest countries of the EU. With less money, there's simply less economic activity which would lead to production of waste, both on an individual level and on an industrial level. People with more money buy, build and consume more – and vice versa.

But let's put it into perspective. According to the mentioned European statistics, 20.2% of the waste is household waste, which means that one citizen of Konjščina created 300 kg of waste at home in one year. Therefore, we can say that the inhabitants of the municipality of Konjščina, that is to say 3318 people, created on average 993 960 kg of waste in their homes in 2020. According to documentation from 2018, the nearby landfill in Tugonica has the capacity to hold 5 776 000 kg of waste per year, out of which 5 500 000 kg is supposed to be municipal waste<sup>23</sup>. This landfill already has problems. Local residents have been pointing out since 2014 that the landfill's capacity is extended beyond what it should be. The Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Develop-

ment actually issued the decision to close the landfill in 2018. However, waste continued to be shipped there even after the decision. When citizens demanded answers, the Ministry changed the story and claimed they had announced the end of waste disposal activity in the Tugonica landfill only by mistake<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, the landfill remained open after all. The landfill is overflowing with waste at this point, and according to the statistics, just the little community of Konjščina creates 18% of the waste that could end up in Tugonica every year. Now, of course, not all of that waste goes directly to Tugonica, as some of it is also recycled. Numbers show that about 42% of waste in Croatia ended up in landfills in 2018<sup>25</sup>, while the rest was treated differently (even though this percentage is probably not that high for municipal waste). The burning question is: where will we go with all our waste when we fill up the last landfill?

One might think that people themselves don't contribute to the overall quantity of waste in a significant way and that the majority of it is a result of construction work and other large-scale economic activity. However, in Croatia, households alone actually create a lot of waste. As previously mentioned, Eurostat statistics show that 20.2% out of the 1483 kg of waste per capita in 2020 was household waste, which is among the top five highest rates for municipal waste in the EU. Waste generation increases with economic development, especially exploitative and unsustainable development, which Croatia strives for in the upcoming period. In Croatia's waste management plan for the 2017-2022 period, it has been predicted that the quantity of municipal waste will have increased by 2030<sup>26</sup>. The numbers from Eurostat show that, in general, the Croatian average of waste generation increased from 2018 to 2020 (1355 to 1483 kg per capita). However, there was a

24 <https://www.zagorje-international.hr/2019/02/07/ministarstvo-objavilo-pogresnu-odluku-odlagaliste-otpada-u-tugonici-nije-zatvoreno-smije-nastaviti-s-radom-do-popunjenja-kapaciteta/>

25 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Waste\\_treatment\\_by\\_type\\_of\\_recovery\\_and\\_disposal,\\_2018\\_\(%25\\_of\\_total\\_treatment\)\\_30-04-2021.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Waste_treatment_by_type_of_recovery_and_disposal,_2018_(%25_of_total_treatment)_30-04-2021.png)

26 *Waste management plan of the Republic of Croatia for the period 2017-2022* September 2022 <https://mingor.gov.hr>

22 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Waste\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Waste_statistics)

23 [https://kzz.hr/sadrzaj/natjecaji/javni-poziv-na-uvod-u-elaborat-gospodarenje-otpad/elaborat\\_gospodarenja\\_otpadom\\_Tugonica.pdf](https://kzz.hr/sadrzaj/natjecaji/javni-poziv-na-uvod-u-elaborat-gospodarenje-otpad/elaborat_gospodarenja_otpadom_Tugonica.pdf)

slight reduction in the average quantity of household waste produced (from 311 to 300 kg per capita), which is a beacon of hope that Croatia could turn in the right direction. Nevertheless, in the mentioned waste management plan it is concluded that “*the percentage of separately collected and recovered waste is still relatively low and the largest part of the produced municipal waste is landfilled without previous treatment*”<sup>27</sup>. Clearly Croatian administration doesn’t have a good solution for waste and is not acting in line with EU’s green targets, but really, what do we do with all the waste?



Image 2: Tugonica landfill: local government claims it is poorly regulated (source: zagorje.com)

Is incineration really the solution? The answer is both yes and no. In the waste treatment hierarchy, incineration is certainly above landfills, and there are examples of economically successful incineration plants in Europe. The one that is most famous and most talked about in Croatia is the Spittelau plant in Vienna, well-known for its architectural design. We can find a similar example in downtown Copenhagen, where a waste-to-energy plant doubles as a ski slope. Not too far away, the incineration plant in Stockholm is just one of the 34 waste-to-energy plants in Sweden, usually praised as highly useful for Sweden’s economy and society. There are examples in smaller towns as well, those

whose population count is comparable to that of Konjščina. One is located in Bazenhaid, in Switzerland – one of the champions when it comes to preventing the generation of waste, recycling, and incinerating waste to create energy.

But even though it looks great on paper, these plants aren’t always without flaw. The biggest problem seems to be the fact that these plants can be too large, which means that the waste needs to be shipped from areas that are further away. This, naturally, creates further environmental impact that could have been prevented if the waste were treated locally, but waste is a big industry today and companies will seek to build bigger plants for waste treatment if it means that it will increase their profit. Such concerns were raised in Copenhagen, where waste also has to be imported, for example from the UK, for the plant to remain profitable<sup>28</sup>.

A similar case is that of Paris, where one billion euros were invested to increase the capacity of an incineration plant in the suburbs of the city. The head of legal affairs of the environmental organisation Zero Waste France, Thibault Turchet, pointed out that this was not in accordance with the EU Green Deal. “*On 328 kg of residual waste produced by each inhabitant [...] of the Paris area, 75% of it could be separated at source and recycled or composted or reused. 75% is huge,*” Turchet said for the META podcast<sup>29</sup>. Instead of focusing on the extension of the capacity of the incinerator, a better idea would be to find more efficient ways to separate waste.

Indeed, by burning waste, we are actually burning valuable materials and resources that could be recycled or reused. We have to be aware that it is not only what happens to waste after it becomes waste that should interest us. It is important to take into consideration that everything that is now waste was once produced – and we used resources and energy for it. If we keep on extracting resources, over-consuming them, creating single-use items from them, and then

<sup>28</sup> <https://zerowasteurope.eu/2019/11/copenhagen-incineration-plant/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://meta.eeb.org/2019/01/24/one-billion-euro-up-in-smoke-meta-podcast/>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

burning them or accumulating them in the landfills so that we have to produce new ones from scratch, we are essentially sabotaging ourselves and making things more difficult than they ever needed to be. To achieve true circular economy, plastic waste has to be considered a valuable resource. Its very production impacts the environment greatly since it is for the most part produced from coal, natural gas and crude oil. Therefore, it makes sense to use that material as many times as possible instead of constantly wasting resources, creating new products, and then turning them into ashes and smoke.

Even if this weren't reason enough to avoid incineration whenever we can, there are also other issues that we shouldn't ignore. For example, it was recently revealed by an independent assessor that the plant in Paris, which had been a symbol of safe waste incineration in a populated area for years, was actually polluting the air and soil by releasing dioxins, environmental pollutants that can be highly toxic<sup>30</sup>, in amounts above the legal level<sup>31</sup>. When we consider all this, it becomes clear that incineration of waste in the current manner is not in accordance with the principles of circular economy that the EU has set and seeks to put into practice in the next 30 years. Therefore, it seems counter-productive to invest in this kind of projects when it's possible to invest in waste prevention and recycling.

The developed countries of Western Europe are usually the ones referred to as the leaders in the shift to clean energy, recycling etc., but they achieve this status partly at the expense of poorer countries. Of course, nobody likes waste. The EU exports a lot of its waste to non-EU countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia and India<sup>32</sup>. Even though exports to outside of the EU were planned to decrease from 2020, statistically, the volume stayed the same, with some changes in the final destinations of waste (for example the extreme decrease

30 <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/dioxins-and-their-effects-on-human-health>

31 <https://sciencespoedj2022.fr/2022/04/19/the-fumes-of-wrath-in-a-paris-suburb-the-largest-waste-incinerator-in-europe-could-be-poisoning-locals%E0%BF%BC/>

32 <https://emerging-europe.com/news/the-eu-needs-to-regulate-waste-exports-to-central-and-eastern-europe/>

of exports to China)<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, export to non-EU countries has been more strictly regulated since the beginning of 2021, when policies were put in place to prevent the export of waste for landfills and hazardous waste<sup>34</sup> to non-OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). Since then, it became more convenient to export waste within the Schengen area in comparison to shipping it elsewhere.

Companies in Western Europe make use of the fact that environmental laws are either not as strict or are less likely to be enforced in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and ship all types of waste across internal Schengen borders to that region, including hazardous waste, which is sometimes even improperly marked. This waste is often simply burnt or ditched to a landfill, which causes environmental deterioration in the receiving countries. Poland, Romania and Bulgaria seem to get the worst of it, with a certain portion of waste shipped illegally to those countries. Croatia has so far been shielded from this, probably thanks to the fact it was until recently situated on the outside of the Schengen area, which means the shipments going across the border were more thoroughly inspected. Another reason is probably the fact that Croatia simply doesn't have the infrastructure to deal with that amount of waste (yet).

Shipping waste to other, usually less privileged, parts of the EU is very much in accordance with the laws, and it is important to point out that it economically benefits both sides. This waste causes pollution in the receiving countries because it is processed with less control – the companies are aware of this, but they still do this type of business because it's profitable. Waste management, also called waste industry, is for sure one of the domains where the typical capitalist model of management is producing the polar opposite effect of the one that

33 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220525-1#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20exports%20of%20waste,19.7%20million%20tonnes%20in%202021>

34 *Eurostat podcast: Stats in a wrap – how do we manage waste in the EU?* August 2022 <https://ec.europa.eu>

would be beneficial in the environmental sense.

The problem is not only that companies will strive to trade already existing waste in order to gain profit (thereby creating emissions and finding loopholes in the legislation to minimise responsibility and maximise profit), but also that as long as the industry can make money trading waste, we will be encouraged to produce waste<sup>35</sup>. This is also the reason why, as mentioned before, companies strive to build bigger incineration plants than are necessary for the amount of waste created in a reasonable surrounding area. The future in this domain seems to be focused on industry growth and in this case the industry can only grow if we feed it more and more garbage. Despite of what it says in the newest EU legislation about waste prevention and minimisation, in practice we see that countries are preparing themselves for a future with more waste. And of course, nobody wants waste in their front yards, so it's better to export it as far away as possible.

Croatia was quite an industrially undeveloped country in the early 2000s and was poorly economically globalised. This, among other things, meant that nature was more or less preserved. The National Nature Protection Strategy, adopted in 2002 as part of the preparations for the application for EU membership, said that the consensus in Croatia was that the state of the environment in the country is better than that of the industrial EU member states. However, it is noted that the reports on the state of the environment at the time were not able to accurately and reliably depict the actual state as there was no harmonised methodology for data collection<sup>36</sup>. From the strategy it is clear that the administration was aware that economic development implied exploitation of resources and energy. Therefore, they planned on skipping the use of environmentally harmful and outdated technologies in order to rely more on durable options. Sadly, it doesn't seem that this came true. In the last 20 years we have witnessed the

environmental degradation of all elements and geographic parts – from the sea, through rivers and forests to mountains all over Croatia. Even with EU policies and goals to lead action, Croatia did not manage to prevent this. One of the reasons for this might be, as we mentioned, that environmental rules are not applied rigidly in Croatia, which companies in Western Europe might see as an opportunity. This brings us back to the case in Konjščina.

### **Why exactly is the incineration plant in Konjščina such a big problem?**

As we have seen, the biggest problem when it comes to managing waste is the conceptual gap between the future the EU is describing in its policies and the current investments directed towards a different future. The problem is amplified in CEE countries, where even well-directed investments can turn sour due to corruption and illegal activities being more widespread and less likely to be punished.

The solution for the waste management problem is circular economy and the related proximity principle, which poses an obligation to treat waste as close as possible to its place of origin. This was seemingly supposed to be implemented in Konjščina. However, the first recourse should be raising awareness about waste production and educating the public on how to reduce the overall amount of waste generated, both in households and in the industry. People are sadly not aware of their own waste. In info-campaigns dealing with the problem of waste, we often hear that we should make people aware of the beauty of nature, which is supposed to incite in them the reaction to preserve it. But people in rural areas live surrounded by nature, sometimes even wild nature, and they don't need to be shown how beautiful it is – they never forgot. Yet they don't perceive the amount of waste generated as anything beyond normal. Often, we also see illegal dumping sites in rural areas. People are not aware of their effect or that the waste is going to end up in their soil and in the water they drink. Even after the protests against the incineration plant in Konjščina, there was

35 <https://meta.eeb.org/2019/01/31/europes-waste-problem-in-numbers/#:~:text=Overall%20in%20the%20EU%2C%2030,opposed%20to%20133kg%20in%202017.>

36 [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2002\\_04\\_46\\_924.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2002_04_46_924.html)

no widespread initiative to raise awareness on the problem of waste generation. Many people who were involved in the struggle still don't understand that the waste has to go somewhere – and there's a lot of it. It is nice that people have it in them to unite in a fight for a good cause, but it is clearly time for further education. People are not aware of how waste is supposed to be managed, so they lack the skills to



Image 3: Parcel bought by the contractor for the incineration plant

criticise how it is currently managed and give their own ideas.

In the incineration plant in Konjščina, waste was supposed to get separated and the rest was supposed to be used to create energy. Local economy was supposed to bloom and the responsibility would also stay on a local level, which means malpractice would be less likely. However, the citizens of Konjščina, who, along with most of the population of Croatia, do not have that much trust in the government, were sceptical for several reasons.

Examples of eco-disasters connected with waste management in Croatia are many. Marišćina near Rijeka, maybe the most ambitious waste management project in Croatia to date, is the source of pro-

found stench reaching people's homes far and wide. Only in June and July 2022, there were six fires at the landfill, allegedly on the part where wood waste is stored. These fires started probably due to the fact that wood waste is mixed with other types of waste, like batteries<sup>37</sup>. The case is similar in Kaštijun, near Pula – the management is bad, the citizens are angry, and the landfill is a source of unpleasant smells. In Konjščina, a landfill was supposed to be put into function alongside the incineration plant. The same contractor has built similar facilities in Slovenia before, such as the one in Suhadole – which, of course, doesn't function properly. There, waste was supposed to be separated for recycling, but was actually just landfilled. There had also been several fires, and the smell forced citizens to keep their windows closed at almost all times. The waste in Suhadole was supposed to be cleared out from the facility in 2018, but in 2019 it was still being shipped there. In the past several years, the contractor's facilities were the subject of 17 complaints, they received two formal notices and paid €26 500 in fines. The contractor also allegedly directed death threats to the Head of a regional unit at the Forestry institute in Slovenia, after she released to the public the information about internal malpractice in waste management<sup>38</sup>.

Overall, there is more than enough reason to be mistrustful when it comes to promises about clean and sustainable waste treatment in a country where proper waste management is an exception rather than the rule. Not only that, but functional and self-sufficient facilities are actually fined by the state for not constantly rising their rates of recycling – even when they have already achieved rates as high as 50%<sup>39</sup>. The administration in charge of waste management is clearly lacking in skill to do it fairly and efficiently.

In Konjščina, the citizens who sold their land in order for the contrac-

37 <https://www.novilist.hr/rijeka-regija/rijeka/sto-se-dogada-na-mariscini-u-mjesec-i-pol-dana-izbilo-sest-pozara/>

38 <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/provjereni-otkriva-pozadinu-price-o-izgradnji-spalionice-otpada-u-konjiscini---556706.html>

39 <http://www.energetika-net.com/vijesti/zastita-okolisa/prelogu-kazna-jer-ne-odvaja-76-otpada-28050>

tor to consolidate the parcel for the plant were not properly informed on what the land would be used for. The municipality mayor received the official term sheet, which outlines the intended use of the land and the basic conditions of the undertaking, only after the land was acquired from the people<sup>40</sup>. On top of that, no feasibility study was conducted before selling the land to the contractor and adopting the land use plan, even though there is a legal obligation to have positive feasibility study results before building a plant of such capacity. This means that no economic or environmental benefit was proven. Zero Waste Croatia pointed out that incineration plants were getting green lights for construction all over the country in order to cover up the collapse of the government's system of regional waste management centres<sup>41</sup>. After Konjščina, similar non-sustainable waste management plans were created for other smaller towns and cities, such as Podrute, Kutina, Brod na Kupi, Bjelovar, Sisak, all the way to Dubrovnik. It certainly seems like there's a race to incinerate.

If the incineration plant in Konjščina was meant only for local waste, it would have been economically unfeasible. Komunalac Konjščina, the company in charge of waste management in Konjščina and eight more surrounding municipalities, in one year collects between 5000 and 6000 tonnes of waste from all of those municipalities together, as pointed out by KESK<sup>42</sup>. It was said that the planned waste-to-energy plant would need three tonnes of waste per hour to operate profitably, or about 72 tonnes per day. The municipality of Konjščina produces about 1000 tonnes of waste per year. The incineration plant could burn that waste in about 14 days, and that's if no waste is ever separated, recycled or reused. Even if the waste from all nine municipalities came to Konjščina's plant and was never separated, recycled or reused, it would be enough for about 83 days of operation in the plant,

40 <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/provjereno-otkriva-pozadinu-price-o-izgradnji-spalionice-otpada-u-konjiscini---556706.html>

41 <https://www.ekovjesnik.hr/clanak/1645/planirano-spaljivanje-komunalnog-otpada-u-konjiscini-je-stetno-i-nezakonito>

42 <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/provjereno-otkriva-pozadinu-price-o-izgradnji-spalionice-otpada-u-konjiscini---556706.html>

or slightly more than one quarter of a year. Everything else would have to be shipped from further away, which the former mayor of Konjščina was probably aware of. During his election campaign in 2016, he made promises about taking care of Varaždin's waste problem. Varaždin is the 10<sup>th</sup> city by population size in Croatia (44 thousand inhabitants), it's situated about 40 km away from Konjščina, and has a big waste management problem. Varaždin had such a crisis with waste (and no landfill capacity) that in the summer of 2021, they even told citizens to keep their waste at home, since there was nowhere to go with it<sup>43</sup>. From the draft of the Waste Management Plan for the period 2018-2023 in Konjščina<sup>44</sup>, it is clear that the local government at the time expected the EU to provide funds for this project, even though this would probably be impossible, because the project is not in line with the principle of circular economy. This would also not be the first time that a project is presented to the citizens as financially supported by the EU, but is in the end left for the taxpayers to pay. It happened with the kindergarten case in Konjščina as well – the funds for the renovation were never received due to certain discrepancies in the final report after the construction work was done.

The citizens of Konjščina also pointed out that there aren't enough experts in the local area to run such a complex facility. The poor functioning of many of the waste treatment facilities was precisely due to bad management and staff that was not skilled or experienced enough to run the facility. For example, the mentioned facility in Marišćina has had three managing directors so far, but none of them managed to stay in their position for the full period of their mandate. There was a fourth candidate who was elected but immediately removed from his position before he even started his mandate. The situation is similar in the facility of Kaštijun<sup>45</sup>. Also, in Croatia, it is not uncommon to have

43 <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/u-varazdinu-stoji-50-tona-smeca-komunalna-tvrtka-porucila-gradanima-otpad-zadrzite-doma-15086133>

44 [https://konjiscina.hr/documents/2018/11\\_sjednica/plan\\_gospodarenja\\_otpadom.pdf](https://konjiscina.hr/documents/2018/11_sjednica/plan_gospodarenja_otpadom.pdf)

45 [https://www.novolist.hr/rijeka-regija/rijeka/novi-direktor-ekoplusa-aleksandar-bulog-jos-nije-ni-poceo-mandat-a-vec-je-opozvan-doznali-smo-gdje-je-zapelo/?meta\\_refresh=true](https://www.novolist.hr/rijeka-regija/rijeka/novi-direktor-ekoplusa-aleksandar-bulog-jos-nije-ni-poceo-mandat-a-vec-je-opozvan-doznali-smo-gdje-je-zapelo/?meta_refresh=true)



those in charge elected on the basis of their affiliation with a certain political party, rather than based on their skills in the necessary area. In the end, as KESK pointed out as well, there's no infrastructure to use the heat that the plant would generate. Putting up such infrastructure would perhaps be even more expensive than the actual incineration plant<sup>46</sup>. There have been no plans drawn up for this nor were the citizens informed of the estimated cost of such construction work, which they would have to pay for. All in all, it is clear from these indications that the plans for the incineration plant were not conveyed in a transparent way, which was a clear sign for worry.

### Defiance against the construction – the KESK association

People in the region pride themselves on their picturesque hills and thermal springs. They live with nature, and there is a strong tradition of family winemaking. The branding of the region relies on the idyllic image of a vacation in the midst of a green haven. In that context, it makes sense people want to guard their environment. *“Ecology always interested people in Konjščina,”* says Ines Debelić. Ines (36) was the leader of the green citizens' initiative KESK, which was founded in order to stop the plans for the construction of the incineration plant. This wasn't the first time Ines got the community buzzing – I grew up in Konjščina, and I remember a local youth association she started, which carried out projects for picking up litter and tidying up parks, as well as flea markets.

The news of a planned incineration plant spread among the general public in early 2019, when the land use plan that included the plant was already accepted by the municipal council. There was some talk of it before this, but nobody took it very seriously. Citizens first reacted with disbelief (*“Yeah, right, we're getting an incineration plant.”*), as well as some Balkan cynicism (*“Nothing ever goes as planned here, and this will be no exception.”*). Soon it became clear that not only was the news correct, but that the plan had already been set; the parcel had



Image 4: Kindergarten playground in Konjščina - the parcel for the incineration plant in the white circle, basically just down the road

been sold to the notorious contractor, and the construction work was going to start soon. People began sharing stories of other similar incineration and waste management facilities in Croatia among themselves. Examples are many, and, as we have seen, the story always goes something like this – there are promises of an efficient incineration plant which is about to solve all of the municipality's energy procurement and waste management problems, perfectly clean, modern, a wonder of the 21<sup>st</sup> century through which the scientific and technological progress has finally come to bless the people and make their lives easier. A nice local plant for the town's local needs. But then these promises are put into action and it all ends with heaps of sometimes unidentified waste shipped to the area, fires in the landfill, and unknown substances released to the air, water and land. Citizens realised that this is what they could expect and decided to prevent their own catastrophe. *“People were really interested in the initiative, I think it's human nature – you fight for justice. This project was about to violate our rights to live a healthy life and have a clean environment”*, says Ines. This association was founded as a reaction to the plans for an incineration plant with the primary goal of putting an end to them, but it also deals with green causes in the municipality in general, and it supports other green organisations in the region. The association KESK, Ines says, was just an extension of the initiative spontaneously started among citizens and was founded for administrative reasons, so that it would

<sup>46</sup> <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/provjereneno-otkriva-pozadinu-price-o-izgradnji-spalionice-otpada-u-konjiscini--556706.html>

be easier to navigate the complicated Croatian bureaucracy and concentrate the efforts for stopping the implementation of the land use plan. *“With an organisation like KESK we could act with more legitimacy, as well as communicate with the authorities in a way that had actual weight”*, concludes Ines.

People became increasingly interested, and KEKS organised public presentations with scientists and experts, as well as public debates. The public stood up ever more passionately against the plan, and on April 7<sup>th</sup> 2019 it came to what would go down in history as Konjščina’s first ever public protest. And it did not stop at just one; another one was organised shortly after. Unity grew ever stronger, and people started gathering in front of the town hall even when no protest was announced. They would wait outside the town hall for the council to leave the building and announce whether any progress had been made to prevent the construction. Sometimes, the police would cruise around to monitor the activities and try to prevent gatherings that would be considered too big, even though these gatherings were spontaneous and peaceful. On May 7<sup>th</sup>, the mayor finally announced that the plan to build an incineration plant was aborted after a council meeting in which the council members (the same ones who accepted the plan in the first place) got the opportunity to vote on the cancellation of the land use plan. The council voted against any such facility being built on the parcel that was sold to the contractor. People celebrated their victory, even though the matter was actually not officially over – Croatia’s bureaucracy is exceedingly complicated and sometimes it seems that everything is both possible and impossible at the same time. There are pitfalls hidden in the way power is divided. The land use plan was accepted on a local level, but the municipality can technically only suggest the land use plan, while the county (županija) accepts it or rejects it in the end. Luckily, after a period of uncertainty (particularly because the responsible minister was in favour of the construction), the county accepted the amended land use plan, which meant the incineration plant could no longer be built.

### Young population, women and the environmentalist struggle in rural areas

Rural areas function in a slightly different way from their urban counterparts. Generally from my experience, people feel that there is more emphasis on interpersonal connections and that the bond that ties the inhabitants is usually stronger – whether because of actual personal connection or out of sheer necessity. People are more involved in each others’ lives, for better or for worse. In the case of activism in rural areas, this definitely allows for a tighter endeavour, and people feel more responsible for their own actions. Since agriculture is important in rural areas, is it essential to have a clean environment and predictable weather. *“Environmental matters in smaller rural communities affect the lives of the people in a direct way,”* Ines points out. Another reason why KESK is interesting as an organisation is that there were a lot of women and young people actively involved in it. They truly seemed like the drivers of the movement, as if this was finally an



Image 5: Protest in Konjščina (source: zagorje.com)

opportunity to let their voices be heard. Not that there weren’t any men or people from older age groups involved who helped a lot as well, but the number of active women and passionate youth was higher than what we would expect to see in Croatian politics, especially in a rural area. In this regard, we have a sort of stereotypical situation on

the opposite pole – the youth-and-women-led KESK was up against two men, a waste entrepreneur and the town mayor, along with some other men on higher positions of power, such as the county governor and the minister of economy and sustainable development.

Ines says she never gave much thought to the proportion of women involved and didn't think of it as a crucial element. *"I never thought about the differences between the capabilities that men and women have. Women have to be louder, more proactive and hard-working to get where men are, but that's how it is in our society,"* she concludes. *"Women are included in the decision-making process, but it is often just due to legal quotas,"* she regrets. This wasn't the case in KESK – the women included were the backbone of the movement and were genuinely invested in it. *"I think women would be much more included if we gave them a chance and if they weren't bound by societal norms, which are still very much present here in Croatia."* In this case, Konjščina is a bright example. As far as I have learnt, women who were active in this movement faced little to no discrimination or negative feedback just based on their gender. Instead of being dismissed by the community, people embraced this leadership of women.

Aneta Đurđinovski, another young woman that was active in the KESK association, confirmed what I had already heard before, and that is that the collective mentality in Konjščina is actually quite progressive for a town in rural Croatia. *"It's the diversity, there are people from all parts of the former Yugoslavia here. We're used to it. What some would frown upon today, we already embraced,"* she said. *"As for the involvement of women, I think there aren't enough people living here for us to judge each other. Everybody knows each other and we cannot afford to treat each other poorly. Any remark based on gender would be a personal remark,"* she concludes.

It is easy to forget that the world simply consists of small communities. Larger communities, even though they function in a different manner, consist of smaller communities too. With less personal connections with the people in your immediate surroundings, you also distance

yourself from the consequences your potential negative behaviour might have on them. Within our communities, we all have to take responsibility for our own actions.

In Croatia, on state level, especially in the Croatian parliament, women are often dismissed just based on their gender. Men usually target women's clothes and looks in general – the way they are dressed is called out as "too provocative" and the clothes as "inappropriate". On the other hand, their hair can be deemed as "too short", in which case they're not feminine enough to be called women. It is not enough to just be a woman, the role of the "good woman" has to be performed within strict societal norms. Ines noticed this when running for town mayor: *"Some people tried to disregard my abilities and expertise by shifting the focus on the fact that I used to sing in a band. But these are all stereotypes that would never particularly get to me or weigh me down. If a woman allows to be influenced by that, she gives others the motive to continue that type of discourse. It's a topic we're still burdened with even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but if we don't give it attention and just persevere, people stop viewing it as important."*

It's not just the gender dimension that can be the basis for discrimination. Aneta said she did feel some resistance because of her age, as she was 22 at the time. She works in media and her tasks within the association were related to that field: *"People dismiss you because you are so young that they assume you couldn't possibly understand the gravity of the situation. But in the end, they realise we have skills they don't have, especially when it comes to more modern technologies, and eventually they realise they're lucky we're around."*

It's important to have diversity in politics, and the lack of young people in the political discussion is especially acute in Croatia. Younger generations have a very low interest in politics and are not encouraged to take action. Young people are, statistically, a minority in Croatia, which is one of the many reasons why they feel discouraged from participating in politics. Seeing examples like Aneta's is important, because it means we can shift away from this status quo. She is also

determined to stay in Konjščina, along with many others who feel attached to the town and consider it their home. Everybody has to know they can participate and have their say in the decisions that directly influence their lives. As KESK became more political, it was evident that it was the platform within which young people felt most confident to be active. Clearly the goal of fighting climate change is recognised as so all-encompassing and important that it can unite us, as we understand it affects all of us. The urgency of the problem can make us see that we are better and stronger together, rather than constantly sustaining competition between each other.

It is evident that with climate change our society is going to have to find different, more progressive and contemporary systems to organise itself. If we want to see real change happening and actually find a solution for the climate crisis, the values that currently make the world go round – competitiveness, brute force, individualism, assertiveness – will have to be actively suppressed in order to make way for empathy, cooperation, and flexibility. These are more than just ways of achieving a goal, they are skills that need to be learnt and practised in order to work appropriately. When it comes to politics, it will have to stop being an end in itself and start actually positively affecting the real world.

### **Further challenges**

With regard to the particular problem of the incineration plant, citizens are so far protected by the accepted land use plan, according to which no such facility for waste treatment can stand in the envisioned parcel. However, the parcel in question is still owned by the contractor that was supposed to build the incineration plant. Since the land use plan can be changed again, citizens are worried that in a couple of years the incineration plant could be built nevertheless. This isn't unlikely if we take into consideration the mentioned increasing waste generation trends in Croatia. The current local government is said to be in negotiations with the contractor about obtaining the land back.

It is not entirely clear how or whether the municipality could even afford it, but it would be better if the parcel were actually used, although for some other type of activity.

In Konjščina, people have become more acquainted with the importance of environmental protection through this initiative, but there are still plenty of issues to work on. People need to be able to look further than the more obvious problems, such as the fact that incineration plants are bad, and start paying attention to the issues under the surface, like how much waste they generate and where that waste has been going so far. This could be achieved through raising further awareness on waste management and circular economy. In Croatia, the generations of our parents and grandparents still remember a more sustainable way of life. At that time, not so long ago, the beverages in shops would usually come in glass rather than plastic bottles, and fruit and vegetables would come from local suppliers. Plenty of products were sold loose – this is something that many customers wish would come back as the norm, because it's simply more convenient.

A problem that commonly appears in rural areas is illegal dumping, because there's simply enough space to do it, among other reasons. People dump their waste, particularly bulky waste, just about anywhere they find suitable. We have cars in our sea and lakes, and it's not unusual to stumble upon an old washing machine, a scruffy couch or a rusty fryer in the woods. This is sadly a kind of tradition in Croatia, one for which we can't blame the boom of consumerism in the recent years, even though it probably exacerbated the problem. Another substantial problem is littering, although this one is obviously not limited to rural areas. Litter is everywhere, around schools, in parks, on the side of the road. That last one is particularly peculiar, because in the ditches beside the roads you can find all kinds of items, from beer cans to more bizarre examples like CDs, diapers and single shoes. There appears to exist a common belief that nature can just take it, it simply carries our garbage "away", and with (a lot of!) time, makes it disappear. This idea needs to be addressed and abolished.



Image 6: Vineyards and nature of the area

Although we like to think of people in rural areas as incredibly respecting of nature, even as its guardians, in some cases it doesn't hold water. They usually know more about soil, agriculture, the animals that live in the wild, but when it comes to questions of environmental protection, some harmful practices have been passed on from older generations. Bulky waste has been dumped in nature for decades, and it seems it will take a lot of time and effort to educate people on how harmful and unnecessary this is. We need people to know that by protecting and respecting nature, they are protecting and respecting themselves.

### **Why does all of this matter?**

It might seem of peripheral interest to learn about small cases of environmental action like this one, but here we can explore the general tendencies and changes in the people's mindset and behaviour. People are not passive nor are they against embracing new ideas, even in rural areas, which are usually not the immediate target of awareness-raising campaigns on the topic of climate change, waste management, decision-making processes and the like. In a way, it is not important to delve too much into theory – the time has come to act, even though writing and talking about these ideas can prompt us to

action and help us deal with the possible social backlash to new tendencies.

From examples like this one we see that what is most valuable is to unite and take action. The initiative in Konjščina is also admirable because it was started entirely by citizens, and it didn't rely on the resources of an existing environmental organisation or the government. It was often pointed out as the example of a successful rebellion against improper waste management practices in Croatia, so much so that it became a sort of symbol of this struggle in the media, where it was mentioned in reports about other towns in which plans for similar facilities were drawn up. KEKS and the citizens of Konjščina still support similar initiatives and offer their help and advice. It is certainly an inspirational story, especially for the context of Croatia. Not every day do the people set their minds to something and unite as they did in this case, and even more rarely are the wanted results in such initiatives actually achieved.

In Croatia, we still have the idea of people in power as being out of reach for the ordinary folk, somebody whose decisions we can't really have an influence on. Precisely because of this, how things played out in Konjščina is a great direction because, slowly but surely, the idea of power has to become more democratic in our collective consciousness. The politicians are supposed to serve us, and not the other way around. This is especially true for the local level, where the issues that arise are usually less abstract and it doesn't take an expert analyst to understand which decision is good, and which one bad (this is also an argument in favour of the decentralisation of power). It shouldn't be this hard to change the decisions of those in power, but since the result was nevertheless positive, it gives hope that our country and society will become less pessimistic about the role of citizens in decision-making. KESK demonstrated that small, local initiatives with concrete targets is precisely what we need in order to see bigger change happening. *"We have to start with ourselves as individuals in order to make things better in the world,"* Ines said.

Croatia is a centralised country, with about one fifth of the population living in the capital of Zagreb, and about one quarter in its urban agglomeration. About one third of the population lives in the five biggest cities. It is easy to forget that good quality of life has to be ensured for the inhabitants of rural areas as well. Pushing projects like the one in Konjščina will lead to even further exodus of the rural population into cities (or abroad), which isn't sustainable. It would be a shame not to be the smarter side now when it comes to this problem, especially since it seems so logical that we shouldn't embrace outdated systems that were proven as harmful for the environment, when we have the opportunity to implement greener solutions and preserve our nature, particularly because they are now subsidised by the EU.

In a broader context, we can study the friction between the less industrially and economically developed Eastern Europe and the richer, more privileged Western European countries. The EU clearly provides good guidance in theory and, overall, we can say that the policies of the EU can get us to the desired targets if we actually follow them. Some of these policies, like the one on plastic products, have already borne fruit and led to a positive progress in the environmental sense. Also, Croatia got a waste prevention plan in 2017<sup>47</sup>, only when it was mandated by EU regulations. However, a negative setting that still hasn't been uprooted is the fact that the Western countries can get away with exporting their bad habits to countries where they're less likely (or completely unlikely) to be penalised. The EU should set up policies to protect not only non-EU countries from being flooded with foreign garbage, but also their own members.

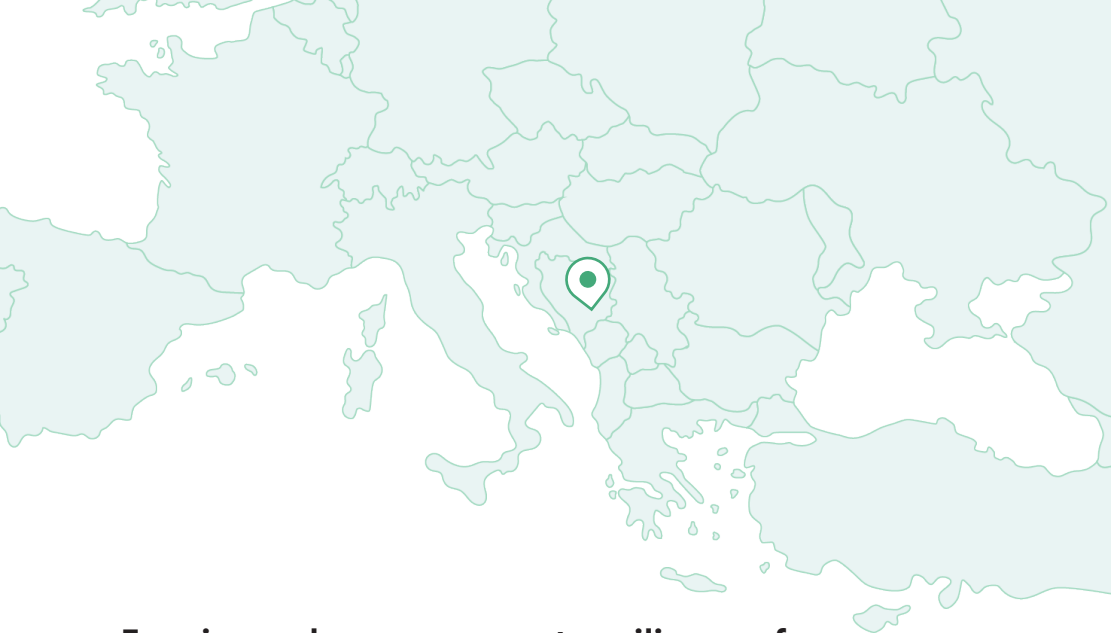
We don't usually think about our waste, which is understandable up to a point. Nobody wants to sit in their own garbage and we instinctively want to remove it from our sight. It is also a question of health – living near waste has already brought us disease, most notably the plague,

and it is still able to bring new ones<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, of course we will not ruminate over something so unpleasant, especially since today, our systems allow us to just let the garbage be taken... somewhere out of sight. But just because it's out of sight, it doesn't mean it doesn't affect us. We have to understand that we live with it – it does not leave our planet just because we can't see it. It might leave our back yards – for now – but we have to be aware of the fact that everything can circle back. In this important moment when our oceans, seas, rivers and soil are contaminated with microplastics, mercury and various other particles and substances, and are generally full of waste, it is time to be creative and find new ways of producing and consuming that minimise waste.

Finally, what we can all learn is that if we persevere, change is possible. For now, the big challenge is to actually want it. Sadly, even with all the noticeable changes to the climate, the scorching hot summer days and the extreme weather events, many people are still not prompted to make a change. I found the struggle in Konjščina inspiring because at first it seemed impossible. It is a huge step to win against the mayor of the municipality, especially since he is a member of the most powerful political party in Croatia (HDZ). It is a small example, but it gives hope that ordinary people can stand up to the big fish. It's still a long way to go, but at least the citizens are now more aware of the political mechanisms that allow them to act. Environmental protection is something we can all agree on, because our environment is us, it's what we live off of, it's where we live. Along with all of our waste.

47 [https://mingor.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/UPRAVA-ZA-PROCJENU-UTJECAJA-NA-OKOLIS-ODRZIVO-GOSPODARENJE-OTPADOM/Sektor%20za%20odr%C5%BEivo%20gospodarenje%20otpadom/Ostalo/management\\_plan\\_of\\_the\\_republic\\_of\\_croatia\\_for\\_the\\_period\\_2017-2022.pdf](https://mingor.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/UPRAVA-ZA-PROCJENU-UTJECAJA-NA-OKOLIS-ODRZIVO-GOSPODARENJE-OTPADOM/Sektor%20za%20odr%C5%BEivo%20gospodarenje%20otpadom/Ostalo/management_plan_of_the_republic_of_croatia_for_the_period_2017-2022.pdf)

48 <https://www.roadrunnerwm.com/blog/history-of-garbage>



## Farming and empowerment: resilience of women in Podrinje, rural Bosnia and Herzegovina

BY: ANAMARIJA DIVKOVIĆ

### Small farmers and a local NGO

Close to the eastern border of Bosnia and Herzegovina there is a region called Podrinje. This region is named after one of its rivers, Drina. Podrinje borders the neighbouring country, Serbia, and is home for mostly Orthodox and Muslims<sup>49</sup>. The history of the region helps understand the lives of people here better, as the struggles they face are remnants of war, and even today, there is a complicated political situation between the two countries. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) (1992-1995) this region suffered greatly. Serbia wanted to take over the territory and the B&H side wanted to keep it within its borders. The war was, of course, brutal, and soldiers had no mercy for civilians. Both Orthodox and Muslim civilians went through torture and all kinds of violence and humiliation, but the suffering was much more present among Muslim civilians, and more war crimes were committed against them. By the end of the war, thousands of civilians from that

<sup>49</sup> Both groups traditionally base their national identity on their religion. Orthodox identify as Serbs and Muslims identify as Bosniaks.

region had been tortured, raped, starved, beaten up and killed. Many left the region permanently. Podrinje was devastated, hence, people became mistrustful and wary about merely speaking to each other.



Image 1: Nature of Podrinje

In 1994 in Tuzla, a local non-governmental organization, Vive Žene (Vive Women), was established with the goal of providing psychosocial support to civilian victims of the war, primarily women. Vive Žene worked with people that had fled their homes and lived in some other communities. Right after the war ended, people started to rebuild the country, but the process was slow due to their dysfunctional government. In the early 2000s, some basic terms were set, so people could start returning to their pre-war homes. Despite that, they lacked support from those communities where they returned, and their relations were either tense or non-existent. National parties that were in power benefited from the polarisation between Orthodox and Muslims, therefore, they ignored the hate crimes that were being committed.

Vive Žene started to work with communities where people of different backgrounds lived together, such as Podrinje. In order to avoid any harm and to improve interpersonal relationships, Vive Žene were led by the policy of “Do no harm”. Different kinds of therapies were provided to the people from those communities, and special teams were formed to work on legal and psycho-social support in the matter of war-crimes resolution. The support continued, and since 2015, the main connections between women participating in the programs that are being implemented in Podrinje are created through the topics of gender equality and agriculture. Those topics are interconnected with the topics of democracy, economic empowerment, and better communication and presentation skills.



Image 2: Private agricultural land locals work on

As part of the scope of this project, I visited Podrinje and talked with 15 women in form of individual interviews and focus group discussions. The interviewed women were the ones who returned or came to Podrinje after the war. They have lived in their villages for many years, and they started working in agriculture at a very young age.

### Living in harmony with nature despite the challenges

People in Podrinje have always worked in their fields. Having a river so close by is a great opportunity, it means that there is enough water

for the fields to never dry out. There are a lot of small canals that go through their villages, so water is plentiful, even if there is not much rain. When people started coming to the war-destroyed area, they knew that if they wanted to earn money, they would have to create jobs for themselves, so agriculture seemed like the best option. They did not have any bargaining power, so they accepted the opportunity that seemed the most suitable given the circumstances. Some companies even suggested farmers to harvest gherkins under the promise that they would purchase them. Thus, the people of Podrinje signed the deal. As I learnt from the focus group discussion, at first, it seemed like a good opportunity for all of them – they could farm their own land, work together with their families and earn money, but as soon as they signed their contracts, problems started to raise. Companies would set strict standards for the minimum amount they were willing to buy, and followed a strict classification of gherkins according to their length<sup>50</sup>. Gherkins would, of course, have to grow but not too much – the smaller the gherkin, the higher the price. Companies provided them with hybrid seeds and products that they had to use daily. Those products were harsh chemicals that people of Podrinje had never used before. Most of them had to use chemical fertilizers such as Quadrix and Radomil.

*“All of us that used Quadrix and Radomil, especially us that farmed gherkins, had negative consequences. Both products are cancerous and should not be used during the harvesting season. Our lands are completely contaminated, and even after all these years, we are not able to farm anything on that land. I even tried fertilizing the ground with organic products and it did not help.”*

Companies knew very well how dangerous those products were, but they still enforced them on the farmers, who were compelled to use them every night during the harvesting season.

<sup>50</sup> There are four different levels in the classification. Class one is 3–6 cm, class two is 6–9 cm, class three is 9–12 cm, and class four is 12–15cm long.



*“We would collect all gherkins from the farm and during the night we would fertilize the plant with the products they provided us with. Next morning there would be hundreds of kilos of gherkins, some of them would be so big that they were third class.”*

One woman said *“I think that Quadrix and Radomil are the two most dangerous products that can be used in agriculture. These two products have been banned for many years in different countries, neighbouring Serbia is one of them.”*

Besides the damages that these products caused on the land, women also say that they experienced rashes, skin burns and stomach issues. They mention that no one warned them about either of these consequences, and when they reported those issues to the company, they did not react adequately. Women were told that their skin was too sensitive and that they should use special equipment. However, the use of this type of equipment was not mentioned in the contracts they signed prior to starting the work. Women say that they had to improvise by using scarves and shawls, as protective surgical masks and latex gloves were not as available 15 years ago as they are now during the pandemic period. Masks were only sold in a couple of pharmacies. Additionally, the interviewed women reckon that cultivating gherkins is not an appropriate job for any woman - being in contact with that many chemicals, carrying a heavy container with a dispenser on the back, bending all day long and taking part in long processes of weeding the gherkins are just some of the reasons.

*“As soon as our contract ended we stopped farming the gherkins.”*, *“I would not sign a new contract for gherkin farming no matter the money.”* and *“I would not recommend anyone to consume gherkins”* are, among others, the comments shared by these women.

The people in the village remember living off their land and resent the intensification of agricultural production that they experienced:

*“It is obvious that there is an agricultural mafia that has no self-consciousness and no morals and just wants to sell any product. We*

*have to farm our lands the way our grandparents did.”* They said that even though they are now selling a lot of their products, they are primarily doing it for themselves and their families. They do not want to risk the health of their loved ones.

They shared their experiences and tips on the way that they currently farm. In order for them to continue farming, many of them relocated their work, since the land that was treated with Quadrix and Radomil is contaminated. They are also trying to decontaminate and recover the soil, and many of them switched to organic production, in which they do not use pesticides or chemical fertilizers. They now put their learnt experiences into use, and they resort to natural methods that result in good quality crops. In order to minimize the use of chemicals, they are weeding by hand, but they noticed that whenever they use manure as their fertilizer they have to weed more often - this lead them to explore deeper connections and make sustainable decisions. Slowly, women started investing in pelleted fertilizer<sup>51</sup> with the support of Vive Žene. The use of pelleted fertilizers has proved to have more benefits for them. Pelleted fertilizers are packed into smaller quantities, so the farmers can carry and distribute them by themselves, saving them time and transport machinery, which tended to be unsafe as well as costly. One woman said, *“Where I live the ground slope is significant, it was always risky for tractor drivers to drive around the farm, and because of that risk they would always charge me more.”* They discovered other sustainable farming methods, such as using eggshells, chicken manure and nettle to increase the nutrients in the soil and act as fertilizers or protection from pests. Women are very satisfied with the results that organic fertilizers are giving, but they say that it is safest to change the types of fertilizers every few years to avoid over-saturation.

*“A few years back, when my sister and I were just starting to live off agriculture, we applied for one grant and received five greenhous-*

<sup>51</sup> Pelleted fertilizers are organic, nutrient-rich fertilizers made out of processed hen manure.



Image 3: Fresh organic fruits from Podrinje



Image 4: Home-made products on the fair

*es and some trainings. During the trainings we were told that we could have huge yields, but only if we followed their instructions. All of it was new to us, so we listened to them. When the autumn arrived and we found out that the state of our soil was horrible, we realised that we had produced poison. We approached people that had been farming their lands for many years and started to learn from them. We displaced our greenhouses and switched to completely organic production. We were very surprised when we saw that the amount and the quality of all products were better. That was when we realised that the stories about how the yield is only good when using chemicals were complete lies.”*

For the last eight years on the International day of Rural Women, Vive Žene has been organising a fair to sell the products of women from the village. The fair is organized in Tuzla and it is an opportunity for around 70 women that participate in the program to present their products and have a source of income. The fair is already a recognisable event, and women small farmers have loyal customers who always visit and shop there. The fair is very important for women because, for most of them, it is the only or prime way to sell their products, which include fresh fruits, vegetables and home-made products. Nevertheless, those are the products that do not have guaranteed sales. Products like raspberries, are always sold earlier to big companies.

*“Our aronia always has excellent inflows, and the only way to sell it is through the Fair of products of women from the village and private acquaintances, but that’s all the purchase of small quantities, we don’t have a guaranteed purchase. The fair of products of women from the village is a good opportunity for us to sell everything we make.”*

Participating in the fair had a huge effect on the economic empowerment of women in Podrinje living in a traditional environment. Prior to it, even when women did all the work, male family members would be the ones to sell the products and keep the earnings. Now that they have economic independence, they are taken more seriously in family discussions and can make decisions for the whole family. This income helped many women to get their driving license, which gave them even more freedom, as public transport is very bad or non-existent. In the beginning, many women were scared of attending the fair and taking up that space for themselves.

*“First time I attended the fair I was anxious. My biggest fear was not selling my products, I knew they were good, but I was frightened of the presentation of my work and valuing it. We were always told to be modest, and that translated into our relationships with our work - we undervalued it.”*

*“Giving media statements was my biggest fear, but now I can do it easily. We were provided with education on marketing, communication and self-presentation, and that really helped.”*

We discussed their current fears and, much to our delight, they seem to have overcome those that stem from self-doubt, lack of self-consciousness or deep patriarchal norms. Now, their focus is mainly on external factors that could damage their business.

*“Weather conditions are the main fear when it comes to production in the countryside. We wonder if drought or hail will destroy everything we do. In addition, there is fear when it comes to sales, now everything has become more expensive, inflation is ubiquitous and I don’t know if anyone will want to buy my juice. Home-made juice is an option, but getting food and paying utilities is a priority. I have no guaranteed purchase of anything, everything I sell is through private contacts and the Fair.”*

*“There is always fear. When you first start working, you are afraid of whether you will succeed. In agriculture, there are also fears about whether there will be enough sun, or whether there will be enough rain, but in addition to the weather, there is also the fear of not having anyone to sell to. I don’t think too much about weather conditions, it’s not in our hands [...] People are mostly afraid that if they produce a large amount they will not have anyone to sell it to, and by that point, they have already invested their work, time and money.”*

Other women have similar fears, and one of them gave an example of how wild animals, such as wild pigs, are also a threat for their farms.

*“We recently sowed grain, 20 bushels of grain were immediately eaten by wild pigs. Then we bought new seeds and sowed them, and within three days everything was uprooted again.”*

We discussed possible solutions, and they concluded that everyone should value the work of farmers more. They gave an example of how people go to the supermarket and buy the product without trying to lower the price at the checkout, but whenever someone buys products from small farmers, they ask for a discount. People do not always take into consideration that products from small farmers are much healthier, and that the money given to them helps the entire community. On the other hand, they said that having an agricultural cooperative would also be beneficial. A cooperative could have contracts with markets or have its own shop where all different types of products could be sold. Cooperatives like these exist in different parts of B&H and even in Podrinje, but women think that the work of existing cooperatives should be more transparent and democratic. They have great potential, but they need a fair leader who can work with large groups of people as a manager.

*“Many of us would be farming more if we knew that someone was going to buy it, we could arrange a price that suits both sides. The entire Podrinje region is really beautiful and has great farming potential, but most of the land is not being used, because we, small farmers, are not sure whether someone will buy our products.”*

Women of Podrinje have been through many difficult experiences and they still face challenges, but they have realised that nature is their ally. Earth is giving them resources that are crucial for their work and everyday life. Women are grateful and do what they can to protect their land. All of them became close friends thanks to their common interests with regard to agriculture, but also through the topics of gender equality and the help they received.

*“Right after the war, there were no gatherings, but now we are close friends. We live in neighboring villages, but we used to not communicate or even greet each other. During the group meetings*

*we talk about the past, present, and future. We help each other with work-related things, but we are there to support one another in our private lives and it is very important to us.”*

Vive Žene’s support to the women of Podrinje will continue, and by sharing their story of resilience we hope to inspire others in similar situations. They showed us how it is possible to live a sustainable lifestyle despite the challenges, and how living in cohesion with nature benefits all.

### **Times of drought: what goes around, comes around**

There are some days when a water pipe breaks and you are left with no water. This happened once or twice in your life and you did not enjoy it. You probably went to the market across the street and bought a few litres of water to have until plumbers came and fixed the pipes. Or maybe you forgot to bring your garbage cans in front of your house and now you have to wait for a couple of days until they can be picked up again. Unpleasant smells will probably reach you before the next garbage-collecting day but you can live with it for a couple of days. Now imagine this. You live 10km away from the closest shop, and your main income comes from farming land, it has been over 35°C for two weeks, there is no water in your well, and there is no water supply network. This is the life of many people that live in Podrinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>52</sup>.

*“In my village, we don’t have irrigation from the city water supply at all. We have local water supply systems that are not even sufficient to drink during the dry season<sup>53</sup>. So that all our seedlings and efforts do not go to waste, we drive to another place, pour water into containers and bring it home. That second village is more than 5 km away. We also pour water in other places, wherever we have taps along the way, we stop and pour water.”*

<sup>52</sup> People interviewed in this article are the same group as in the previous article.

<sup>53</sup> From 15th of June till 15th of September

More than 40 families live in this village and most of them use land for farming. One woman said that there is only one water source and everyone in the village is connected to that one water supply system. Some other women said that they had the same situation, but another water supply system was recently built in their villages. They explained what happened.

*“A large irrigation project was carried out in Bratunac Municipality, it was supported by the Ministry of the Republic of Srpska, but it had one major flaw. The idea was never to solve this problem in the entire municipality, but in local communities (“mjesne zajednice”) that have a lot of farms and a lot of people. Presidents and councils of local communities had to nominate their community to the Bratunac City Hall (institution running the project) in order for them to receive support. Some presidents and councils never meet, so this possibility was not even considered in some local communities. Because of this, some locals did not have the opportunity to act on this problem and were left out of the project. There were conflicts and all this was felt most by the citizenry.”*

Because of all of that, the project was not implemented in several local communities, regardless of the objective need. Now, people have to bring water from other villages. Some locals were united and agreed on everything, so even despite the smaller number of inhabitants, they were chosen to have the project of building a water network and water supply done in their village. The situation is such that there is little chance that such a project will be started again in the upcoming period and that the water supply infrastructure will be done in the remaining local communities. In this situation, many have to rely on natural water flow.

*“I’m lucky to live near a river, so I irrigate everything with water from the river. It means a lot to me that I can water my plants so that despite this heat, all my plants grow well. Even in this dry year,*

*I have plenty of grain, pods, beans and potatoes.”*

Others are experiencing severe droughts and say that many people in their village already gave up farming because they do not have enough water.

*“The village of Daljekošta has always been known for its numerous springs and streams. 9 years ago, in a very small area of the village, there were 28 springs that flowed throughout the year, now we have 9 that do not dry up and 2 that dry up during extreme heat, but they run again as soon as the summer passes.”*

Extreme heat is affecting the biggest river in the region, Drina, as well.

*“Even the Drina river is hot, so even when we take water from the river to water the fields, we water plants with warm water.”*

The ones that have water supply systems are also facing issues in periods of extreme heat. The City council set limits on how much water can be spent per household. Households that live off farming can not fit into those limits. Anyone that uses too much water has to pay fines. This is negatively affecting the women of the region whose main income comes from agriculture and that already invested their money in seeds and other needed materials.

*“Everything is drying up.”*

*“Unfortunately, 5 dunums of grain were completely destroyed due to drought.”*

Some women say that no irrigation system can help when daily temperatures are over 40°C for a couple of weeks. They also noticed radical temperature drops during the night. Some nights it is less than 20°C, and that is a significant difference. For people, it might feel nice

to cool down, but it is not good for the plants. During the harvesting season women see the results of the shock that the plants have been through. Yields are not that good.

*“This whole year [2022] is not at all favourable for agriculture, there was very little snow, then there were frosts and cold rain for a long time, until late spring. We could not sow in those conditions. As soon as the cold rains stopped we sowed, but it immediately became hot, the whole summer was with high temperatures. After the hot summer, frosts and low temperatures soon arrived again. It seems as if there is no transition in spring and autumn anymore, but as if summer and winter are just alternating.”*

*“Those of us who have animals are used to having fresh grass for the animals all summer, and that they are outdoors and graze. Now, because of the heat, the grass is dry and, already in July, there is no fresh grass and I have to give them hay. Sadly, they are already eating ‘winter food’.”*

The droughts even bring out the apparently hidden problems. Worldwide, we see how climate change brings both drought and floods, and with these cycles rivers return the harm done to them, one way or another.

People in Bosnia and Herzegovina treat natural resources poorly. Many are prone to littering and even dumping entire garbage bins into nature. Garbage flows in the river, and where water levels are low they create garbage islands. Because of those islands, some women do not have access to water even if they live close to the river. They have an additional risk of flooding because those islands and other garbage that gets intertwined with the trees and bushes work as a dam. Spring of 2014 had many rainy days and, in May, river beds were overfilled with water, so, all the rain caused floods in many places in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other Western Balkan countries. In Bosnia and

Herzegovina, over 90 000 people had to be displaced, 25 000 homes were damaged or destroyed, and 25 people perished, and material damages were massive. Places that are at low altitude and have rivers were the first to get flooded. This was not much of a surprise since river beds and shores were filled with all kinds of garbage (old cars, broken fridges and stoves and tons of plastic bags, food wraps and packaging, etc.). Unfortunately, many communities have been flooded year after year since 2014, but in a smaller scale. River beds and shores were cleaned afterwards, but they are now once again filled with garbage.

*“It seems as if we didn’t learn anything from the floods of 2014. Everything people had been throwing into the rivers until then was returned to us, yet we see people throwing garbage into the rivers again.”*

*“It’s useless to advise some people and it’s useless to scold and embarrass them, they do the same thing again.”*

There is no systematic reaction to this problem, no one is held accountable for littering and dumping garbage in nature, and waste collecting is not being done systematically in these rural areas. Some people collect their garbage and the garbage of their neighbours in a bin, and put it in the car, then they drive to some location where there are dumpsters and leave it there. Some people are not happy when they see someone from the neighbouring village dumping garbage in ‘their’ dumpsters. They say that they should not be allowed to do that since they are not paying for the garbage collecting service.

*“This morning I put the garbage in the container in fear because I’m afraid that someone sees it and attacks me.”*

But not everyone has the possibility of collecting and then driving

waste somewhere else. Some do not have neighbours that are willing to help and they cannot do it themselves. People live in remote areas without public transport, and some without cars. It is even harder for elderly people. They are left with no other possibility than to illegally dispose of garbage. Some burn the garbage, which is not safe and causes big damage to the air and soil. Burning waste emits a lot of poisonous and harmful gasses. Some of it should never be burnt because it can cause explosions. Some are placing garbage in metal bins, some put it on the grass and then burn it. Flame can spread easily, especially in the summer months, and sometimes it does. In those situations is it crucial to call fire-fighters, but then people get fined, so they try to avoid the fine by putting out the fire by themselves. When they do not succeed, the entire field burns, or it spreads to the woods or near homes. Incidents like that destroy the entire ecosystem for a longer period. All bugs, insects, flowers and small animals are killed, and the smoke is dangerous for a greater area. Even though this happens very rarely, the risk still exists. The issue is that no one speaks about this publicly or does anything to stop these risks from happening by eliminating the core problem, and that is waste production and collection. Those are both individual and communal problems.

*“Garbage collection does not exist in our village, as a result, we have an illegal landfill near the village. That dump is too close to the village, and I’m afraid it could affect everything we work on. We worked on the problem of the illegal landfill. My husband and I had found donors from France, who would finance the cleaning of that area and the delivery of the containers. They would also support us in negotiations within the local community to make an agreement for the garbage to be removed. However, for that to happen, the citizens would have needed to cooperate by paying for garbage collection, as it is almost everywhere else. The first step was to collect data on how many citizens were interested in such a system, and the results were devastating. When my husband and I pro-*

*cessed the data, we saw that not even 3% of the population wanted to pay for waste removal, after which the project was suspended. Although the utility company came and presented the system, and explained that people would only be paying a small amount per household, they did not change their minds. We told them that it could be dangerous for everyone's health, and also for food production in the village, but they said that they are used to not having to pay for water supply and garbage collection because they live in the village. They do not take into account that we all, especially people in the countryside, once lived with much less waste."*

Women say that they are aware that all of this contributes to climate change and further problems. They are willing to do what they, as individuals, can do. They are willing to help the community and work on legislation, but nobody is listening to them. Some things they do to help the planet are using organic fertilizers, composting, recycling, taking care of bees, using glass jars, bottles and paper bags, doing most of the work by hand, avoiding heavy machinery, changing crop cultures every couple of years, and not using chemical pesticides and fungicides.

Apart from the radical temperature changes, they say they are witnessing some other changes in nature that could be connected to climate change. Many plants get destroyed because temperatures are quite high in February, and plants start to sprout, but in March, temperatures drop below zero, it snows and rains and plants get frozen. Once they are frozen while sprouting, they have almost no chance of creating products.

All of them noticed how there are fewer bees and small bugs, but there are more killer hornets and more poisonous snakes. Poisonous snakes are usually in the woods, but now they are getting close to people's homes, locals assume it is because snakes are searching for moisture and food. Now, some plants need more "help" in order to grow, and some plants are farmed in different seasons of the year. All of this is

affecting their work and lifestyle because hornets and snakes are a threat to them and their families whenever they are outside working or spending time together. Taking care of the environment and plants, and helping them grow is their duty. They point out how there should be limits on how many chemical products someone can buy, everyone living in the village should be encouraged to compost, more products should be coming in refillable containers, and there should be strict laws regarding waste disposal.

### **Political involvement of women in patriarchal communities**

Even though it is not easy to work on these laws, some women tried getting into their local community council to change the situation on a micro level. In doing so, they were put through a lot. Male members of their own communities started insulting them and spreading lies, and most of the lies were about their sex life, knowing that the community is patriarchal and the reaction it would have. Some women fought and were elected into their local community councils, but then they faced other challenges.

*"When I was a member of the local community council, everyone else from the council avoided me. They would arrange a meeting without informing me, meet at the gas station and hold the meeting, and I would only later find out from the citizens that there was a meeting, and what was discussed in it."*

Women say that this is because those who are in power are satisfied with the situation and do not want any changes. To keep the situation intact, they "invest" in national rhetoric, hoping to cause conflicts that keep people from talking about anything crucial in their day-to-day life. 2022 is the election year in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and right-wing parties are the ones that usually lead the dirtiest campaigns. They undertake electoral thefts and they go to small villages and give people money if they promise to vote for them.

*“They also visited me in July, even though the elections are only in October. I will not vote for them, therefore I will face more challenges than those who support those national parties.”*

*“If our existence was secured, we would certainly not fall for their cheap stories, we would talk about incentives for farmers and the improvement of streets. This is how they exploit us and we allow it.”*

Most of the parties are non-democratic, do not hold to their principles and do not support women.

*“I don’t want to be part of such a system, and I know that if I were to get involved and point out these problems, I would be kicked out of the party.”*

Since they do not have space to participate in local parties, women, as a group, work on various problems in their communities. One of the problems they will try to tackle in the upcoming period is the lack of gynaecologists in their municipalities. There was only one gynaecologist in one of the municipalities until he retired in the spring of 2022. Time has passed and no one has been employed to cover this role. They checked the procedures and realised that there should not only be one but two gynaecologists for the number of people in the municipality. To prepare for the advocacy campaign, all of the women are learning more about the issue. Local non-governmental organisations promised to support them. Everyone hopes that they succeed because reproductive health is not a topic that usually gets enough attention in the Podrinje region, and this will be a huge win for them as individuals, but also for every woman living in the region.

“Other women have sacrificed themselves to get us where we are today. So let’s try to do our part to make the world a better place for the women who come after us.

– unknown author



### Women of Podrinje fighting gender inequality

Nihada, Behija, Suada, and Vesna live in the region of Podrine in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They and other women, together with the local NGO Vive Žene, created a Network of women of Podrinje to work on the gender and economic empowerment of its members and of other women of Podrinje. Behija has been in many programs of Vive Žene, starting from 1995, when she was living in a migrant center<sup>54</sup> near Tuzla. Vesna came to Podrinje in 1995, and she joined the program of psychosocial support and reconciliation in the early 2000s. Suada returned to Podrinje in 2001, and she joined the program of gender and economic empowerment in 2015. Lastly, Nihada, who was a little girl during the '90s war, grew up in a migrant center in Tuzla and also joined the program in 2015. They managed to rebuild their lives and empower themselves, they managed to build a non-patriarchal family in a very patriarchal community. They are small farmers and self-employed. In this article, we will discuss the norms with which they grew up - some that stick even 30+ years later, as well as their work. They told me what they do and how they face the issues in a patriarchal community. People in rural areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina often had a lot of children (usually more than 5), but it was hard for them to sustain them all. Children used to work with their parents in the fields as early as age 6. At the time, many parents did not want their children to go to school, and even if they did, it would be just the boys. Many girls did not have any chance to go to school. In rural areas, the situation regarding education started to change only in the 1970s and 1980s. The next step was letting girls go to school only for the first four grades. Later on, girls were allowed to finish elementary school and some even got a chance to go to high school. Only girls born in the late 1980s and later had the opportunity to continue with their education. By the time these women were around their late teens or early 20s and 30s, there was a war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and many of them could not

continue with their education even though they were allowed to or wanted to. There were not many high schools in Podrinje and there were no Universities, so kids needed to go to other cities to live and study, which was quite expensive for families that mostly live off agriculture, working as small farmers. The women I talked with did not have any opportunity to go to university, but they did not give up on their education. Today, they are attending different kinds of non-formal education and courses where they can learn about farming. They prioritise the education of their children, and they had to sacrifice a lot to ensure that their children can pursue higher education.

**Nihada:** *“I was raised in a collective migrant center in Mihatovići, my sister was sick, and my mother raised us alone. It was important to her that we are obedient, but she did not put much focus on education. Now I constantly encourage my child to study.”*

**Suada:** *“My daughter is 20 years old. We live in Podrinje, but she had to travel to Tuzla to go to elementary school. She is now studying architecture in Sarajevo.”*

**Vesna:** *“I am very proud of my kids, both of them are students. My daughter is in her sixth (final) year of medical studies.”*

**Behija:** *“My son and daughter are studying IT engineering, and I didn't even finish school. My parents taught me that the most important thing is to learn to cook and work in agriculture. Before the war, we had a large agricultural land, and female children did not go to school, nor to work if there were men who worked. That's how my parents raised me, but I got stronger with Vive Žene, through all the workshops. Now my daughter lives differently, she has the opportunity to study, travel, and work. Whenever my mum and I meet, I always say how much we have progressed in all these years and I hope that one day my daughter will provide even more for her chil-*

<sup>54</sup> There has been 8 centers in Tuzla Canton and they were called migrant centers but were established for internally displaced people. The biggest center in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the one in Mihatovići.

*dren. I consider that one of my greatest successes and I am most grateful for that. My daughter did not remain illiterate, she does not have to work in agriculture all her life. When and if she gets married, she will not live among those who prevent her from going to work in a company where there are men.”*

They brought up the way their parents raised them, and how it affected them. They are learning how to be better parents, especially when it comes to raising daughters. It is clear that they first had to work on themselves, break the chains they grew up with, and then set grounds for raising their children. These four women managed to build their families without patriarchal constraints, but gender roles and division of work are still rather traditional. All of them mentioned taking care of children as their primary task. Some of them grew up in very patriarchal families, like Behija. She worked a lot from an early age, got married during the '90s war and had her first baby when she was only 15. But she thought that was the life of every woman because her mother raised her like that.

**Behija:** *“I did not know that there were women’s rights, nor that it was possible to fight for myself. I could not even dream of having my fields, my own house, and all of that registered under my name. I didn’t know I could have a driving license or my own car. I did not know that I could register my production. I didn’t know that women could have and do any of these things, because that’s where I come from. Although my husband and I have always had a harmonious marriage, I have changed completely over the years. Before, I was a wife who behaved the way my mum taught me. Whenever I was going somewhere or planning to do something, I thought I had to ask my husband, so I did. In fact, my husband never expected that from me and I didn’t even have to do it. In this marriage, he always respected my words and decisions, together we agreed on all the next steps, and yet I have only become more free in recent years. My husband gives me complete freedom and gives me full support*

*for everything I want to do, both personally and professionally.”*

Vesna’s family was not as patriarchal as Behijas, she came to Podrinje from an urban area but still, patriarchy had many negative effects on her. She was a teenager during the '90s war, and that had its consequences. Vesna said that she puts greater focus on raising her daughter because she did not want her to deal with the same issues that she dealt with herself. For older generations, the societal norm was to sweep problems under the rug, so many did not face them. Generational trauma is a very common problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Vesna says that it is important to work with parents to make them understand that their children do not have to live the same life they lived. She also worked a lot on selecting everything that she has to offer to her children, she paid a lot of attention to their needs, and worked on passing on the ideas and behaviours that her children can benefit from. She sees that as her win, but she says that she had to do a lot of internal work to be able to do that.

**Vesna:** *“The workshops help me to think less about what others will say or think. Here, I work on my self-confidence. I used to be very insecure about myself, but I managed to learn what is good for me and I think about it more. I’m so glad I didn’t raise my daughter the way I was raised, she would never think about what someone would say, she doesn’t care. It is very difficult when a child grows up in a community strongly influenced by negative thinking. Later, through life, it is difficult to strengthen such children.”*

**Suada:** *“I like all the topics that we covered within the project. All the ideas that I hear about and I like, I pass on to my friends and at home, and I work on their implementation. Especially when we learn about parental attitudes concerning children. I raise my children differently from the way I was raised, the focus is more on education.”*

Nihada is the youngest of four women, and differences in gender roles are visible. She is a parent with a stable job and her husband works part-time. When he plans his work schedule he tries to be home with the kids until Nihada gets back. He understands the role of both parents when raising their children.

**Nihada:** *“While I am at work, my husband looks after the children, if he has to work, then the children stay with my mother. I always have their support and don’t have pressure or feelings of guilt for leaving the kids alone.”*

All of them are aware of the changes in their own life. All of them attended many workshops in order to empower themselves and then help their families. They all agree that Behija had the greatest transformation. She became a role model for many other women. Her husband also participates in the project and he says he loves this “new” Behija much more. Both of them understand that this was a long process during which every woman should get support. All of the women agreed that changes could not have been possible if they had not attended the programs of psychosocial support. The programs were firstly established for women that survived war torture and trauma, and then they developed in different aspects.

**Vesna:** *“The importance of working with Vive Žene is mostly reflected in our psychological stability. To be honest, psychotherapy had the most positive effects on all women. Therapy helped overcome the war trauma of the group members. One can not be empowered if they do not have their own peace.”*

**Behija:** *“During these 20 years, in addition to economic empowerment, which became the focus, I feel freedom, strength and stability on a personal level. I’m fighting for myself, which I never did before. Before, I only thought about comforting everyone else and*

*was not thinking about myself and my needs. Now it’s not like that, now I take care of myself. This did not come overnight. Vive Žene’s therapist was coming regularly to my village and we had group therapies and psychosocial support, I attended every time. All of this is thanks to that process. This is how the Network was developed and its goal is to help as many women as possible.”*

In the Network of women of Podrinje, they cover different topics. Two of them are the most present and those are gender equality and agriculture. These topics are relevant for every woman, and they are often intersected with topics of democracy, human rights and advocacy campaigns. The group noticed that it is hard to make a change if women do not feel empowered. One of the reasons why they did not feel empowered is because they did not have their source of income. Their husbands were the ones that were earning money, and women did not want to be a burden. They always planned their life around their husbands and to make sure all of their needs were met. These women were already working hard but they did not earn any money from it. Taking care of kids and the elderly, making lunches and cleaning homes are still unpaid jobs, but now women earn money from agriculture.

**Vesna:** *“We realised that women living in the countryside can not be strong enough if they are not also economically empowered. Through the work of local associations and the support of Vive Žene, we offered and provided an opportunity to all interested women to join us. Then, we all together established a market for the sale of our products. Women already made different products, but they would usually gift them or leave them and the products would spoil. Even now it’s mostly about small quantities, but the market is quite serious and if there was an opportunity for an even bigger market, which would be profitable for them, women would, of course, make an even bigger effort and production. All this is already very important for women and their empowerment.”*

**Nihada:** *“I think the position of women is much better now than it was before. Earlier, women were not equal to men, I don’t think that’s the case anymore. Now a woman can contribute to everything, even more than a man does. In social situations, which we, ordinary people, are not part of, the situation may be different and the man may be the centre of everything. I assume that this is the situation in politics and in better-paid working positions, where men dominate. That’s why we hear about discrimination and the position of women every day.”*

The market they created is a great thing because the money that women earned from it is the money they spend on themselves. They invested that money in themselves, to get driving licenses, attend courses on agriculture or take vacations. But, the network had a greater impact on the entire community. Everything they learn about, they spread to other women, which helps them in their empowerment process. Some women joined the Network because of that.

**Behija:** *“When it was decided that I was to represent my local association and become a member of the network, I came up with ideas to change something in my community. I think I succeeded in part of that, and I hope others think so too. I mostly worked on strengthening women, building self-confidence, fighting for our rights, and fighting domestic violence. I pass on everything I’ve learnt to other women while drinking coffee with my friends, neighbours, mother, daughter, and sister in my village, I repeat to them what violence is, how they shouldn’t suffer, and how important it is to speak up. I think that these conversations with them contributed a lot because I hear that they pass it on to others, which means that they have remembered and that it is important to them.”*

**Vesna:** *“Not everything is as easy as I imagined and a lot of sacrifices are required, but this is my path and I see myself in it. My initial idea was to point out the problems of women in the village, which*

*were not visible before, and I wanted to contribute to the elimination of those problems. Whether it’s about problems in partner relationships or the economic condition of women in the village or some other kind. Regarding the progress in solving the problems of women that live in the village, it is important to emphasise the saying “When you save one person’s life, it is as if you saved the whole world”. I am aware that we cannot do miracles, but if I helped one neighbour, then another, one friend, then another, and now I can list 10 women whose lives have changed for the better thanks to my knowledge and my work, I can say that I am a happy woman. Solidarity, especially among women, is very important to me and I always work to build and emphasise solidarity.”*

What Behija and Vesna do is visible in the community and they got a lot of support for their work but they also gained enemies. Those are the patriarchal male family members and neighbours who think that their behaviour is “not right”. Those men do not want the women in their lives to become independent, self-confident, and loud. They approach Behijas’ and Vesnas’ husbands and speak badly about them hoping to discourage them. When they saw that Behijas’ and Vesnas’ families do not get discouraged that easily, they forbade their own wives and daughters to get close to them.

**Behija:** *“In our society, women are humiliated every day and society does not treat us in a good way. Discrimination and violence against women exist in my community, and I have never seen anyone working on these problems. Only VIVE ŽENE works to empower women in this area and provide much-needed psychological support. Women should support each other much more loudly and talk regularly about the problems we encounter, surely we could help each other a lot and give advice. Violence is a big problem for women in my community. I was a witness to gender-based physical violence, which I reported and became the “black sheep” for*

*I know that men forbid their wives to hang out with me or to drink coffee with me because I talk about domestic violence, empowerment, and change. They say that I am the head of my house and they are afraid that their wives might become more like me. They used to make such comments in my presence. That is very sad.”*

**Vesna:** *“Women who are in a particularly difficult situation do not easily come to parents’ meetings in schools or the association’s meetings, and it is very difficult for them to dare to ask for help, and they are very often controlled by their partners. They often behave the way someone tells them they have to. Making decisions, even family ones, is not a place where they are being asked to be. I try to find a way to reach out to those women, to connect with them, to try to shine a light on what they suppress. Women put such a problem aside, so as not to think about it, but I try to help those women in my community to better understand the situation they are in and help themselves.”*

Vesna works a lot on establishing better politics for women and she said that working on that is very important. People do not know anything about feminism, gender equality, politics, and gender-responsive budgeting. All of these topics are slightly mainstream in Western Europe, but in Podrinje, she has to explain it all from the beginning and face many misogynistic opinions coming from people who should be working on improving the situation.

**Vesna:** *“Patriarchy is very pronounced in the countryside. The way to bring the problem of patriarchy closer to men, without them perceiving it as a threat to their position, is through joint learning processes. Through this project, we have joint workshops for men and women, and they mentioned the characteristics of their wives that bother them, and someone said that when they talk about women, they should think about all women: wives, daughters, sisters..., after which their thinking completely changed. That prism needs to be*

*replaced. I think men are also aware that patriarchy is not good for them, but they don’t know about alternatives. Recently, I had a negative experience during a conversation with the director of a high school, a man who does not live in the village, who, in response to my questions, which are necessary to create a gender action plan for the municipality of Bratunac, said, ‘Well, how much longer will you work on gender empowerment, aren’t you ashamed? What more rights do women want?’ After this, I had to explain to him the meaning of gender equality itself and the benefits it brings for men as well. There are people everywhere who block the processes, but we should try to find ways to get closer to them and make them aware as much as we can. You should start with your closest ones, with your family, husbands, sons, brothers and then move on.”*

Their empowerment is very visible just by the way they discuss their own paths. Feminism is just gaining traction in rural B&H, but we also discussed ecofeminism, which is bit new for them. It is an interesting topic for them, because all of them are in close relation to nature. They work in the fields and they live in the village. I asked them to think about the similarities between the Earth and women and they had different approaches. The clearest difference is visible in Nihada’s and Behijas’ sentences.

**Nihada:** *“Earth and women are very similar. Both give life. I think that a woman is the main support for everything, both in marriage and in everyday life. I think that women are just like the Earth and as you plant in the earth and it bears fruit, so does a woman. Women provide knowledge and everything a person needs. I think that a woman can always give a good and quality product. And in social, political, but also private life, in anything; I think a woman is a pillar. The earth gives you everything you need for life, just like a woman gives life and what is needed for life. It builds humanity.”*

**Behija:** *“Both are big, bold, and strong, and, on the other hand, no one seems to pay attention or care about their well-being. We, as a society, are not protecting the planet Earth, its rivers, and fields at all. I think about it all the time and it bothers me, for example, all the garbage that surrounds us, and no one seems to care.”*

In the end, they sent messages both to local women and people around the world to understand the lives of women of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Vesna:** *“The most important thing is for women to have solidarity. Women should not speak against each other, like men would never be against each other - they protect and support each other. We too must learn to behave like that and have solidarity. We often get the question, ‘Do you know that you have more obligations if you want the same rights?’, and I want everyone to know that women in Bosnia and Herzegovina have taken on many more obligations than they have to. All women from here are strong, they are the bearers of society and family, without even realising it, and they can do and carry a lot on their backs.”*

**Nihada:** *“I would tell everyone to learn to have their say in life and not only to nod their head. I don’t like it when someone just nods. You should fight for your opinion, even when it is different from other people’s opinions. It is important to be your own self no matter how old you are or what you do. A person that values themselves also values others, those who do not value themselves cannot value other people either. And it’s also important that people get an education, the more educated people are, the better. We have to support each other and by no means should we be jealous or an enemy. We, women from Bosnia and Herzegovina are brave and persistent and we will fight all of our battles.”*

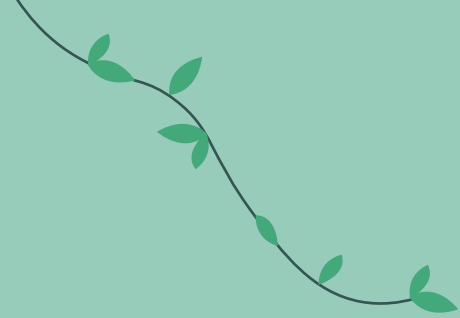
**Suada:** *“My message to girls is to study, to never stop studying, to*

*keep learning things for their entire lives, and to be happy. I would tell young mothers to join forces, not to neglect themselves and their needs, and to socialise and work on themselves. All women should always work on themselves. You should respect others, but first, yourself. Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina are the most hard-working and pure-hearted, and few people notice and appreciate that. The strength of Bosnian women lies in their kindness, willingness to help, selflessness and hard work.”*

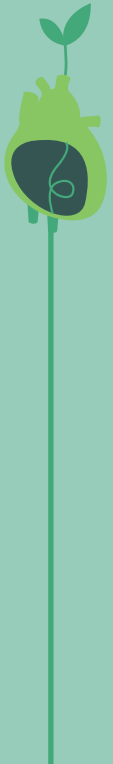
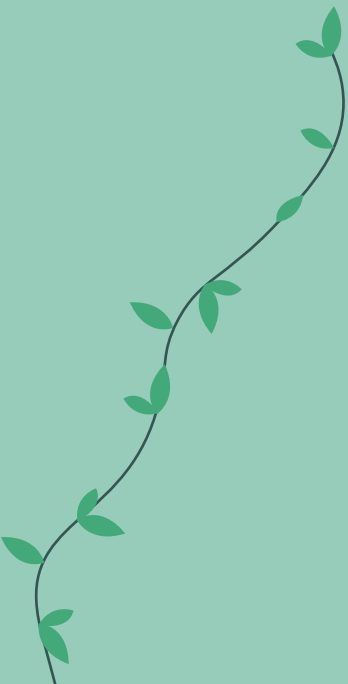
**Behija:** *“The message for girls and women is not to suffer violence, blackmail or insults, but to be the most important person to themselves, to study, and to have their own job and not depend on someone else’s money. Women from Bosnia and Herzegovina went through numerous sufferings, poverty, mistreatment, rape and war, and they came out stronger and stronger.”*

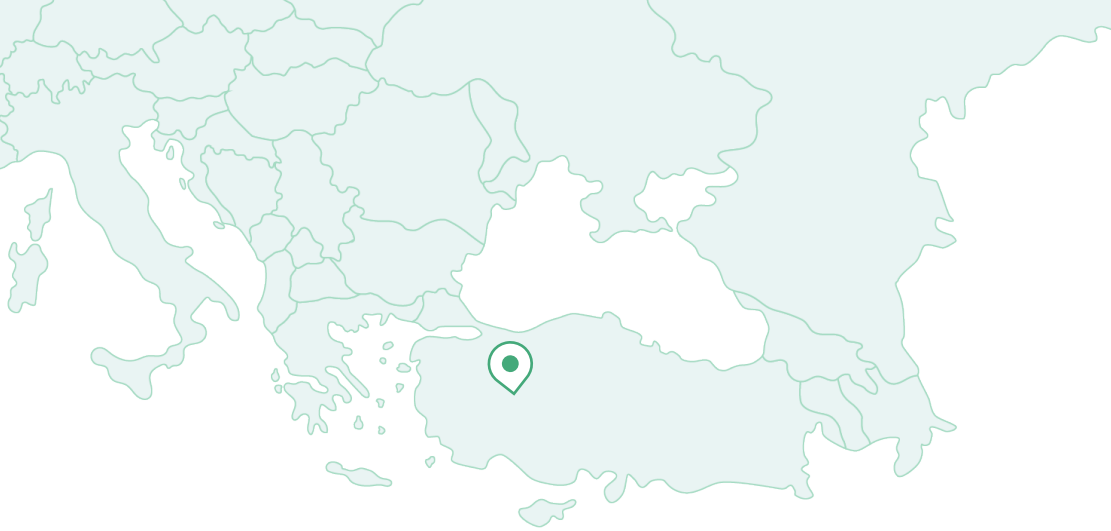
### **Finding hope and inspiration**

In all these stories we have learnt much about the life of women in Podrinje - from their connections to the environment, the challenges they face and overcome, their hopes and messages radiating resilience. Right after meeting them in the summer of 2021, I realised how special these women are. I really wanted to share their stories with more people, and tell everyone about their agricultural and sustainable work, and their fights for a more democratic and equal community and world, but also about their kindness. Through their stories we learn how brave and capable they are and that is not something what we learn to expect from rural women, who spend most of their life taking care of their families and working in the field. We are surprised, even though we say we see other people as equal and as capable as ourselves and people surrounding us. I think all of us should be aware of our biases towards minorities and underprivileged groups and actively work on dismantling them. I hope these stories make people more curious about their believes, Podrinje and its fierce people.



“*Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it is possible, without claiming it, she stands up for all women.*  
– Maya Angelou





## The town of thermal power plants: Çan

BY: ÖZGE DORUK

**M**y story with Çan began in 2018. I initially travelled to Çanakkale to conduct academic fieldwork for my master's thesis, and I started to gather information about the environmental struggle in Çan. I joined the local movement as an activist after finishing my thesis - I wanted to raise visibility of the local struggle. I decided to document the story, and this is how the film *The Town of Thermal Power Plants* came to be. The film can be good for understanding the story of Çan in a more detailed, clear and fluent way; you can access it on this link:

### **The Town of Thermal Power Plants<sup>55</sup>**

Link: <https://vimeo.com/464924675>

Password: termik2020

The town of Çan has long been poisoned by thermal power plants. A large number of politicians, NGOs, activists, etc. attempted to speak up against thermal power plants during these times. Protests were held, lawsuits were filed, documentaries were shot. However, the thermal power plants still continue to operate. I have heard many people speak against the power plants in this town, where the locals are taken for granted and where the activists from outside are withdrawing in despair. However, I also observed that, although the women living in the town were at the forefront of the protests, they were not given enough space to speak their own words.



Image 1: Power plant in Çan

This research aims to understand how the coal-fired power plants in Çanakkale's Çan region impact the daily routines of the local women. It seeks to identify women's needs and the dynamics of the community they would like to see despite the thermal power plants construction and other environmentally damaging projects.

Current literature studies (academic publications, non-governmental reports), interviews, and additional forms of information about the topic (documentaries, press articles, etc.) were all used in this study. In addition to the fieldwork, in-depth interviews were conducted with the women living in the town.

<sup>55</sup> Documentary was produced with the support of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Kazdağlı Association for the Preservation of Natural and Cultural Assets and Europe Beyond Coal.



### Historical Background

Çan is a small town in the province of Çanakkale in north-west Turkey. When we look at the historical past of this region, we could go back a lot in time. Although we lack precise dates, several ancient sources and structures in the area can offer us a general notion about this town. The Iliad by Homer is the most well-known of these sources.



Image 2: Nature of Çan

Çan is approximately 95 km away from the ancient city of Troy. The lands mentioned in the *Legend of the Iliad* also cover the borders of the town.

Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Çan was a tiny village located in the countryside under the Ottoman Empire that was associated with the Biga Sanjak (regional governance body). The population was never too dense, most people worked in agriculture, livestock farming and occasionally forestry to make a living.

In this study, I would like to touch on the change experienced after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, because the understanding of its historical background can help analyse the current situation better. The transformation of the town throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century will help us understand the economic and social history of Çan on a micro

scale, and of Turkey on a macro scale<sup>56</sup>. I might say that we need to connect with the past and view it from a wider perspective in order to comprehend the processes we are currently going through.

The Republic of Turkey was a fledgling nation-state that had separated from the Ottoman Empire when it was founded in 1923 as a result of the First World War. After the war, it started a completely new construction process in terms of the economy, society, and politics. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this country, whose economy is mostly dependent on agricultural industries, intermittently carried out numerous industrialization development schemes.

We can summarise the reflection of these plans on Çan as follows; Çan was a rural area where the villagers made their living from agriculture and livestock. At the same time, they have been going to the nearby villages and settlements for many years to work as seasonal workers.

In the 1940s, coal mines were first opened in Çan and the locals got new jobs in addition to farming. The mines brought with them new possibilities. With this, the industrialization process of this small town started. The government had a new economic development plan during the 1940's in which local investors were supported. Thus the town's ceramic industry had its foundations established in 1955. Businessman İbrahim Bodur's ceramic factory changed the town's economy and triggered migration into the town for employment opportunities.

Differences in everyday life practices have started to be felt as a result of changes in people's means of subsistence. Women have entered the workforce in the town, which had rigid patriarchal norms inside a traditional system. It should be mentioned that women continued to perform manufacturing and agricultural work at the same time.

As discovered in the interviews, although there has been a visible improvement in the context of gender equality in the labour sphere, the perception of society still has not changed. There is still a strong patriarchal model in the town, and any traditional gender roles are still very present.

<sup>56</sup> Cited Hasan Güler's (2014) work "Patron Baba ve İşçileri".

In the 1960s, the strikes against the Ceramic Factory and the workers' movement constituted a key point in defining of Çan socio-economic dynamics. Although the factory made various improvements in the field of worker's rights at first, it later dismissed all the workers who participated in the strike. This affected not only the workers but also those with the same surname and those from the same village. Villages that took part in the strike were put on a blacklist and were not allowed any new jobs. As a result of this process, individuals have become less motivated to fight for their rights and are more worried about maintaining their way of life. All these events pacified the town, both at the time and in the long-term.

### Coal power plants and their effects on Çan

The construction of the first thermal power plant in Çan was in 1996. The foundations of the power plant were laid in 2000, and the project was carried out by the Electricity Generation Corporation, a public institution. At the end of 2003, the first trial production was carried out<sup>57</sup>. The power plant has an installed power capacity of 320 MWe, which meets all the electrical energy needs of almost half a million people<sup>58</sup>. However, the thermal power plant plan was revealed and it became a root to the first environmental movement in Çanakkale. The thermal power plant in Çan burns lignite coal which is mined in this area. It is forbidden to use this coal for household heating since it is of very poor quality and releases a lot of dust and sulphur dioxide into the air<sup>59</sup>. People protested against the plant because they were aware of the damage it would cause to themselves, agricultural areas and the environment. Despite all objections, the power plant was built. Nothing stayed the same after that.

The villages closest to the power plant have nearly become ghost

57 Ilgar, R. (2008) *Project of çan thermolectric power*. Marmara Coğrafya Dergisi - 17 <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3160>

58 <https://www.enerjiatlas.com/komur/18-mart-Çan-termik-santrali.html>

59 Gacal F. (2018) *İletişim kiti: çanakkale, izmir ve tekirdağ'da kömürden elektrik üretimi ve sağlık*. Health and Environment Alliance. [https://www.env-health.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/HEAL-Toolkit-TR\\_Çanakkale-Izmir-Tekirdag.pdf](https://www.env-health.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/HEAL-Toolkit-TR_Çanakkale-Izmir-Tekirdag.pdf)

towns since the pollution from the thermal power plant coupled with the difficulties experienced due to the loss of job opportunities and the increase in livelihood difficulties.

No solution has been found for all of this pollution, and the declining level of human health continues, the fertile soils are being destroyed, and other types of life are poisoned since the construction of the Çan Thermal Power Plant.

Despite all this, a new thermal power plant construction process was approved in 2014. This power plant, which was planned by a private company (ODAŞ), was also commissioned in 2018. Unfortunately, situation was same: despite the opposition of numerous local, national, and even international groups and activists against this new power plant, nothing changed.

### Çan's story in the context of climate justice

Energy is a necessity for developing countries. This is the common argument of many governments and large companies. They claim that we require energy for further economic growth. They develop projects that destroy the entire ecosystem in order to obtain this energy. This argument has also strongly affected Turkey's energy policy. We must consider making use of both local and national resources. The Ministry of Energy declared 2012 the "Year of Coal," pledging to support new coal-fired power plant projects and incentives. The number of destructive projects such as the one in Çan, have been increasing since the 2000s, and especially in the last 10 years. Protective laws are being changed in a way that benefits businesses, disregarding public health and environmental preservation.

Although the environmental impact assessment (EIA) processes required for each project are one of the strongest arguments used by environmental movements in legal struggle, EIAs are decided in favour of the companies with each new regulation. Even if the EIA positive decision is cancelled and the project is suspended, companies continue to work illegally.

Regarding this issue, at the end of 2019, a new law amendment was brought to the agenda in the Parliament. Amendment 50 included postponing penalties for thermal power plants that did not already have a filter installed in their chimney in accordance with environmental legislation. A long-term campaign was carried out against this amendment, which had serious repercussions in civil society. Many local, national and international organizations participated in the efforts to withdraw the amendment. And it was a success, amendment was withdrawn. However, no power plant was closed despite the penalties that decreed the payment of fines and closures of the companies that do not comply. Among these power plants is the Çan Thermal Power Plant, which still continues to operate without a filter. Another example of the systemic support of non-renewable resources comes from the fact that Turkey signed the Paris Agreement in 2015 and it was officially approved by the parliament in 2021, but the country's goal still does not include moving away from coal. The government made no decision on coal exit at the climate council, which was held between February 21st and 25th 2022. Furthermore, increased electricity production from natural gas and nuclear energy was demanded<sup>60</sup>. A feasible point for taking concrete actions or making preparations in this regard is far beyond meeting the climate targets. This means it is too late to take any action to meet the goals set by the agreement.

Even though the country's plans are far from talking about just transition, there might be some hope for changing them as effects of climate change are more visible day by day. However, the struggles in Çan are happening for many years now, and the negative effects keep piling on, and locals have to live with the harsh impacts of two coal power plants.

In the following text we will see how Çan, a rural county that is far away from the metropolis and other urban areas, survives next to coal-fired power plants that pollute its air, water, and land. Although the priority

<sup>60</sup> <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/cevre/258330-iklim-surasindan-komurden-cikisa-dair-karar-cikmadi>



Image 2: Livestock farming is one of the main sources of income in Çan

in this study is given to power plants, it is important to remember that the area is also subject to unplanned and uncontrolled mining projects, which are big contributors to environmental degradation. Çanakkale is one of the cities whose air quality has deteriorated gradually in the last 5 years<sup>61</sup>. People are getting respiratory diseases more often due to air pollution. A study conducted by Çanakkale 18 Mart University (ÇOMU) in 2018 stated that the most common respiratory problem in Çan was shortness of breath. At the same time, it was emphasized that the incidence of asthma is much higher than in other regions<sup>62</sup>.

Due to the gas released from the unfiltered chimney, ash falls on the nearby houses. People cannot open their windows at home, and each time they get out they are exposed to pollution. Although access to fresh air is a fundamental human right, fresh air cannot be inhaled in Çan even for a day.

The dangers are in water as well: during the 1980s, acid lakes have arisen in artificial ponds created by private companies' coal mining,

<sup>61</sup> Right to Clean Air Platform (2021). *Dark Report*. Retrieved: 20.08.2022 <https://www.temizhavahakki.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/KaraRapor2021.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> Mentese, Mırcı etc. 2015, cited in Gacal, 2018; 17

where hazardous fluids and groundwater combine<sup>63</sup>.

Pollution of water, air and soil continues to be seen even in agricultural fields. The output of people's agricultural activities declines in this situation, which also has an impact on the people's economical condition.

When we consider the definition of environmental justice;

*"Fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies<sup>64</sup>."*, previously mentioned issues show only briefly to what extent the environmental injustice is occurring in Çan. The fact that people cannot live a healthy and decent life in the lands where they were born and raised due to the ecological destructions, and the fact that they are left to their own fate, are examples of environmental injustice happening daily as a result of regulations not being followed.

The environmental injustice is also climate injustice, and local issues in Çan are reflected on a global scale as the sources of climate change. To borrow the words of Indian activist Disha Ravi:

*"Climate justice is about intersectional equity. It is about being radically inclusive of all groups of people, so that everyone has access to clean air, food and water. As a dear friend always says 'climate justice isn't just for the rich and white.' It is a fight alongside those who are displaced; whose rivers have been poisoned; whose lands were stolen; who watch their houses get washed away every other season; and who fight tirelessly for what are basic human rights<sup>65</sup>."*

The residents of Çan are severely exposed to the repercussions of

63 Gacal F. (2018) *İletişim kiti: çanakkale, izmir ve tekirdağ'da kömürden elektrik üretimi ve sağlık*. Health and Environment Alliance. [https://www.env-health.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/HEAL-Toolkit-TR\\_Çanakkale-Izmir-Tekirdag.pdf](https://www.env-health.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/HEAL-Toolkit-TR_Çanakkale-Izmir-Tekirdag.pdf)

64 United States Environmental Protection Agency. *Learn about environmental justice*. Retrieved: 20.08.2022

65 <https://takeclimateaction.uk/resources/what-climate-justice>

the climate problem as a result of the operation of the two coal-fired power stations, and are victims of these injustices. The effect of such injustice is visible especially in vulnerable populations, such as women, children and, mainly, farmers with lower income.

The socio-economic inequities that exist in society are made even more obvious by looking through a lens of climate justice. Gender, which is simply the cultural and social roles that society establishes based on the gender assigned at birth, keeps women and LGBT+ people in the background in many areas, including economy, politics, education, business, and health. Gender inequality is the term used to describe the scenario that results from these conventional roles. These social injustices that affect women make them more vulnerable to the effects of a climate disaster. According to various reports, women who live in rural regions are among the populations in developing countries that are most impacted by climate change. In times of threat, the traditional tasks of rural women make the threats more challenging. These roles include being the principal users of natural resources, performing agricultural labour, caring for the elderly and children, and performing domestic work<sup>66</sup>.

### Reflections from the women of Çan

Within the scope of the project's local research, I had the chance to meet women who were born in Çan or who have lived in Çan for many years. Although I talked to many of them and got their opinions, I was able to conduct in-depth interviews with only 3 women.

Beyza is a 20 year-old university student. She was born and raised in Çan. Ümran is a 35 year-old lawyer. She has lived and worked in Çan for around 6 years. And Ayşe is a 59 year-old farmer. She was born in Asmalı Village, which is near Çan. All three belong to different social groups, so their inputs contribute to observe the story of Çan from different points of view.

It is observed that there has been an intense increase in respiratory

66 Talu, 2016; Lahiri-Dutt, 2013 cited in Doruk, 2022; 10. Doruk O. (2022) *Bozkurt: iklim adaleti üzerine saha notları*. Yeşil Düşünce Derneği. İstanbul

tract diseases, especially with the air pollution caused by the coal-fired power plant. People begin to realise that diseases are a part of their life when they notice that cancer cases are rising, that babies are developing asthma, etc. Care-related responsibilities fall more and more on women as a result of these health issues. According to the interviewees, both men and women in the family have a greater responsibility to take care of the other family members.

*Beyza says “When a man’s mother falls ill, he brings his old mother to his house and the man’s wife takes care of that mother. The man continues to commute to work at that time, and there is not much change in his life. This makes women more attached to their homes. My mother is sick and also has to take care of another patient at home. It is a very challenging and restrictive situation for women.”*

We may say that it is still a little town even if the industrialisation process brought immigrants to the area. People in this situation have few choices for socialising in public areas. Women have many less options in areas where they can define themselves without taking on roles like being mothers or wives. Besides, socialising in already existing public areas may become impossible as a result of the filthy pollution that spreads over the neighbourhood from the power plant’s chimney and makes it difficult to even breathe. Beyza remembers the pollution they lived with for many years:

*“When I was in sixth grade or something, the weather was very different, heavily foggy. It was winter. On the way to school, we could walk by each other without noticing. My friends and I clutched each other while holding the lanterns in our hands.”*

In this environment, which makes living difficult, agriculture is the main source of income for women, as it gives them more financial freedom, while husbands work in the power plant. The women that reside here

work in farms. They have relative economic freedom since they can sell the products they produce. One of the people who participated in the interview claimed that the pollution of the water, air, and soil caused a decline in productivity and made it harder to obtain nutritious products.

*“It is difficult in every sense to live here. Raising a child is very difficult. The tomatoes that women have planted for 2-3 years are drying.”*

- Ümran

They stated that they lost their most basic source of livelihood because of this. This situation, as stated by the interviewee, “makes women more needy.”

Women eventually become financially reliant on the family’s male members. However, if the family’s men are employed by the thermal power plant, this prevents them from speaking up against the plant’s harmful impacts. The destructive cycle is perpetuated by this silence. Increased disease rates, the need for women to provide care, difficulty leaving the house, ineffective agricultural practices, and the requirement that someone works at the power plant are all factors influencing women’s oppression and their hopes for future. They claimed that the only way they could see a solution was to leave the community. One of the interviewees stated that although they like this place very much, they can not think of buying a house here. Another emphasised that they are tired of struggling because of the thermal power plants and hope for a better life.

The responses I received when I asked each person I spoke with about their dream Çan, were quite straightforward and basic. People are not interested in large projects. They only want to be able to choose how to live in their own city. They keep imagining a life in which their work is supported and strengthened in a healthy environment. Everyone’s right to health should be protected in a fair transformation process according to the respondents, who also advocated for social security,

the prevention of diseases brought on by coal-fired power plants, and the creation of an action plan.

### Conclusion

The coal-fired power plants in Çan Town and the ecological destruction they have created clearly show us how climate justice intersects with other areas of human rights. If a person is in a socio-economically disadvantaged position, their political representation remains weak. This weakness can cause them to be crushed under the neo-liberal policies of decision makers. People may not be willing to fight even for basic and vital rights that involve everyone, such as clean air. People in Çan, along with health struggles do not feel economically secure nor supported by the system. This additionally gives power to the corrupt cycle they are living in, which just makes it even more complicated for the people without power. However, there are still people fighting and protesting in hopes of breaking out of the cycle, which gives some hope for the wider community and the locals to engage in activism.

As in all areas of life, gender inequality is one of the most important points to consider. This inequality, which directly intersects with climate justice, keeps renewing itself as a paradox in Çan. The existence of women in the public sphere is interrupted by the thermal power plant. They lose their socialisation areas, their economic livelihoods, and their health. Due to the increased care services, they have to work extra during the day, and with this stress load, they enter the cycle of disease again. They live in fear and cannot speak up because the decision makers are companies with stronger political representation. They still try their best and persist by reclaiming economic freedom in the agriculture field. Even then, they face challenges, but their hope for the future of Çan remains.

Just transition plans could potentially work for the situation that Çan is in if the governments and the people start considering different aspects of their region. Contrary to the imposed economy-based stra-

tegic plans, there is a need to recognise and analyse people's living space from sociological, ecological, cultural and political perspectives. In addition to this recognition, it is necessary to ask open questions about what the people living there want, and to actively involve them in the transformation process. Here, women have a particularly important role in active involvement. One of the first conditions for the transition to be just is to make room for the representation of women where they can make their own voices heard, uninfluenced by voices of others.

## Gender Inequality within the Environmental Movement: Voices from Turkey

BY: ÖZGE DORUK

For many years, I have attempted to take an active role in the environmental movement. I am concerned about the environment and want to see the change happen. I advocate with the passionate belief that another world is possible. In this movement, I had the opportunity to learn about all other areas of (human) rights, and to understand and expand my field of advocacy. I first learnt of the feminist movement while I was in the environmental movement and I got the opportunity to learn more about feminism. My experience, what I read, and what I got to hear taught me that all human rights in the world intersect. We cannot separate identity movements from anti-poverty movements, or the environmental movement from the workers', or the feminist movement from the students'. All these movements help fight against social injustice and lead us to better understand human rights in the context of climate justice.

The intersection of all these struggles is not only visible in the target areas of each movement; it also exists within the movements themselves: For example, I, as a woman and an environmental activist, have been exposed to, witnessed, and heard about numerous human rights and safe-space violations within the environmental movement, both locally and nationally. It took time to concretely define and name these violations. Listening to the words of women and LGBT+ people who face the same issues as me was both enlightening and heart-breaking, as it revealed that these violations are systematic.

The purpose of this article is to bring to light and discuss the human rights violations experienced by women activists within the environmental movement. In this context, it is based not only on observations or related literature research, but also on the perspectives of various

women working in the environmental field in Turkey. It includes a general assessment from Turkey's point of view, as well as proposals for solutions.

As people fighting for rights, we must address bias within ourselves, examine the concept of gender equality, be aware of the violations we have committed and work to change them; this will also strengthen us in our cause. It will help us implement the motto of being the change, ourselves first, and then on a community level. The first step is to become aware of and express existing inequalities and violations. So why do we talk about it now? As explained before, the feminist and environmental movements are deeply intersectional. Through the publication, we aim to bring attention to this intersectionality, and often we learn about the issues of traditional environments in rural areas being the root cause of the discrimination that women face once they speak up. If such inequalities exist in "higher" levels of the movements, where they disrupt safe spaces in activist spheres, we can only imagine how it is in circles where almost no attention is given to the issue, in other words, traditional rural environments.



### An overview of gender (in)equality in Turkey

We are assigned gender roles in the societies we live in from the moment we are born. Society expects us to conform to these roles and

live our lives through them. These roles have changed over time and are perceived differently in various parts of the world. However, the social order based on these binary gender roles, known as the patriarchy, exists everywhere and is still in effect today.

*“Patriarchy is a form of mental, social, spiritual, economic and political organization/structuring of society produced by the gradual institutionalisation of gender based political relations created, maintained and reinforced by different institutions linked closely together to achieve consensus on the lesser value of women and their roles...”*<sup>67</sup>

Gender roles are deeply rooted in society and they can be seen in all spheres of life. It is important to note that in countries where inequality reaches its peak, there is a serious situation of injustices occurring daily.

To provide several brief examples of what exactly these gender roles and the inequalities experienced because of them are; preventing and restricting the access of girls to education, controlling the female body in the field of health, restricting their access to birth control methods, not providing them with a safe public space, unsafe streets that prevent women and people of different gender identities from being out at night, less funding for sports and cultural activities, biases in the legal system, the use of discriminatory and insulting language in all parts of society, and so on.

We know that in traditional societies, gender inequality is much more prevalent. Attribution of domestic roles to women, responsibility for domestic care (such as caring for children and the elderly), speaking and dressing in a certain way, or being forced to behave and punished by society if she deviates from this; these are all examples of the gender inequality many of us have seen or heard of. Although it varies from region to region, this inequality persists in a world order dominated by the patriarchy. And so does the fight against inequality. We can speak up about inequality and seek rights as a result of these issues - the

67 <http://www.learnwhr.org/wp-content/uploads/D-Facio-What-is-Patriarchy.pdf>

outcomes of organised fights are not insignificant. However, there is still much work to be done.

Turkey is one of the countries where gender inequality is still a big issue. Organised fights, no matter if in the form of advocacy or demonstrations, are not an acceptable option in an autocratic state. Human rights movements have been suppressed with disproportionate force, particularly in the recent years. Fundamental rights are violated for no apparent reason. Every year on March 8<sup>th</sup>, during the International Women’s day, hundreds of police officers block the people from marching. The examples of gender inequality in Turkey can be seen at various scales, from large cities to villages.

In the study conducted by United Nations Developments Programme (UNDP) on gender equality in 2019, it was stated that Turkey ranks the 66<sup>th</sup> place out of 162 countries. In the study of “Turkey’s Gender Equality Index in 81 Cities” conducted in 2020, it was stated that inequality in Turkey is most intense in the fields of “representation in economy and politics” after “participation in production activities”<sup>68</sup>.

According to the current perception of gender inequality in Turkey<sup>69</sup>, it is stated that women should be primarily engaged in domestic labour rather than public employment; it is prioritized that women are responsible for the care of children and the elderly<sup>70</sup>. 59% of women taking part in the study are employed, 41% are unemployed. The reasons given for leaving their jobs are as follows: having children, being subjected to mobbing, working for low wages, marriage, being harassed by men at work, being too tired at work, being unable to keep up with housework, and COVID-19 pandemic (since 2020). According to the findings of a study conducted with young women preparing for the university entrance exam, students prefer professions that they can carry out comfortably and in harmony with their other “roles” in their daily lives. In this context, we should emphasise that teaching is

68 [https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/mce/2020/haberler/tobb\\_tskb\\_tepav\\_81\\_ilde\\_turkiyenin\\_toplumsal\\_cinsiyet\\_esitligi\\_karnesi.pdf](https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/mce/2020/haberler/tobb_tskb_tepav_81_ilde_turkiyenin_toplumsal_cinsiyet_esitligi_karnesi.pdf)

69 <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/1954922>

70 Ibid.



the most preferred profession.

In terms of political representation, Sema Yılmaz in her work<sup>71</sup> claims that when women enter politics, they are addressed directly to traditional women's branches; she emphasises that they are kept out of decision-making mechanisms. She goes on to say that women are not wanted to have a voice in politics. We can back up this point of view by mentioning that only 104 of the 596 members of the Turkish Grand National Assembly are women. It is claimed that women are only suitable for certain professions and can only come to the forefront and take responsibility in certain political issues. While issues such as family, children, and the rights of the elderly are appropriate for women to discuss, the economy, energy strategy, international policy, and so on are not. It was stated that roles in politics are arranged in parallel with the roles assigned to women in their private life<sup>72</sup>, a similar phenomena to what we previously noticed with regard to profession choices by students.

We can say that social inequality is now being worsened significantly by government policies. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Turkey was the first country to sign the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. This contract, known as the Istanbul Convention to the general public, was withdrawn in a problematic manner last year.

The first article of the contract states the general purpose of the convention clearly:

*“To protect women against all forms of violence and to prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence; promote substantial equality between women and men, including by contributing to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and empowering women; devise a comprehensive framework, policy and measures to protect and assist all victims of violence against women and domestic violence; promot-*

71 <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/503438>

72 Ibid.

*ing international cooperation with the aim of eliminating violence against women and domestic violence; To provide support and assistance for organizations and law enforcement agencies to cooperate effectively with one another to adopt a holistic approach to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence<sup>73</sup>.”*

It's claimed by the conservative government that expressions in the convention such as “gender,” “sexual orientation,” and “sexual identity” lead young people to immorality/perversion and homosexuality, and violent language that disrupts family and religious concepts.

Women's demonstrations and campaigns started after Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021. Ultimately, by a vote of 2 to 3, the 10th Chamber of the Council of State rejected the request for annulment of the Presidency's decision to annul the Istanbul Convention<sup>74</sup>, in other words, the withdrawal from convention was systematically supported in all levels of the government.

With the general social “rules”, cultural background and political attitude of the society, it is easier to see and stand against gender inequality today. I can express how difficult it is to see inequalities when we believe that everyone is working toward the same ideal and belief, to accept what we see, and to be able to take a stand against it after this acceptance.

I wanted to know what kinds of obstacles working women activists in the environmental movement face and how much of these challenges are due to gender inequality within the movement. Because, even if we discuss it when it is appropriate, I do not believe a strong enough stance has been taken on this issue. People are silent in order for the movement to continue striving for common goals. Violations must contain a serious element of violence in order to be considered or noticed. Otherwise, it may be overlooked. Men who violate rights, commit psychological/physical violence can have their actions ex-

73 <http://www.bukak.boun.edu.tr/?p=1411>

74 <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c3g1jw3472lo>

cused simply because they are “opposition”. The interviews I’ve had about what’s causing all of this and what’s going on, the recordings I’ve watched, my own experiences and the pertinent literature have all been beneficial to understand the inequalities within the movement.

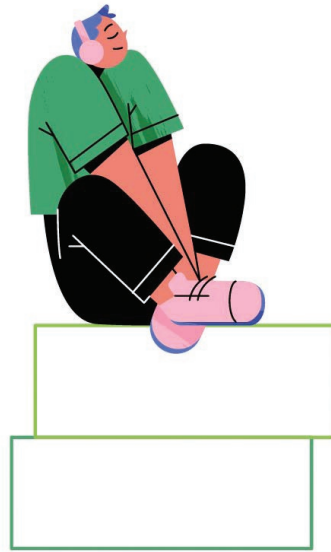
### The inequality is within us

“No community is free from patriarchal rules,” Güneş (40) says when I ask her how the environmental and feminist movements intersect. Patriarchy, on the other hand, has permeated every aspect of Turkey’s social structure.

Beyond their activist identities, people in the environmental movement are a part of the community in which they live. The Turkish leftist movement, the student movement and the revolutionaries of the 1980s, who were in opposition to the military coup process, have maintained their fighting spirit, particularly within local environmental movements. There is a tradition of activism they talk about, and this is more traditional and patriarchal than today, which is why they do not want to lose privilege of authority.

In general, men, older people, middle class or rich people may not be open for cooperation as conservative opinions are more present in these groups. While I am in the local movement in Canakkale, I see that I am mostly blocked by these men. It is hard to cooperate with men in the local movement. Instead of acting together, they act driven by their egos. They can talk for long hours and sabotage meetings to prove they know best. They love to build a hierarchy that supposedly calls for their privilege of “experience”. In addition, women are often exposed to mansplaining.

Acting independently or autonomously from them may appear to be a



“childish whim”, especially if you are a young woman. I had the opportunity to hear and see this instructive attitude and psychological pressure that goes into paving the way for young people. Unfortunately, these attitudes can be overlooked alongside the rhetoric of “we are a handful of people, we should not lose contact, let us find a middle ground”. I will not deny that this statement has some truth to it. But how fair is it to witness and condone the violation of another person’s human rights by people involved in a general fight for human rights? Here is one more example: A movement was started for Arikli Village, where uranium exploitation was carried out in the summer of 2021. Within this movement, in addition to certain actions, meetings were held to inform the villagers living in that region about the uranium mine. In one of these meetings, I witnessed two male professors who attended the meeting online arguing with each other for 40 minutes. While the issue was people’s livelihoods close to the mine, the focus seemed to be their individual fight without any regard to the aim of the meeting. I can interpret it as the result of a deep gender role that they recklessly see in themselves: the right to dominate this space and the thoughtlessness of wasting people’s time. It is, of course, not easy to relate directly and may seem hypothetical. But when the intertwined layers of the social structure are carefully separated, it is not too difficult to observe the relationship between them, as well as the relationship they have with the public. Imagine one of the speakers had been a woman.

Environmental and feminist movements, despite being “inclusive”, are very prone to mansplaining incidents. “Mansplaining” is a term used to describe a situation where a man talks condescendingly to someone, especially a woman, about something he has incomplete knowledge of, with the mistaken assumption that he knows more about it than the person he’s talking to.”<sup>75</sup>

The experts who are invited to numerous conferences, seminars, and workshops for capacity building and increasing knowledge and aware-

<sup>75</sup> <https://feminisminindia.com/2020/04/29/video-what-is-mansplaining/> related news: <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-48278772>

ness, which is another tool of social movements, are another visible manifestation of gender inequality. People, affected by the deeply rooted gender norms, assume some professions are more related to a certain gender. Thus it is easy to become a victim of prejudices about the apparent expertise of speakers, even within the movement.

One of my interviewees stated that the speakers in symposiums and panels are predominantly male and that a man's word and knowledge are more trusted. There are statements supporting this situation in the recordings I listened to in the YeşilGazete's Women Activists Speak series<sup>76</sup>. As women, we often have to repeat our words several times before we draw attention to what we are saying. Unlike men, we constantly need to prove what we say. This situation can turn into a hierarchy that becomes sharper with age and experience.

In recent years, we can see that many studies have been carried out in the field of civil society to observe this situation. It is obvious that this violation, which is relatively more visible, is more pronounced.

Barış Gençer Baykan, an academic from Yeditepe University, keeps a tally about situations like this in civil society, private sectors, academia, the political field etc. Baykan keeps records of events, meetings and conferences in which there are no female participants in many fields, shares it with us via social media and ensures the visibility of gender inequality<sup>77</sup>. In an interview about this work, Baykan states that meetings without women are mainly in fields of agriculture, economy, energy and history. Likewise, she states that domestic responsibilities and child/elder care are one of the reasons why women aren't present in these meetings<sup>78</sup>.

When I asked about the intersection of the environmental and feminist movements, an interviewee stated that "*local environmental movements are becoming more connected to the feminist movement.*"

76 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMITKvaJ\\_sc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMITKvaJ_sc) , <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jcXSFuB67M&t=568s>

77 <http://www.yesilgundem.net/2018/03/kadnsz-toplantlar.html>

78 <https://www.sivilsayfalar.org/2018/11/19/kadinsiz-toplantilar-cinsiyet-esitsizligin-gorunur-kilindigi-bir-duzlem/>

In situations of hazardous mining, coal or hydro electric power plants, etc. we can see that the women who live there are always at the forefront of the fight against environmental destruction projects that take place outside of the city. This is a relevant occurrence that needs assessment: Why do women embrace this movement more in the area they live in? What I also want to emphasise here is that the inequality we mentioned in the previous paragraphs repeats itself. Women act together against the security forces, against the companies and the state, and protest these destruction projects, they stand guard for days when needed, go to the parliament, make statements on news and social media channels. However, they still cannot take an active role in the decision-making mechanisms of the movement in general. Women who form the backbone of the movement with their words and actions can be ignored due to their age, socio-economic conditions, gender and experience. I had the opportunity to meet with women who self-identify as activists and who are generally from the city. But it is hard, if not impossible, to find women in villages who consciously chose the path of activism, as there are no structured movements and all activism is initiated out of necessity.

"*One does not expect to see these behaviours in the organised movement.*" This phrase is coming from Gülşah, who also puts his disappointment within the environmental movement into words. Women activists who come together and try to organise in Turkey can withdraw from the environmental movement just for this reason. Older men want to hold on to the power they have established, with the dominance of this authoritarianism, women cannot make their voices heard. Speaking louder does not always lead to a result. Most of the time, it leaves a deep abrasive effect. This issue is at an unchanging point at every level and in every position of the struggle, from local to national. Not being able to see that this situation creates an inequality, not being able to perceive that the words spoken and the attitudes in place are mansplaining, does not make one realise that the situation is a violation.

**So, what is the solution?**

Everyone had a different answer to this question with an underlying anxiety:

*“We could do a lot better in the environmental movement if we didn’t spend so much time constantly proving ourselves.”*

(Güneş, 40, feminist and environmental activist from Çanakkale)

*“In this movement, eco-feminism needs to be much more visible.”*

(Melisa, 18, young climate activist from İstanbul)

*“Women and LGBT+ people need to be discussed more and this needs to be discussed in relation to nature. Intersectionality is crucial.”*

(Gülşah, 31, Academic from Antalya)

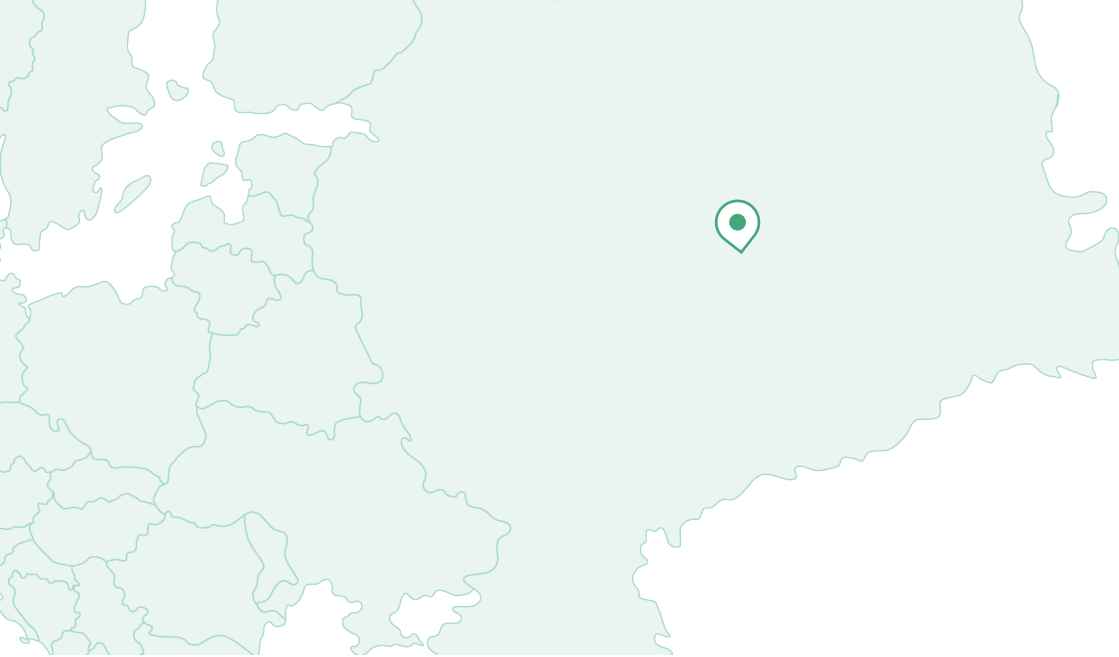
*“We need to talk about participatory decision-making processes together. We must do this not only as women, but also by including men.”*

(Bahar, 33, feminist and climate activist from İstanbul)

With all of these responses, I can say the following about this situation: Just as human rights violations feed and grow one another, so should the fight against them be multifaceted. If we are advocating for rights, we must not lose sight of the fact that there are many areas within those rights that must be protected. Of course, gender inequality in the environmental movement covers a wide range of issues. As I mentioned in my introduction, I wanted to open this issue up for discussion in this context by using a specific framework and concepts. We must speak up more, make more noise and be more visible. As a result, we will be aware of our own inequality.

A participant in a meeting I attended with young climate activists last year stated that she could hardly express herself in the struggle in her local area, that her words were not taken seriously, especially by older men, and that she could not find a place where she could exist.

It was important for me, as someone who has experienced what she described, to make her feel that she was not alone. It was valuable for her to know and hear that the problem was not her own and that she was not alone. We are not alone; we have had similar experiences at every stage. I know that every woman, LGBT+ activist from west to east, at various levels, encounters injustice. Responsibility to change it is in our hands, not in an instant, but over time. We will continue to fight gender inequality in the communities where we come together for change, just as we do in every other field where we want to see it.



## Endurance of a culture: the story of Tipshirma, a village in the Chuvash republic, Russia

BY: NATALYA SOFRONOVA

Discussions within the environmental and feminist movements often focus on urban areas. There is indeed a reason for this: urban areas contribute more to the total carbon footprint<sup>79</sup>, and are statistically more significant when it comes to the overall impact on the world's climate. Additionally, the dense population characteristic of urban areas is one of the reasons why more subtle and common forms of oppression and violation of human rights are displayed, which both movements tackle. However, zooming into rural areas, villages with much less people and different social dynamics, all present issues are more visible. In these areas where people are dependent on nature and themselves, climate change has a direct impact on their lives, which is especially noticed by women<sup>80</sup>. One of such cases, which we

79 United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/climate-solutions/cities-pollution#:~:text=Cities%20and%20Pollution,cent%20of%20the%20Earth's%20surface>.

80 United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/women-in-shadow-climate-change>

will explore in this article, is the case of a village that was forgotten by the authorities, and that is dependent on agriculture - Tipshirma. Tipshirma is a small village near the regional capital Cheboksary, in the Chuvash republic in Russia. Although the original aim was to discover the impacts of climate and environmental issues on the lives of women in the village, I have discovered deeper connections between cultural assimilation and socio economic issues on their lives. This can offer us insight on the general state of mind in rural communities when it comes to action taking, gender, and labour, as well as socio economic difficulties in under-represented communities around the world. I gathered information from interviews performed with several women in their early thirties, observed the village, and conducted an analysis of the available online resources.

In regard to Tipshirma, we should take into consideration the region which it is part of. The Chuvash republic is one of the poorest regions in Russia, and is in the bottom 25% of regions in terms of average wages and poverty rates<sup>81</sup>. Young women living in villages face different difficulties, from economic influences to ethnic and gender discrimination. In this article we are going to take a look at the way of life in a small village in the Chuvash republic through the fore-mentioned aspects. In order to better understand the story and interconnection of these aspects, we should look into the emergence of its people, culture, and the Chuvash republic itself.

### Ethnogenesis and history of the Chuvash people

The Chuvash republic is the region of an ethnic minority in Russia. The Chuvash people originated from the Sabirs and the Volga Bulgars, and the Chuvash language is part of the Turkic language group<sup>82</sup>. The political history of the region and the recurrent socio-economic oppression exerted on people throughout its history play a role in the locals'

81 Rosstat, average wages in Russia by regions, 12.21-05.22 (39551 RUB in Chuvash republic); percent of people living below the poverty line, 2021 (16% in Chuvash republic)

82 Salmin, A. K. (2017). History of the Chuvash people: analysis of the main versions. Limited Liability Company "Nestor-Istoria".

lives even today. For most of its existence, the Chuvash republic has been part of bigger political entities or states: before the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it was part of Volga Bulgaria, and then, it was concurred with other regions by the Golden Horde. After it collapsed, the Chuvash republic became part of Khanate of Kazan. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in order to break free from Khanate of Kazan, they joined forces with Russia, later becoming one of the Russian regions in exchange for protection from other countries. Nevertheless, some Chuvash people were against this accession and were executed after protests in the 1550s. From the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chuvash people participated in major uprisings in Russia, including Razin and Pugachev's peasant uprisings<sup>83</sup>. As an ethnic minority group, Chuvash people face various forms of discrimination on the basis of religion - as pagans, they were forced to become Christians, and also due to prejudice and the stereotyped ideas that are imposed on them on a daily basis, such as not being cultured or not being smart. Those are just some forms of stereotyping that non-Slavic people face in Russia to this day. Due to the cultural assimilation enforced by Russia from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, most of the people living in the Chuvash republic right now (around 95%) who practise religion are Christian<sup>84</sup>. Forced assimilation coerces people into changing their cultural beliefs and traditions and imposes uniformity, and the ideal for the Russian policy of assimilation is becoming a Christian Slavic person who speaks Russian as their native language. Unfortunately, we can see that forced assimilation was implemented on Chuvash people quite successfully. Many of them do not speak the Chuvash language anymore or they speak it in a mixed manner combined with Russian, especially those who live in the cities. Considering the long history of assimilation of Chuvash people, it is quite extraordinary that this culture persisted for so long. Today, it is indeed disappearing, which is a major issue, but the centuries of re-

83 Vyazova, O. G., & Stepanov, V. I. History Of The Chuvash People In The Eyes Of The European Historian Andreas Kappeler

84 Ministry of culture of the Chuvash republic, <https://culture.cap.ru/action/activity/mezhnacionaljnie-i-etnokonfessionaljnie-otnosheniy>

silience can still be sensed in the villages where people still preserve their culture in their daily lives.

The village we will talk about is Tipshirma ("Тип ҫырма" – "dry ravine" in Chuvash), with a population of about 200 people, and almost all of them are members of an ethnic minority - the Chuvash people. In the following sections I will approach different aspects of life in Tip-



Images 1,2: Entrance to the village

shirma around the topics of economy, the environment and gender.

### **Economic situation in the village**

Tipshirma is located between the 2 biggest cities of the region – Cheboksary and Novocheboksarsk. There is a small library, a market, and a recently built children's playground. Tipshirma is very small, it has 3 streets: "straight st.", "oblique st." and "youth st."

As you enter the village, you can walk down the straight street and see the market and the library next to it.

The shop is one of the few places in the village where people can work. Many of the villagers work in nearby towns, as there are rarely any other job opportunities in the village. Some of them move to other places and visit their houses on the weekends and during holidays. For permanent residents of the village, agriculture is one of their most crucial income sources: they grow crops mostly for themselves, and, less often, to sell it. A local woman shared her perspective on the job situation in the village:

*“We don’t have many job opportunities in the village. There are several small businesses, but most of their employees are from the city because the wages are really low and they have a large em-*



Image 3: Local library

*ployee turnover.”*

She works near the village, at the gas station, and she is satisfied with her job, where she can go on foot unlike most of the villagers. Others work in the cities and spend around 40-60 minutes commuting to work each day. Some people travel to other regions for temporary jobs, as the job situation in the whole Chuvash republic is unfavourable. Such trends make it difficult for people to stay connected to their families, and precarious jobs imply health and economic risks.

As in many rural communities worldwide, there is an outflow of young people from the village. They move to nearby cities in search for better living conditions and jobs:

*“Somehow the village is already getting empty. Mostly the elderly live here, and young people visit on weekends, vacations, or in the summer. Those who leave are looking for comfort, they buy or rent apartments”.*

With the young people leaving, the expectations for maintaining a

“functional” society falls on the backs of those who stay. And considering that the men of the village, traditionally “bread-winners”, work in neighbouring cities, the majority of these expectations fall on women.

### **Gendered division of labour**

The state of women’s rights and gender discrimination in the village is similar to the situation in Russia in general. According to the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), Russia is on the 81<sup>st</sup> place out of 156 in the GGGI ranking. However, if we look at the rankings by sector, we see that Russia is on the 25<sup>th</sup> place when it comes to economic participation and opportunity, on the 1<sup>st</sup> place regarding educational attainment, health and survival (along with other 26-29 countries), and on the 133<sup>rd</sup> place as for political empowerment<sup>85</sup>. In other words, Russian women live in a patriarchal society where their rights are being restricted - their political rights more than any other, but they are expected to study and work as much as men, and even more, as their second shift<sup>86</sup> continues at home as unpaid labour.

For women living in rural areas, the “second shift” consists not only of housework and family care, but also of agricultural work. Men in the village are also involved in the harvesting process, but interviews with villagers showed that there is a gender division of labour in both agriculture and housework.

This division is based on the types of work that are perceived as more physically hard. In gardening, women do planting and weeding more often, while men tend to plough the field, move the grass or chop the wood. The housework division is similar to other patriarchal societies: women are often the ones who cook and clean, and men do home repairs and maintenance. Nevertheless, the division of labour is not a strict pattern of interaction that all villagers follow. In many cases they mix “women’s” and “men’s” household duties.

<sup>85</sup> Global Gender Gap Report, March 2021, World Economic Forum

<sup>86</sup> The labour performed at home in addition to the paid work: shopping, cooking, paying bills, babysitting. Hochschild, A., & Machung, A. (2012). The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home. Penguin.

Villagers also help each other in the harvesting process. One of the interviewees has a tractor in her household that her family lends to people in times of harvest for a small symbolic price.

The amount of work to do in the fields depends on the size and composition of the family. Small families with elderly people tend to grow less crops. Today, there are a few families who don't have any animals because of the difficulties of keeping livestock. Besides the high costs of investment and maintenance of machinery, which villagers tackle by using tools that could be fairly considered communal, another challenge raised is a newly constructed highway that makes it impossible for animals to cross it and get to the pastures. As mentioned, to many villagers, agriculture yields are economically significant, so any challenges and difficulties reflect directly on their well-being. Nowadays, the challenges are rooted in many axes, one of which is the climate change.

#### **Land of Chuvash ancestors in times of climate change**

Climate change and other environmental issues have as strong impact on farmers living in the village: they reduce yields and enhance weed and pest proliferation<sup>87</sup>. The reduction of crop yields makes it hard for families to make ends meet, and the increasing prices of machinery and other equipment make their financial situation even worse. I asked locals if they had already noticed weather changes during their life in the village, and how it affected them so far.

Many of them noticed changing weather conditions but do not consider it a threat. One of the interviewees noticed the following in this regard:

*“Winter has become warmer. When I was a child, we did not go to school for weeks in winter, temperatures could reach down to -30°C. Now I have a child, and neither this year nor the last did he miss school because of the weather. Winter has become much*

*warmer than it used to be.”*

Others noticed that unpredictable and extreme weather conditions make it difficult to grow crops, and the way it affects them economically:

*“It affects the harvest, because now not everything has time to ripen. People started building greenhouses so that the harvest is better. Potatoes are already planted less - either because the summer is dry or because there is constant rain. Now we buy potatoes more often and it affects the financial situation: you have a bigger budget for food and a smaller one for other necessities.”*

Villagers agree and emphasise that spending more money on food will harshly influence their lives, especially in the current economic and political climate.

*“Of course, not having a good harvest will hit the pockets, especially in this situation with the war in Ukraine, and everything is becoming more expensive, prices are rising at the speed of light. The fact that we have food growing in the garden is a big advantage.”*

Villagers, besides feeling temperature changes and its effect on their yields, also care about the environment on a local level. They focus on the litter problem, as they have seen changes happening in the nearby scenery during the last decade. Villagers communicate their concerns on this via messengers, and sometimes gather to clean the village and nearby territories. They consider the place their home and they try to keep it clean, as waste management companies and authorities only manage waste containers and do not clean the streets.

The nearby landfill Pichtulino had been contaminating the area until 2015, when it was closed - but villagers remember they were influenced by it:

*“We did not really feel it, but people in Pichtulino (a nearby village) constantly felt the smell and the stench, it affected the health of*

<sup>87</sup> IFPRI report, G. C. Nelson and others, Climate change: Impact on agriculture and costs of adaptation <https://www.ifpri.org/publication/climate-change-impact-agriculture-and-costs-adaptation#:~:text=Agriculture%20is%20extremely%20vulnerable%20to,and%20long%20run%20production%20declines>.



*people and animals. Garbage from the landfill used to be blown by the wind and it reached us here. And there was a terrible smell even in our village when they were burning it.”*

These were shortly the environmental struggles that the interviewed women mentioned. We can see that the most common environmental impact they face is related to difficulties in agricultural production, which to them means lack of financial stability. Generations of Chuvash people have lived off of agriculture and have been in touch with nature – through their culture and traditions, approached later text, we will see how these particularities are entwined in their daily lives. The climate crisis will influence the lives of villagers even more in the near future, and with the economic downturn in Russia as a consequence of sanctions and poor political management, which might be followed by years of recession, the future of rural areas does not seem bright or hopeful<sup>88</sup>. The economic situation in the village perhaps would not have been so difficult had there been better political management, so in the following text we will also explore their perceptions of the system in terms of support needed and received, and what other challenges they face that prevent them from feeling secure in their lives. This is why in the following text we will focus on the deeper implications that lead them to the conditions they live in.

We will take a look at other aspects of living in Tipshirma, and explore Chuvash culture, ethnic discrimination of non-slavic people in Russia, the political engagement of the villagers and their hopes for the future.

### **Centuries of cultural assimilation and its social implications**

The Chuvash republic has been part of Russia since 1551<sup>89</sup> and encountered the challenge of cultural assimilation. Children in the village study in Russian-language schools and most if not all of the villag-

ers speak Russian quite well. As neither ethnically Russian, nor Slavic, Chuvash people face ethnic discrimination perpetuated by harmful stereotypes toward the community. In this article we will explore local culture and traditions, what villagers think about assimilation issues, and how they experienced discrimination.

### **Cultural heritage and traditions**

Cultural assimilation had a big impact in many areas of their lives. In terms of religion, Chuvash people used to be pagans, but, after joining Russia, they were forced to convert to Christianity. Around 95% of villagers are Orthodox, a similar situation to that of the rest of the Chuvash republic. Therefore, many of their main celebrations are connected to the Orthodox religion. In the interviews, most of them emphasised national and Orthodox celebrations and a few Chuvash ones. Chuvash preserved connection with nature and agriculture can be traced back to the pagan times, as one of the most popular celebrations is a remnant of that time. Akatuy is one of the most important national holidays of the Chuvash people, dedicated to the end of spring field work. In the past, on a certain day, a table with various dishes was set in the hut, and relatives and neighbours were invited. After gathering, the host appointed one elder who knew the ritual and began to fulfil their duties as the leader. Participants received a slice from one of the dishes made from grain and animal products, and a mug of beer. After, they sang a hymn to agricultural labour and prayed. In their prayers, the Chuvash asked Tura and other deities for a plentiful harvest, livestock offspring, and health and wealth for their relatives and friends. After completing the prayer, everyone ate and drank. It was believed that a plentiful feast contributed to an equally plentiful harvest of bread<sup>90</sup>. In the recent years, rapid changes have been noticed – nowadays, this tradition rarely includes praying or singing the harvest song. In addition to that, Akatuy is less often celebrated in Tipshirma compared

88 Bloomberg – <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-05/russia-risks-bigger-longer-sanctions-hit-internal-report-warns?srnd=premium-europe>

89 Kotlyarov, D. A. (2006). About the formation of “the whole land of Kazan”. In *Studies of Russian History and Culture* (pp. 326-340).

90 N. Petrov, T. Semenova, The role of the national holiday «Akatuy» in the preservation of ethno-cultural traditions in the globalization context, Ulyanov Chuvash State University, Cheboksary

to the early 2000s. Nevertheless, agriculture remains one of the main activities cherished and relied on by the villagers. The environmental changes that the villagers notice, besides their economic influence, also jeopardise their sense of community.

A local villager talks about the holidays celebrated in her family and the cultural activities that make the community of Tipshirma gather:

*“In the village, we do not have as many celebrations as we used to have. [...] Villagers try to celebrate, sometimes organise events, but not many people participate in them, not as it used to be. In the past, there were concerts with Chuvash songs and dances, activities for children, mini-markets with sweets... Also, we used to have football tournaments between our village and nearby ones (Tipshirma-Pikhtulino, Chemursha-Yanashkassi). We used to cook Shurpe (Chuvash soup). Last year, villagers of Chemursha cooked it during the celebration”*

Akatuy is dear to the hearts of the villagers and some of them visit other places to take part in the celebration. Another interviewee reflects on Chuvash and Orthodox holidays celebrated in the area:

*“[...] I don't even know if these (Petrovka, John the Warrior) are pagan or Orthodox holidays. And of course, we celebrate Akatuy after seeding”*

Other constituents of their cultural heritage that are at risk due to cultural assimilation are their costumes and embroidery, which are useful at depicting a specific culture: Chuvash people have various types of clothes and embroidery which signify gender, age, marital status and social status of the person wearing it. Moreover, Chuvash embroidery has deep sacral meanings and is used on specific parts of the clothes to protect people from dangers. One of the main elements of Chuvash embroidery on women's clothes is “keske” (кӛскӛ), which takes the form of rosettes on the part over the chest, symbolising cosmogonic images and the Sun protecting those who wear it<sup>91</sup>.

<sup>91</sup> I.G. Petrov, E.E. Nikonorova, Signs of age and sex stratification in Chuvash women's clothing. 2008. Centre for Ethnological Research, UNC RAN, Ufa



Image 3,4,5,6: Chuvash traditional patterns, clothing and decoration exhibited at the Museum of Chuvash embroidery.

Nowadays, Chuvash people rarely wear national costumes. Women in their early thirties who were interviewed remember their grandmothers wearing them on special occasions and celebrations, but cannot remember when it was the last time they saw someone in Chuvash traditional clothing. While being in the village, I also talked to several people who were in their sixties and they emphasised that, even in their generation, people did not use to wear them often. However, they used to wear them during Chuvash holidays or on wedding days, especially the

elderly. Now, villagers see people in Chuvash costumes only at a few Chuvash celebrations such as Akatuy, and mostly those who perform in Chuvash folk ensembles. Inputs allow to conclude that the silencing of traditions seems to have been increasing in the past few generations.

*“Nowadays, you can see people wearing Chuvash costumes only at some festivals, if they perform, sing or dance”*

The disappearance of Chuvash costumes is one of many consequences of cultural assimilation perpetuated in Russia and the USSR. Wearing the national costume along with other attributes such as language and religion “reveals” the non-slavic ethnicity of a person and leads to ethnic stereotyping and discrimination, which Chuvash people face even without showing these attributes.

### **Chuvash language**

What is probably the most prominent issue of cultural assimilation among Chuvash people as well as in many other cultures can be seen in the form of language slowly fading away. Based on the Russian nation-wide census of 2020, 99% of Chuvash people can speak Russian, while only 69% of them can speak Chuvash<sup>92</sup>. In the Chuvash republic, especially in cities and governmental facilities, Russian is used as the main and only way of communicating. More people speak Chuvash in villages and smaller towns. However, even in the villages, people do not speak the Chuvash language as much as they used to. The disappearance of the Chuvash language is happening gradually. Interviewees share their perspective on the situation:

*“Now, villagers speak in a mixed manner (Russian and Chuvash). The elderly speak Chuvash, young people mostly speak Russian. In our house we speak also in Russian. If you leave the house, you can talk to someone in Chuvash. At school, Chuvash is in the curriculum*

*but the whole education program is in Russian.”*

*“[...] It changes with generations. Now it seems to me that people know Chuvash less and less.”*

Villagers consider the extinction of the language as inevitable and rather unfortunate. They want to pass on Chuvash culture and language to their children, which is not an easy task, as Chuvash is seen as a secondary language and is not used in most public institutions in the region. Some of the villagers speculate that this situation was heavily influenced by systematic changes of legislation. For instance, in 2018 the Russian parliament approved the amendments to the Federal Education Law, which made it optional to learn local languages of the ethnic minority republics in schools, a step that subtly mainstreamed the Russian language to all previously autonomous regions with their own languages. Now, parents have to give permission to schools to teach it, which means less and less people are going to learn Chuvash at school. A local woman shares her perspective on the situation:

*“I have always been for learning Chuvash, they must know their native language. Let them know that there is Chuvash language and people, since they live in the Chuvash Republic. It used to be mandatory. Now it’s strange, signatures are being collected for the Chuvash language.”*

Villagers care about Chuvash traditions, language and culture. However, they notice how Chuvash culture is disappearing through generations. They do not know how to change this situation of cultural assimilation and whether it is possible at all:

*“[...] We don’t know if we can support all these traditions and knowledge in the future”.*

92 Russian population census, 2020

*“It’s nice to pass on traditions when you know they will remain among some”.*

### **Discrimination of Chuvash people**

The topic of ethnic discrimination was quite sensitive to talk about, and some interviewees were not ready to share their experience or said that they never encountered it. One of the women who used to study at the school in the nearby city shared that she was bullied there because of her Chuvash ethnicity. She does not consider it discrimination and thinks that just some people might be nasty.

From my personal experience, when I was studying in school in the regional capital Cheboksary, I encountered stereotypes about Chuvash people as not smart or cultured enough. I had the privilege of being slavic-passing and having no accent, though it still bothered me when I heard such stereotypes. I’ve had situations where people were surprised to learn of my ethnicity because they thought that I was *“too (academically) smart to be Chuvash”*.

Those stereotypes about ethnic minorities follow people in every area of life. I studied sociology in Moscow and conducted a research on ethnic discrimination in the rental market with my peers. During the research we found out how ethnically slavic Russians construct the concept of “a non-slavic person” and believe in many stereotypes about them as dirty, not cultured, and dangerous. This situation leads to high levels of discrimination and makes it practically impossible for non-slavic people to rent an apartment there, especially if they do not have Russian citizenship. To rent a flat, a non-slavic person has to hide their ethnicity or prove that they will be decent tenants even though they are not slavic. With this input, we can rewind on the topic of economic difficulties in the village and ask ourselves if the situation would have been any different if this bias didn’t exist. The interconnection between discrimination, economic difficulties and access to opportunities mentioned in the text so far open space for many questions. However, very often, the culprit in the perpetuation of the unfavourable situation is the government.

### **Political engagement: Screaming into the void**

Politics might be one of the most sensitive and challenging aspects in this research. It can’t be said that people in the village support the current authorities. Many of them have opposed views and criticise various problems, from corruption to the underfunding of the region. The biggest challenge in the political part of this research for me was to stay unbiased, with the aim of discussing topics close to the participants, focusing on local political problems, and not the general situation with civil rights in Russia. In particular, I have explored how they get involved in the political system and what they think is crucial for change now.

The Chuvash republic, as part of Russia, has a similar administrative structure to other regions. Tipshirma is part of the Sinyalskoe rural settlement with an administrative centre in Sinyali village. In the past, Tipshirma used to have a village council (Sel’sovet), which was eliminated in the early 1990s with the collapse of the USSR. Thus, it became more difficult to communicate local problems and to generally be closer to the ones in power. Sel’sovet used to work with local problems, do record keeping, and oversee local activities.

*“We used to have Sel’sovet, but now only the library remains there (in the administrative building), the village council is now in Sinyali, the administration works there.”*

When I asked whether they were satisfied with the actions of the authorities on a local level, they were surprised, as it was difficult for them to remember any of the actions except for the renovation of the children’s playground. One of the main problems of the village is the quality of the roads, which haven’t been paved yet, even though the village is situated between the two biggest cities of the region. Moreover, this situation has seriously affected villagers’ lives, as even ambulances cannot drive to the village in bad weather.

*“To be honest, our administration does not do much for the village. We live between two cities, there should be better roads, even the ambulance can’t drive up to your house - you have to go out to the*

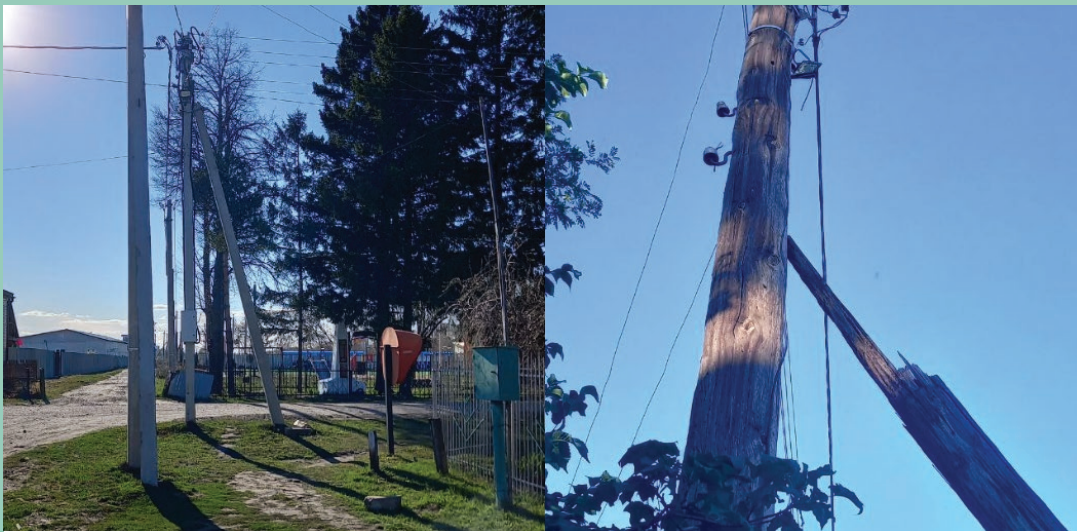


Image 7,8: Rugged and unsafe electrical powerlines

*road to meet it yourself. They can't drive up or don't even want to, when they see that the road is bad. And taxi drivers are afraid to get stuck too because the roads are without pavement"*

In the 2010s one of the roads was covered with gravel, not by the authorities, but by a company that installed gas line services. This road situation is not the only problem of the village: Insufficient funding occurs in the area of electric supply too. Power poles have not been renewed for a long time and many of them are almost ruined, hanging near houses, as can be seen in the image. Dense houses of Tipshirma in such situation are at risk of causing fires.

Villagers do not believe in change and think that the authorities will not be persuaded to take actions. In their answers, we could see the hierarchical nature of the political structure in Russia, where those who make decisions are too far away from the people who need help.

*"It does not depend only on the local administration... they cannot increase the budget of the village. If they ask the regional government for more money, they won't succeed... Even if we really want it and the local administration wants it, it does not mean that regional and federal authorities will give permission."*

Villagers try to communicate their problems to local authorities but do not get any response, which is demotivating to take any further actions. Many of them leave the village in search of better living and working conditions or work in other regions from time to time. Young people are leaving rapidly, which leaves little hope for improvement.

*"Well, the administration doesn't listen, they don't pay attention at all. Sure, meetings are held, all complaints are expressed to them, but it is useless – it goes over their heads. Young people will leave at this rate."*

Such situation makes people lose their political subjectivity and hopes in the power of their actions. This reflects the general situation in Russia, where people do not believe they can change the political system after trying again and again and not getting any results.

*"Oh, I don't know, if anything could have been done, it would have been done a long time ago."*

### **What does the future hold for young women in Tipshirma?**

The situation in the village in all explored aspects didn't seem to be hopeful. And yet, people still live there and fight for the preservation of their land and culture, despite living standards being on the bare minimum. At the end of the interviews, I asked about what they expected and dreamt of for the future, to explore their personal aspirations and what they thought would happen to the village.

One of the interviewees was a woman in her thirties with 3 children. She lives and shares household duties with her siblings who have children too. She wakes up at 6 and goes to work from 8:00 to 20:00. Many would say these are harsh working conditions, but, for many people in the Chuvash republic, it is their daily reality. When she is not working, she takes care of her children, household duties and crops. Without her siblings, it would have been more challenging to work and look

after her children. Sharing responsibilities helps her earn money while also having at least some time with her children.

Another interviewee also lives with her big family: her mother, her husband, their child, her sister and her sister's child. She has a similar daily routine: she works a full-time job, takes care of her child and does household chores.

Interviewees hope for the better but do not feel like they can influence the future:

*"I hope everything will be better, I don't know, it does not depend on me, but on the people, on the local governance."*

Some are worried because of the expansion of nearby cities, as two years ago construction companies wanted to build apartments near the village.

*"I really hope that Tipshirma will remain a village. We were extremely afraid that the city was coming closer, that they would demolish the village. Of course, I really want Tipshirma to remain in its place, so that no one's house is taken away. Although they promised to build apartments between Pichtulino and Tipshirma two years ago, they never started building. But the New City (a district of the nearby city) is approaching us, we would like Tipshirma to remain in the same state as it is now. Of course, with better roads."*

Even though some villagers go to other places to earn money, many of them love their village and do not wish to live in cities. They want to stay in Tipshirma and preserve their native place for themselves and their children, who have more opportunities to be close to nature in the village.

*"My husband and I are village-loving people. The city does not attract us."*

When talking about their dreams, women living in the village put emphasis on their future and hope to be able to have enough money to provide for their families and themselves.

*"My dream is to raise my children, teach them to go on a good path. I will manage to work somehow, the main goal is to have a decent salary."*

The aspirations of young women overall seem to be to live their lives in a simple manner, focusing on family and preserving the heritage and land of their ancestors. Their stories offer a good representation of what is happening in many underfunded and almost forgotten rural communities. Thanks to them we can draw a line between the common assumptions about passivity in rural areas and reality, which is that living on the bare minimum doesn't leave space for much action. It truly puts into perspective the privilege of doing activism and fighting for a better future. The harsh economic situation of the region and gender roles are significant factors going against their political empowerment.

Only significant changes on both local and federal levels can improve the quality of life in the village. Such changes seem unlikely in the near future. However, sharing their stories and ways of life in a rural community may show the world some unvoiced perspectives and experiences. It reflects the fate of many cultures that have unfortunately suffered the same, if not even worse consequences.

Finding hope and a voice in a society that aims to silence them is an act of resilience, and no matter how silent, we have seen that women of Tipshirma are ready to be heard. We hope that sharing their stories will empower others in similar situations to identify local issues, and become involved in creating a society that will enable them to fulfil their dreams and aim even higher.

## How people become environmental activists

BY: NATALYA SOFRONOVA

In the previous text about Tipshirma village we have mentioned some social issues, but an important observation was regarding the lack of engagement of the local community. Looking into activism in rural areas worldwide, we can see that it is more difficult to mobilise for a cause in these places, and factors influencing engagement come from a wide range of political, social, and economic types of oppression, among others. In order to explore this issue, specifically in rural areas, we would require much more research, and surely the reader should take the initiative to open these discussions, and assess the different context of social, political, gender and many other aspects of rural communities. However, in the following article, we will explore how people become environmental activists and the path they go through, so that we can know how to better engage and keep them, in all kinds of communities.

Activists are a crucial part of the fight against climate change. In the last few years we could see the rising numbers of environmental and climate activist all over the world<sup>93</sup>. However, in some countries, such forms of activism are less common. There are different types of activist organisations: advocacy organisations who provide legal support, protest organisations who organise demonstrations and rallies, service organisations who provide material and mental health support, and cultural organisations who engage in cultural and ideological activities, for example, holding educational events or film festivals. Many of the activist organisations cannot be classified into one type, as they share different functions. But some forms of activism, such as protesting, are less common in non-democratic countries due to

higher legal and physical risks.

In 2021, as part of my sociology studies, I wrote my thesis on environmental movements. One of the research objectives was to explore how people become environmental activists. Two cases were studied: the environmental student organisation “HSE Green” of Higher School of Economics university, and the Russian branch of the international climate movement Fridays For Future (FFF). They were selected based on their differences in the form of movements (non-protest - protest<sup>94</sup>) and the scale of the movement’s mission (to make the university environmentally friendly - to prevent the global climate crisis). During the study, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with active members of the movements.

I conceptualised the path of becoming an activist using the concept of “the moral career” and identified its key stages. The moral career of an activist consists of successive changes in the individual’s perception of themselves and others when the individual begins to outline the boundaries between the outward group of regular people and the inward group of environmental activists<sup>95</sup>.

The first stage, “*Life Before Activism*”, is characterised by a low interest in environmental issues and may be accompanied by the participation in non-environmental activism, such as protests for civil or women’s rights. For activists who have moved from small towns, often being young people from rural areas, this stage is characterised by the feeling that there are not enough natural (“green”) locations in the big city, and they don’t feel as connected to nature as they used to. The individual’s attitude towards environmental activism and environmentally oriented practices at this stage is indifferent or even negative. The second stage of the moral career of an activist, “*It opened my eyes*”, comes when they encounter emotionally charged content

93 Taylor M., (2019). Latest global school climate strikes expected to beat turnout record. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/24/latest-global-school-climate-strikes-expected-to-beat-turnout-record>

94 Protest organisations are the ones that organise protest types of collective actions such as demonstrations, picketing, rallies, marches, etc. in order to oppose the actions of authorities (local, federal, university administration).

95 The concept of moral career was borrowed from the works of Goffman, E. (1968). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Aldine Transaction.

about the environment or gradually notice such content in their daily lives. At this stage, an individual becomes interested in environmental issues and gradually introduces environmentally oriented practices into their life, such as separate waste collection or reducing the consumption of animal products. Also, an individual may experience embarrassment and fear of being ridiculed by others for implementing environmental practices, since even to this day individuals can treat eco-friendly people this way. At this stage, individuals begin to frame their experience as a struggle. Firstly, a struggle with themselves and their daily practices, and then, a struggle with the opposing ideas about the environment that their friends, family and other people hold. The new knowledge about the environment and skills acquired during this stage are perceived as insufficient and superficial.

The third stage, “*Acquisition of competence*”, in many cases, may be a life-long stage, and it is a process of immersion into environmental topics and the acquisition of broader and more detailed knowledge. Competence, also called “human capital”, is a specific form of capital that acts as an identifying mark for people from the inner group of activists, which allows them to differentiate themselves from other people<sup>96</sup>. At the beginning of this stage, an individual consumes articles and educational material on environmental topics, and then, they start participating in collective actions and joining organisations.

I identified several main reasons for enrolling an environmental organisation: an interest in environmental issues, which translates into the need not only to change their daily practices, but also to influence others through activist actions; a need for a community where they have a safe space to build their identity; and interest in the form of the movement activities, for instance, some activists from FFF wanted to specifically engage in climate protesting. Another reason for joining is having the goal of increasing the volume of human and symbolic capital: to find new connections, gain recognition by others and improve specific skills for further use in the non-activist career.

<sup>96</sup> Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

The fourth stage of the activist’s moral career, “*Active period of growth*”, is divided into two parts:

The first is the “adaptation process”, when an activist begins to participate in collective actions of the movement. At this stage, the identity of an individual is heavily influenced. The individual experiences anxiety and fear of “losing face” in front of other activists<sup>97</sup>, since they still feel like “impostors” because of the discrepancy between their ideas about the ideal activist and their own level of competence. To prevent this negative experience, the individual manages impressions of themselves: they try to talk less about topics they are not sure about, and they control their gestures and words or do “homework” before interacting with other members, for example, reading environmental articles. In the case of the Fridays For Future movement, “losing face” is perceived even more dangerously, especially when they participate in a single picketing<sup>98</sup> in the streets, since being perceived as incompetent by strangers can worsen the image of the environmental movement as a whole.

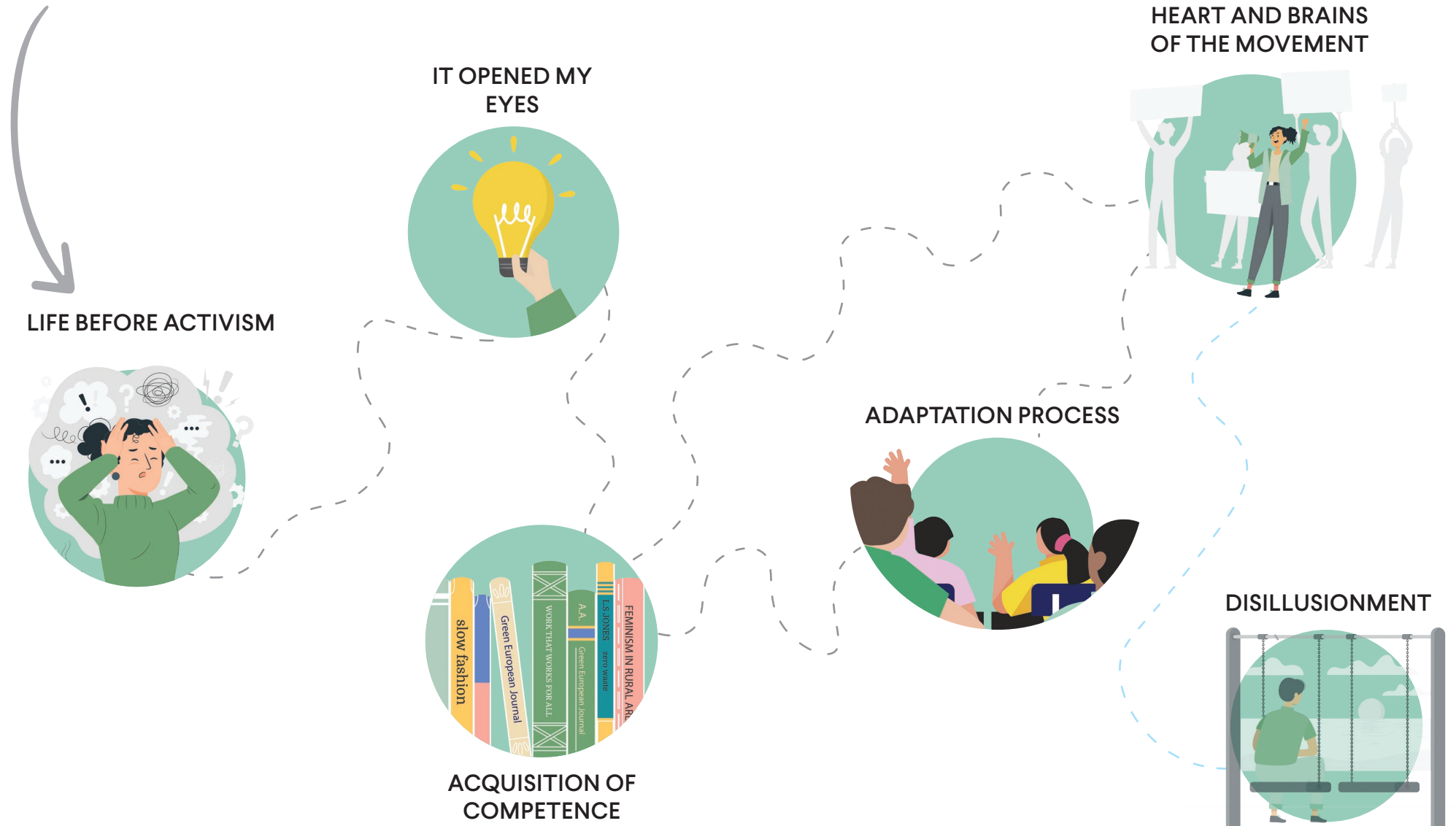
The second part of this stage, “*Heart and brains of the movement*”, starts when the identity of an activist is quite close to the collective identity of the movement. The network structure of the individual’s connections expands, and the connections become stronger - the involvement in the activities of the movement increases. At this stage, the activist takes on managerial responsibilities, such as becoming a coordinator or head of a department, which leads to new difficulties, specifically the loss of trust towards other activists that may occur due to discrepancies in values, aims and responsibilities. Therefore, generalised trust in activists as members of the movement may decrease, while interpersonal trust towards individual activists that share their values, on the contrary, may grow. This loss of confidence

<sup>97</sup> Losing face is failing to have one’s identity ratified/accepted. That situation is accompanied with a feeling of embarrassment, for example being unaware of well-known environmental facts among other activists.

<sup>98</sup> Single picketing is a form of activist action that involves one person. For instance, an activist standing with a poster against climate change in the streets.



# TIMELINE OF BEING AN ACTIVIST

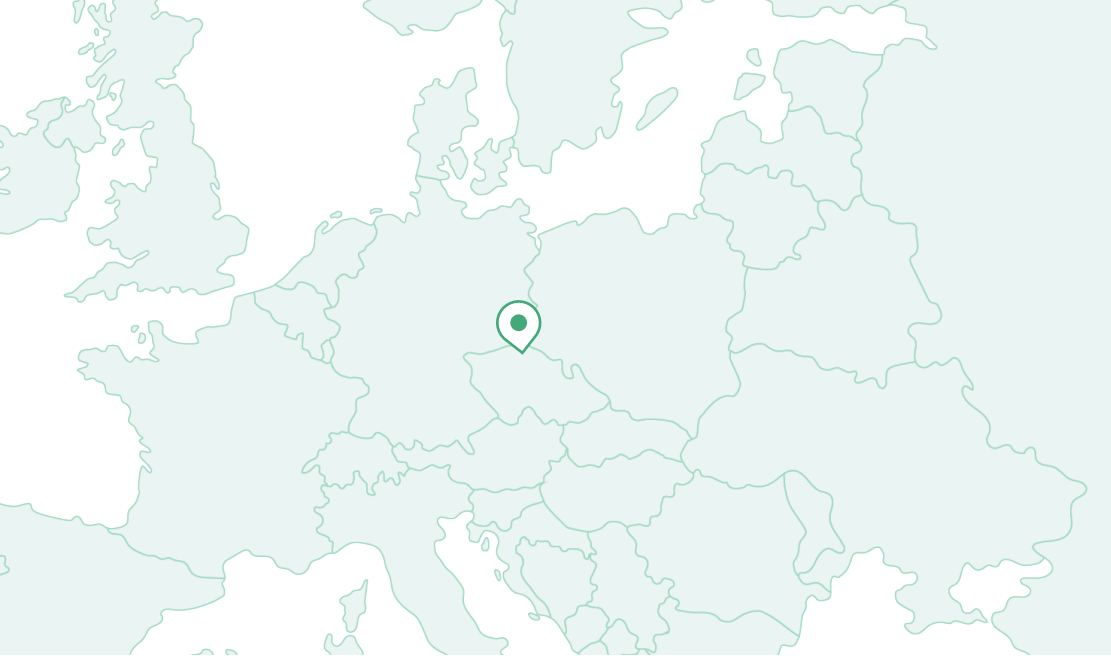


is also seen by activists in terms of struggle and they emphasise the need to deal with it for the movement to function more effectively. The fifth and last stage of an activist's moral career, "*Disillusionment*", does not occur in all cases. It can be characterised by reducing the activist's duties or dropping out of activism and the movement altogether. This event can be influenced by external conditions, for example, political events, when the activist begins to feel that it is necessary to reallocate their resources from environmental to human rights activities, or other spheres of engagement, such as scientific research instead of activism. This reason for dropping out of environmental activism became quite popular among Fridays For Future activists since the war on Ukraine escalated, as many of them think it is useless to fight for environmental justice until the Russian aggression is not stopped. Dropping out of the movement or environmental activism can also happen due to loss of hope, when, in the course of gaining competence, activists begin to realise that they will not be able to achieve their goals fast enough, so they begin to feel the senselessness and inefficiency of their actions. Another reason is loss of community or role conflict, when an activist joins another environmental organisation and its activities are negatively viewed by members of the first movement, which leads to the loss of a safe space for expressing their identity. That is, the activist immediately becomes a representative of internal and external groups at the same time. For example, one of the FFF activists explained her reluctance to work for the movement after she started to work in Greenpeace by the fact that some activists from FFF heavily criticised her new job.

We also identified what keeps individuals engaged in activism in the later stages of their activist path. One of the key reasons for continuing is a sense of duty. The activist frames their activism in terms of confrontation and crime, where there is a perpetrator, a victim and a defender. The activist, in this case, acts in a triple position; on the one hand, they are the victims who will have to bear the consequences of climate change, on the other hand, they are the defenders of peo-

ple. Sometimes, the activist may feel like a perpetrator or an accomplice in a crime if they drop out of activism. Activists feel that they have different duties: the "duty to the innocent" such as animals and children, as beings without agency; the "civil duty", as citizens of the country and inhabitants of the planet; the "duty to the self", thus the desire to avoid the future costs of climate change and the "psychological costs" of feeling guilty about not trying to stop it. Other reasons are the following: activist action became their daily habit, they are attached to the community as they have strong ties with members of the movement, or they desire to influence the situation around, to exercise their agency and feel empowered.

A year and a half has passed since I conducted the interviews with the environmental activists. Today, environmental issues are moving to the background in the discussion of worldwide topics, and the pressure on activists from non-democratic countries is increasing. Right now, it is important to maintain ties within and between activist organisations and activists in general to preserve and rebuild the civil society that is being destroyed by non-democratic governments. More and more activists are losing hope for a brighter future, and it is crucial not to stop believing in the power of collective actions. Understanding the process of activism by individuals is a first step; applying these insights and analysing the dynamics inside these movements further is one way to strive for stronger movements and empowerment through activism.



## The Black Triangle: story of water loss in Uhelná, Czech Republic

BY: MAJA KLIMENTIĆ

Coal is dug out of the ground and burnt for energy. Right?! It seems simple at first, yet there is a whole dark world of politics, environmental hazards and profit-driven ideas behind one of the largest dirty industries in the world. An example of such a case, explored as a local story in the very centre of Europe, is the story of “The Black Triangle”. This is an area located on the borders between Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic. Geographically, it makes a shape that is similar to a triangle, hence the name. The approximate centre is the national tripoint at Zittau. Politically, the triangle consists of:

- Germany’s two local administrative regions surrounding Dresden and Chemnitz, amounting to about 14,000 square kilometres, with a population of 3.36 million people (as of 2002).
- The southwest portion of Poland’s Lower Silesian Voivodeship, amounting to 8,500 square kilometres, with a population of 1.3 million.

– Four regions of the Czech Republic (Hradec Králové, Karlovy Vary, Liberec and Ústí nad Labem), amounting to 12,000 square kilometres and a population of 1.59 million<sup>99</sup>.

### But why the notorious name?

Historically, this area has been known for having plenty of natural resources and mineral deposits that contributed to the economic “growth” of the region. In the Soviet times, a mass industrial development of the North Bohemian Basin began, starting the operation of multiple chemical plants, steel factories and refineries. All these required lots of energy, which was obtained in power plants by burning lignite from local coal mines<sup>100</sup>. This industry brought destruction for decades – the expansion of coal mines was intense and required the literal demolition of cities, whilst the coal burning contributed to making the area one of the most polluted in Europe<sup>101</sup>.

From the beginning, the Black triangle area gave many examples of human rights violations, political secrets, corruption, and massive negative environmental impact. Currently, some of the major concerns are acid rains (caused by pollution carried by the wind to different

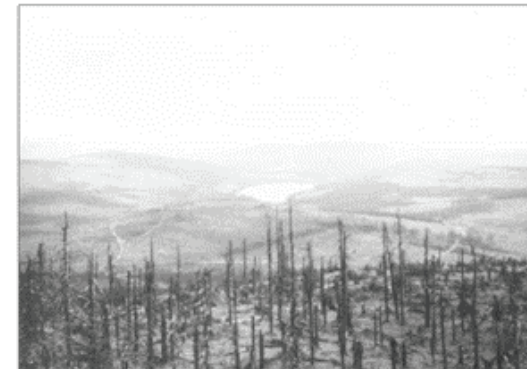


Image 1: Forest in Jizera mountains destroyed by acid rain<sup>5</sup>

99 [http://www.umwelt.sachsen.de/umwelt/download/luft/Bericht\\_Luftqualitaet\\_Schwarzes\\_Dreieck\\_2002.pdf](http://www.umwelt.sachsen.de/umwelt/download/luft/Bericht_Luftqualitaet_Schwarzes_Dreieck_2002.pdf)

100 <https://www.nrdc.org/onearth>

101 <https://english.radio.cz/a-black-triangle-gradually-turns-green-8625756>

parts of Europe), dust and noise pollution, as well as water drainage from nearby cities into the coal mine. This causes cities to sink into the ground slowly, leaving people with no water.

Decades of acid rains have destroyed the environment. Satellite based estimations of forest cover change in the Krušné Hory indicate that 50% of the forests disappeared between 1972 and 1989.<sup>102</sup> In Jizera mountains, soil and water were severely acidified and contained high concentrations of heavy metals<sup>103</sup>.

Attempts to help nature recover started after June 1991, when the 3 countries made a mutual agreement to cut down emission in compliance with the new EU standards. The damage was being fixed on several levels – lowering emissions through technological improvements, banning of deforestation and physical methods like remediation of forests with native tree species, liming of waters (air application of calcite powder) to modify lakes acidity caused by the acid rains, reintroduction of the fish, and so on.

Air quality improved with all this, forests started to re-grow and fish are now thriving in the lakes. Today, it is not an ideal situation, but technological advances and new environmental regulations are helping to continue this improvement.

However, in the story of The Black Triangle, there are more dangers to the environment, life and health that we did not account for yet. Following this story, we will see how continued exploitation and coal burning are affecting human rights on a different level: that of access to water. The main actor in this story is the Turów power plant.

### **Turów coal mine and power plant**

The main actor and contributor to the environmental and political scandal is the Turów coal mine and power plant located on the Polish side of the triangle (south-west Poland). It is a 200-meter-deep pit stretching for several kilometres, and operated by the Polska Grupa

<sup>102</sup> [http://www.grid.unep.ch/activities/global\\_change/blacktriangle.php](http://www.grid.unep.ch/activities/global_change/blacktriangle.php)

<sup>103</sup> "Degradation and recovery of mountain watersheds: the Jizera Mountains, Czech Republic" by J. Kreček (Czech Technical University) and Z. Horická (Charles University)



Image 2: Turów power plant and coal mine pit

Energetyczna (PGE). It is the largest lignite reserve in Poland and produces about 30 million tons of lignite annually<sup>104</sup>.

Coal mining in this area dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Turów power plant was opened in 1962, and it runs on the reserves from the mine, which were expected to last until 2044. Even with the technological improvements mentioned previously, the power plants remain the fifth largest source of greenhouse emissions and Turów the eighth least efficient power station in the EU<sup>105</sup> (data from 2007). Due to the new legislation and revised environmental impact assessment, the PGE has lost its mining licence as of May 2020. Despite that, as we will learn later on, the coal is still being mined and the mine itself is extending to the very border with the Czech Republic.

As it is expanding, the water is withdrawing into the mine more rapidly than expected, and the villages in the outskirts of Turów are left with little to no water. Water shortage already causes the surrounding nature to die, while some villages lost access to running water and must rely on fire fighters to deliver water tanks. In this text we will explore life in one of those villages – Uhelná in the Czech Republic. We will also look at a dirty world of politics and corruption, as well as the details of a legal fight as the first ever case of an EU member state suing another over an environmental issue<sup>106</sup>.

<sup>104</sup> <http://www.poltegor.pl/ref/lr2006a.pdf>

<sup>105</sup> [https://wwfeu.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/european\\_dirty\\_thirty\\_may\\_2007.pdf](https://wwfeu.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/european_dirty_thirty_may_2007.pdf)

<sup>106</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/Turów-the-polish-coal-mine-at-the-centre-of-regional-tensions/>

When I was looking for a story to cover in the scope of local research, I did not expect to come across a story as complex as this one. As a foreigner in the Czech Republic, I was not aware of the local environmental issues, nor did I know much about their political issues. I was surprised to hear from Zuzana that this was, in fact, a very “popular” story in the Czech Republic, but that after so much media coverage, it was still not talked about more.

The Turów scandal has been going on for many years now, and, in all this time, the aspects of environment and politics have been deeply connected. Through the process as well as today, many NGOs, activists and politicians are involved. Part of the Black Triangle in the Czech Republic suffers from water loss and pollution, and it affects many people who live across this geographical region. In the following articles, we will follow stories from locals, activists and lawyers involved in the case:

Anna Kširova, from Liberec, started getting involved more and more after joining a protest against expansion and learning more deeply about the issue. Anna lives 30 kilometers away from Turów and has been following the case for a long time. She communicated with politicians, both on a regional and a national level, who have turned against the locals, the landscape and the climate. She is a medical doctor specialising in anaesthesia, co-founder of the group “Parents for the future” in Liberec, and is also involved with the local Greens. Her *“biggest motivation to be active in the climate protection are her two children, as the climate crisis is one of the greatest threats to the near future of human kind.”*

The local Zuzana Pechová, resident of Uhebná village and originally from Liberec, is a teacher of art and the French language. She works as a vice-dean and assistant professor at the Faculty of Education of the Technical University in Liberec. She likes to run in the Lusatian Mountains and take care of her children and her garden. She “thinks globally, acts locally”, and is an involved citizen. From her backyard, she can see the Turów, and the mine pit is just a few minutes ride from her home. She will tell us what the situation is like on the very border of the coal mine and about

the effects that it has on environment and everyday life.

We will also get an insight from the representative of Frank Bold, an organisation that actively works on the legal case against Turów coal mine and PGE. Lawyer Petra Kalenská will give a deeper insight into the details of the case. She is a lawyer and project manager of the Turów case, currently working on a case about illegal mining in the coal mine. She studied law at Charles University in Prague, and International Human Rights Law at Lund University in Sweden. In 2020, she successfully completed her doctoral studies at the Faculty of Law at Charles University. As a lawyer, she specialises in international law, human rights law and anti-discrimination law.

### **Environmental impact of mining in villages near Turów**

The name “Black Triangle” suggests that this area is cold, polluted and wretched. The truth is, some areas were indeed like that for many years: with naked tree trunks and burnt ground. Today, nature is thriving and the areas in the mountains are a popular location for tourists and hikers. Many people are relocating to the rural areas, and one of them is Zuzana. She moved with her family several years ago and now lives in a house from the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the village Uhebná, right next to the coal mine. The area is beautiful, with large green hills, forests and meadows, all within a 5-minute walk. Most of the 30 residents in Uhebná are people who also moved there to enjoy a peaceful life, and only a few have been there for generations. Now, there are 12 houses in Uhebná, but many decades ago, it was a lively transit town with developed trade routes, restaurants, and shops. The remains of this time can still be seen in the architecture and concrete rocks which used to be houses.

The beauty of the area and its rich history are what keep hold of Zuzana and her family, as they wish to stay and fight to conserve it – it is worth fighting for. They were aware of their proximity to the coal mine and the risk when they bought the house. For a while it was peaceful, but Zuzana explains that she first heard about the expansion on the media, several years after they had moved. This made them immediately get

involved in the protests and start working with the locals and NGOs to stop the expansion. They attended protests in Bogatynia, started petitions in cities influenced by the mining, and gathered thousands of signatures to stop it. All these actions attracted the media, made the local government start communicating with the locals, and even some officials attended demonstrations. There was a lot of support for the activists and the locals. This would change later though.

Zuzana is the only local woman who was present in the media on this issue and clearly stated her reasons for being active: *“We can see the coal mine from our backyard and we are the first in line to be affected by the expansion. We are fighting for our future.”*



Image 3: Turów power plant as seen from Uhelná

Turów mine is expanding to the very border of the Czech Republic and Poland. There is a line of trees blocking a part of view to the pit, however, these trees will be cut down and right next to the road there will be a massive open pit of a coal mine. This expansion is several meters long, but the effects it has run much deeper, as every meter of expansion makes water withdrawal even faster.

**Zuzana:** *“When the coal mine was opened, the water withdrawal was expected. But the flow of underground water is hard to predict and we are now seeing consequences. Currently, the water level in the municipal well is at the point where it was expected to be in 2044. Every house in Uhelná used to have its own well, which sup-*

*plied us with water, as well as a local monitoring station. The water levels first dropped in the 80s and the first pipe system was made to get water from the municipal well. However, this pipe system was made to be a solution for the originally expected drop in water levels; it didn't consider the possibility of water being even lower. Today, that system is barely functioning, as the water levels keep hitting all time lows, especially during hot summers. We can't predict how long we will be able to draw this water as it keeps getting worse, it's only a matter of time until we lose our water completely.”*

Despite the village being on the very border, Uhelná still has a relatively stable water supply. However, there are other villages which have it even worse. A nearby village, Václavice, is relying on water trucks and is experiencing water shortages.

*“Václavice is a smaller village, and it is one of the most influenced villages by this water loss. Every day families are forced to take rations of water and decide who will take a shower that day.”*, Zuzana says.

In the affected villages, the people are suffering without essential water while PGE continues digging the hole. But where is all this water going? Water can't really be stopped unless there are barriers, so due to the geographical points of the terrain and the deep mining, it is withdrawing into the pit made for the exploitation of coal. It is going to the very source of the problem and causing more trouble for miners underground. For the mining to continue, the mine itself should be dry – but the water is seeping inside and making the mining difficult. To resolve this, PGE is using additional energy resources to pump out all this water, ironically, into the local river in Poland – Neisse, and away from the residents in the Czech Republic who need it.

The exploitation of coal and water loss have even further impacts on the environment, as Zuzana explains, in drying of the soil and creating noise pollution. It is not only affecting people but also nature to a greater extent – Uhelná still has beautiful forests and hills, but some areas where there is no water are in danger of drying out, especially in

summertime. This is a chain reaction that influences agriculture and local animals, making it a problem for the entire ecosystems nearby. Due to the winds and technological improvements, the area doesn't experience high levels of pollution – this is more felt in other parts of the black triangle, where air pollution is a major health risk for the residents. However, the coal mine working 24/7 means that, despite the distance, the locals can hear a constant hum from the coal mine. This is usually an overlooked type of pollution called noise pollution, which, in the long term, can have various negative effects on health of people and animals. The locals get used to it after a while, as Zuzana says, but it harms the peaceful nature in a subtle and disturbing way. Despite the daily challenges they face from an environmental perspective, people still live here and continue to fight for well-being and justice, both for themselves and for nature. Today, this fight is done at grassroots level as well as through a legal battleground. It is demanding in many ways, but despite being tired, many of the locals share Zuzana's strong emotions: *“Even if we don't win, I can tell myself that I tried as much as I could”*.

### **Political and legal background of the story**

The locals are united in this fight against expansion and illegal mining, activists and NGOs help them, but as everyone agrees, they have lost faith in governmental support. It failed them when they needed it the most. They all agree that this is not only a fight against PGE, but a fight against corruption in the government and the greed.

The story, which runs even deeper than the coal mine and disappearing water, is a story of political and legal aspects of this case. As complex as it is, I will try to tell it chronologically from Petra's inputs.

Coal was mined for many years in the area, but the process was intensified in the 80s, when PGE took over and obtained a licence for mining. In 1994, the Polish authorities granted PGE a concession to operate that mine until the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 2020. At the time, the Environmental impact assessment showed that coal reserves were expected to last un-

til 2044, when water withdrawal levels would be where they are today. PGE started mining intensively and providing large energy supplies for Poland. Water loss was felt immediately, and at some point in the 90s, when the effects of pollution were at their peak, an agreement between counties to reduce emissions forced PGE to make some technological improvements for the power plant. This reduced the air pollution to some extent, but did not stop water loss.

In the following years, water levels were already being considerably lowered in the villages around Turów, and a relatively functional system of underground pipes for getting municipal water was established. Wells in people's backyards were long dried out and unused. Intensive mining depleted its resources faster than expected, so to continue mining, the coal mine would need to expand. This expansion meant that water levels would drop even further, and that the natural barrier blocking the view to the pit would be gone.

Despite that, in January 2020, close to the date of expiry of the mining permit, rigged environmental impact assessment (EIA) results enabled Polish authorities to grant PGE the permit for mining until 2026. This is when Zuzana and other locals started the initiative to stop the expansion organising protests and gaining media attention rapidly. Activists like Anna and NGOs from around the region got involved, and the demonstrations made the local government get involved. Some representatives attended the rallies and listened to the people, and locals felt supported.

At the time, as Anna says, *“there was a lot of nationalistic communication, people turned against each-other, blaming the neighbouring countries. The activists from the affected villages organising gatherings and speaking to the people in Poland were judged and not listened, as if the issue didn't concern them. The discourse is mainly seen between Czechia and Poland as one country against the other. German villages experienced the additional effect of cities sinking into the ground due to unstable soil, but did not get involved. Due to historical reasons and some policies made after WW2, Germany*

*was not allowed to act regarding PGE in Poland.”*

The pressure from the activists was supported by the local government, which took it to a higher level and involved the state government as well. On September 30th 2020, the government of the Czech Republic submitted a complaint to the European Commission for the violation of the EU law by Poland. When this did not stop the mining, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2021 the country filed a lawsuit against Poland on the EU court of justice for threatening the environment and people's health. Zuzana mentioned that during this time there was a lot of tension between countries in the sense of respecting the laws and *authority* that “old” and “new” EU states had, implying that some EU countries had more authority over others because of the time they had been contributing to the EU. In this context, it was discussed that the Polish government had been “offended” by the audacity of the Czech government suing them.

The strong pressure led the countries to negotiate. Considering that the entire lawsuit was “for the people”, it would have been natural to ask locals what was a priority to prevent the harm done to them, but this didn't happen. Immediately, the local government (Liberec region) started communicating with the state and there was no more room for the locals and their needs.

The countries negotiated, but from the agreement, which consisted of sole “support for preventive infrastructure”, it was clear that profit was the main driving force. PGE was supposed to pay to the region of Liberec 10 million EUR, while the Polish government would pay 10 million to the state, and 25 million to the government of Liberec. This money was supposed to be used for infrastructure, such as pipes that would redistribute water, water level monitoring stations, and similar support. But this didn't really work in reality.

**Zuzana:** *“In order to implement the infrastructure of pipes, there is a lot of work needed. They would need to dig the ground deep and in a big surface in order to do this, and it is a big investment. The*

*local government, even with the fine that PGE and Polish government paid, simply have no funds to implement this structure. They did however put the water level monitoring stations, but the locals don't have access to them – the monitoring part is done by PGE. We cannot get access to this data”.*

Additionally, the agreement did not include the requirement that PGE needs to stop the mining and expansion. However, it was agreed that if all the negotiated terms were met, the CR side would not take any further legal action after the lawsuit. Considering that all the politicians got money in their pockets, to the government it seemed like a good deal. It might have been a matter of corruption, incompetence, or anything else, but the expansion plans continued.

This was only the negotiation – but the final judgement was yet to be announced by the EU court of justice. On the 21st of May, after re-assessing the rigged EIA, the court ordered PGE to immediately stop mining until the final judgement. They did not stop, with the excuse that people would lose their jobs as well as the electricity in the area, which Turów supplied. In the meantime, new infrastructure projects were pushed into the agreement thanks to the pressure from public and a few supporters, such as dust screens, underground barriers etc. A new hit came to PGE on the 20th of September as a daily half a million fine from the court for not respecting the order set in May. The court's order to close the mine was not supported by the workers in PGE who then started protesting in hopes of keeping their jobs, nor the government, who predicted energy shortages.

On the 1st of February 2022, the Polish court dismissed the EIA immediate enforceability decision, which means that PGE continues mining today without any EIA, which is a violation of the EU law. This was recognised soon after by the General Advocate of the EU court of justice, stating that Poland (and not only PGE) violates the EU law. In the following days, the previous agreement between the countries was signed and CR dropped the lawsuit, cashing out the “infrastructure” money.



At this point, it appeared to be an EU problem: PGE was paying fines, Poland was breaking the EU law, and they somehow continued mining even without a license and a clear order from the EU court. This was recognised by MEPs who on March 17th called for the cease of mining<sup>107</sup>. However, it was still a local problem as the locals were completely excluded from the agreement. With support of NGOs, they are still pursuing justice in the legal battlefield, but they are facing many challenges. For example, the Polish minister of Climate denied them access to information regarding the prolongation of the licence until 2026. The “infrastructure” projects are still not done and it doesn’t seem like they are a priority, despite the continued water loss. Ironically, the reason why the government got involved in the first place were the efforts of locals voicing out the struggles they were facing, and now they “don’t have jurisdiction” to support their complaints on the agreement.

### Path to sustainable improvement

Sadly, the struggle with water loss in villages close to Turów still continues, as well as the political tensions between countries. Turów is surely not the only coal power plant whose functioning had negative effects that go beyond the environmental degradation. Today, more than ever, we see the decades of harm caused by this profit-driven industry on the environment, as climate change and the story of Turów show how a real systemic change is needed to make a difference. This change in the recent times may come as financial support to make a transition to green energies, investments in renewable resources, and general legislative changes that will benefit the environment.

During the research, I learnt information that was painfully ironic: as an EU country, Poland can theoretically access funds for incorporating renewable energy systems, but attempts to get access to just transition funds from the EU have been denied to the country because of Turów. This means that, as long as Turów is mining illegally, the country won’t be able to transition to the use of renewable resources, as

investment costs are high. However, as seen in the story, the governments seem more likely to make decisions in favour of profit, rather than systemic change. The funding for green energies could technically be prioritised, but the will is lacking.

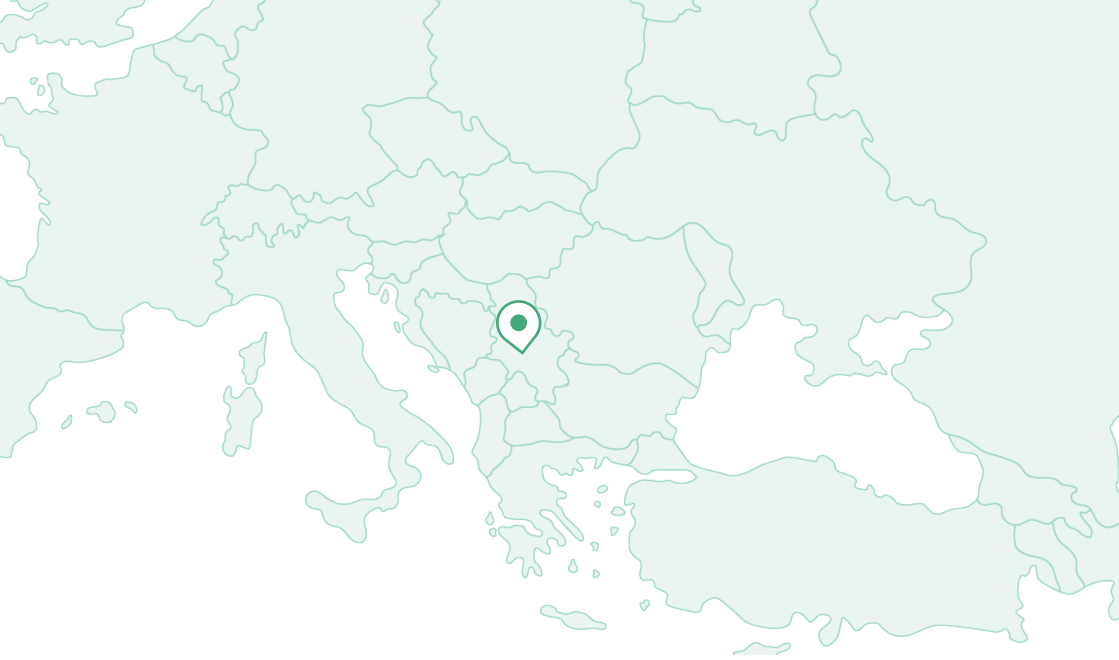
The path to sustainability would require a lot of effort, investment, and time, but most importantly, the will to make the change. As the governments don’t seem too eager to change, the only ones that can pressure them are the passionate, resilient, and hopeful young activists, people like women represented in this story. The responsibility to voice out problems belongs to all of us, and together we can make enough pressure to be heard. Personally, hearing how many individuals and organisations joined to support people in Czech villages in their fight for water, gives me hope that they will succeed and that they will inspire many others in similar situations to mobilise.

The activists in the story had different motivations to join the movement. Whether it was a personal reason, solidarity, or a pure activist spirit, they joined and, in the process, they found inspiration. As Zuzana says, *“the Turów case made us here in the village much more aware of the green movement and environment in general. We have started to make changes in our lives that make us more green, and this is one little step we can all do.”* We can all take this advice and make the fight for environment personal – we can take little steps, even if we can’t see their end goal.

Image 4: Wind turbines in Uhelná



<sup>107</sup> <https://www.annacavazzini.eu/wp-content/uploads/MEPs-letter-Turów-17-March-2022.pdf>



## Highway construction in Čačak, Serbia: No-way to the High-way!

BY: ELENA PETROVSKA

Roads are a structure of the human civilisation that we see every day and which play a crucial role in the way the world functions and connects. In 2018, there were a total of 64.285.009 km of any kind of roads in the world<sup>108</sup>. And yet, we don't give them much thought in our day to day lives, they just are. Highways and express-ways, as the longest of the roads, are engineering feats; involving many kinds of (non-renewable) materials, extensive planning, lots of time and money. Both environmental and social impacts of highway construction and operation can manifest in different forms, and we will explore some of them through the example of a highway construction in Serbia. This article will cover various aspects of highway construction and explore them through one case: Locals in Čačak, Serbia have been protesting for over a year, protecting their livelihoods and call-

108 <https://www.scmo.net/faq/2019/8/9/how-much-roads-is-there-is-the-world>

ing upon institutional help to rebuild their households from scratch, and we will explore some of them in further text.

### Environmental implications of the roads and highway construction

Environmental issues have been getting more attention in mass media in Balkans in the past years, and this is accompanied by more action and citizen engagement in protests against these issues. The mass organising against hydro power plants (HPPs) construction in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina got international attention, and so did air pollution protests as mayor environmental issues<sup>109</sup>. The latest big news in this arena were the successful blockades against the planned mine opening and the processing of lithium ore and boron by the anglo-australian company Rio Tinto, and changes in the expropriation law which was going to make it easier for the company to undertake this project<sup>110</sup>.

One issue, however, was excluded from the headlines on environmental pollution - highway construction. There are activists thinking and calling upon social and environmental sustainability and greener mobility alternatives in cities, trying to make the bike lanes expansion prevail, preserving green spaces or pedestrian lanes (rather than having parking lots or the roads enlarging at the expense of them), rooting for better public transport as opposed to personal vehicles dominating streets, etc<sup>111</sup>. Nevertheless, going outside of city limits, there seem to be hardly any major red flags raised when it comes to the environmental implications of building highways.

Highways indeed play an important role in connecting communities across a country. Among other things, they stimulate local economies; directly, by driving the development of related industries, or indirectly, by prompting a local industrial layout to change around the development of roads (e.g. with hospitality services as restaurants and ho-

109 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-environment-dams-idUSKCN1J0007>

110 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/05/rio-tinto-lithium-mine-thousands-of-protesters-block-roads-across-serbia>

111 <https://uzb.rs/belgrade-critical-mass-cycling-ride-serbia/>

tels built in close proximity to the roads, or other service industries related to car maintenance). Highways also present networks that enable the transportation of goods, and they are usually more efficient than regional roads regarding travel distances and time spent on the road, which can mean lower emissions of greenhouse gases.

Still, aside from the seemingly positive aspects, under the light of an ongoing climate crisis, there's a need for a more thorough analysis of human-induced activities and the effects they have on the natural environment and the communities that are at highest risk because of them. Some of the effects on the environment caused by the highway construction can be seen through direct and indirect effects on biodiversity. The most evident direct effect is the increase in species' mortality rates and the subsequent population declines. For example, some reptiles are attracted to warmer road surfaces (to regulate their body temperature) and then, due to their natural defence mechanism, they become immobilized when approached by a car, which increases their mortality risk. Indirectly, different species can get affected by habitat fragmentation and alteration, which disturbs their movement patterns (wildlife migration and others) and genetic diversity (by obstructing gene flow within populations). In addition to what was mentioned, highways also lead to general biodiversity reduction, animals and plants included<sup>112</sup>.

Other negative environmental effects include changes in natural landscapes, landforms and triggered soil erosions. Additionally, highway construction and operation lead to the pollution of the atmosphere, the surface and underground water, and, in cases where carcinogenic heavy metals are used, also the ground<sup>113</sup>. An example of a long-lasting negative effect that highways are having on the natural environment lies in noise pollution too, which negatively affects birds, specifically

the ones that have song frequencies similar to those of cars, as such proximity of the highway disrupts their acoustic communication and leads to population decline<sup>114</sup>.

In contrast to the artificial linear cutting of the natural environment done by highway structures, in some cases, so called 'green bridges' have been built, artificial overpasses for wildlife containing native vegetation. These are helping to reduce road-killings and the fragmentation of habitats, and they are an exemplary measure to prevent one of the negative impacts of highway construction<sup>115</sup>. This practise that started in France in the mid 20th century hasn't taken off in Serbia quite yet. In 2021, there were still no such green bridges built, but just the Moravian Corridor, of which we will talk in further text, envisions around 65 green culverts and 40 bridges to be built in the future<sup>116</sup>.



Image 1: Green bridge in Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada (source [www.theworldgeography.com](http://www.theworldgeography.com))

Setting aside the previously listed effects, it is worth noting that exploring the environmental impacts of highways is always specific to an individual area, as natural environments differ from one another in their great range of species diversity and other biological and social aspects. According to the Serbian law, it is necessary to conduct an

<sup>112</sup> [https://www.e3s-conferences.org/articles/e3sconf/pdf/2021/09/e3sconf\\_iaecst20\\_01113.pdf](https://www.e3s-conferences.org/articles/e3sconf/pdf/2021/09/e3sconf_iaecst20_01113.pdf)

<sup>113</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331582635\\_Road\\_Construction\\_and\\_Trace\\_Heavy\\_Metals\\_in\\_Roadside\\_Soils\\_along\\_a\\_Major\\_Traffic\\_Corridor\\_in\\_an\\_Expanding\\_Metropolis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331582635_Road_Construction_and_Trace_Heavy_Metals_in_Roadside_Soils_along_a_Major_Traffic_Corridor_in_an_Expanding_Metropolis)

<sup>114</sup> <https://www.environmentalscience.org/roads>

<sup>115</sup> <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/wildlife-crossings>

<sup>116</sup> <https://srda.rs/zeleni-mostovi-spasavaju-zivotinje-razne-prelaze-na-autoputevima-planira-i-srbija/>

environmental assessment for different infrastructure projects. These studies are being done for the construction of highways in different segments, and they include assessing the current state of the area as well as the measures to be taken to mitigate the impacts, among many other things. It is worth mentioning that these studies usually amount to more than 200 pages, and are most often only readable for people who have experience with such technical documentation. As an alternative, there is a 'non-technical' project summary of the material, which sums up the general framework.

This summary, done by the Moravian Corridor, generally covers the variety of impacts that the highway would have on water and air quality, noise, geology and soil, terrestrial and freshwater ecology, and local communities<sup>117</sup>. However, mitigating measures are not very descriptive, and they present the need to go through the environmental assessment in order to get a general sense of the future management of the highway construction and operation in this aspect. This poses a question on the level of transparency and clarity that the project documentation carries, which is specially important as a means of communication with the affected communities.

With the ongoing climate change and its effects multiplying at an accelerated rate, the road sector should be prioritised line of investigation in research studies on the implications that it has on the environment, because, as we learnt from the scientific communications as well as from activists in the last years, we have little time to act and too many things to address. Therefore, it's important to consider the variety of essential sectors involved and to think and plan through transitions so that their negative effects are minimized. Transport is another one of these essential sectors, which adds up to the issue of highways most often taking routes through biodiverse areas, and it becomes more so important to lower their impacts, as such areas are the very same ones that play one of the most important roles in the mitigation of climate change.

<sup>117</sup> [https://www.koridorisrbije.rs/site/content/files/5f74fb3eb054c\\_Morava%20NTS%20Serbian.pdf](https://www.koridorisrbije.rs/site/content/files/5f74fb3eb054c_Morava%20NTS%20Serbian.pdf)

Moreover, with the average global temperatures raising, more and more roads will be deemed as unsafe and unusable due to their literal melting caused by heat waves, like in India in the past years<sup>118</sup>; or even due to the opposite weather extreme in some cases, which causes roads to freeze. Therefore, in the context of climate change, this sector, along with many others, is facing a challenge and calls for rethinking new strategies to take in the future and for building on the resilience.

### Roads construction trends in Serbia

As mentioned before, this article will cover the story of a specific highway construction in Serbia, which resulted in many wrongdoings. In order to understand the story more clearly, let's take a look at some specifics of road constructions there. The company managing most of the work in the field of roads infrastructure in Serbia is "Serbia Corridors" (Koridori Srbije), founded in 2009 by the Serbian government, with the main goal of managing state roads under construction until their completion. The company has an "investor function", it organises and performs construction, supervises construction work, and deals with expropriation processes, project documentation and others. Their website has listed a total of 750km of roads to be constructed or reconstructed under their management (out of which around 10-15% seem to be finalised)<sup>119</sup>. For visualisation, it's nearly as much distance as a road trip through the Balkans: Belgrade-Sarajevo-Podgorica-Pristina. Another thing listed on their website are the contractors for all the planned construction/reconstruction projects. Some companies that are particularly standing out are Chinese contractors, one of which is China Communications Construction, a company against which there was a criminal complaint filed because of environmental pollution and damage to water dams, banks, and water management facilities<sup>120</sup>.

<sup>118</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/International/indias-deadly-heatwave-melting-roads/story?id=31341298>

<sup>119</sup> <http://koridorisrbije.rs/sr/informacije>

<sup>120</sup> <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/krivicne-prijave-protiv-rio-sava-exploration-i-kineske-firme-cccc-zbog-zagadjenja/>

This was due to illegally exploiting gravel for highway construction near wells that serve as an alternative supply for drinking water in the city of Čačak.

The complaint was filed by the local Coalition against Corruption in the Environment and the Podrinje Anti-Corruption Team, under the premise that there was a lack of any valid documentation, and because of the project itself, which was bypassed through an internal agreement with authorized persons (the local government of Čačak and the director of the national water management company “Srbi-javode”)<sup>121</sup>. In the recent years, the Serbian government has had many worrying cooperations with Chinese investors in different industries, in most cases deemed by activists as harmful for prompting environmental disasters and helping obstruct freedom in a “partly-free” country (as per Freedom House observations<sup>122</sup>).

One illustrative example of such harmful cooperation is the mining company Zidjin in the city of Bor, in central Serbia, where the copper industry is polluting so much that the life span of people is 10 years shorter than the average in the rest of the country<sup>123</sup>. Another extremely polluting Chinese company is Linglong, which produces tires in Zrenjanin, a city that hasn’t had a drinking water supply for more than a decade<sup>124</sup>. This company got a gift of 96 hectares of agricultural land, and received financial help by the Serbian government to start its construction work without previously finalising the obligatory environmental assessment<sup>125</sup>.

Such harmful dynamics are being pulled in other countries too under the excuse of “promoting economic activity” in the country by offering extra jobs. In reality, they leave behind all the devastating impacts



Image 2: Illegal excavation of gravel in Western Morava (source: www.pakt.org.rs)

it has on the environment and locals.

Coming back to the roads, the website of Serbia Corridors notes the following: “*Expropriation is a legally regulated forced transfer of property rights on immovable property from private to state property. The basis of expropriation is the public interest, which is determined by the law or by a decision of the Government of Serbia in cases where airports, hospitals, schools, sewerage, or, among other things, a highway is being built, which represents a capital investment that brings economic progress and prosperity to the entire region, as well as the country. The expropriation procedure, which as a legal institute exists in all modern legal systems of the world, in the Republic of Serbia is regulated by the Law on Expropriation*”.

Indeed, expropriation is a procedure happening everywhere, but what distinguishes one situation from another are the regulations around it. Sometimes, however, even good regulations don’t have much value on paper if they are not being followed through in reality, which is something that occurs commonly in corrupted environments as Serbia’s, as pointed out by Transparency International<sup>126</sup>.

The law on expropriation in Serbia, which exists from 1995, was changed a couple of times, and the last time was by the end of 2021.

121 <https://www.pakt.org.rs/sr/2016-05-18-09-48-28/286-ogoljeni-kriminal-na-zapadnoj-moravi>

122 <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2020&country=SRB>

123 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/europe/serbia-chinese-companies-pollution.html>

124 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kako-se-gradi-fabrika-linglong-u-zrenjaninu/31105559.html>

125 <https://www.masina.rs/zagadenje-po-feng-suiju-linglong-u-zrenjaninu/>

126 <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/serbia>

These changes were recognised by the people and they sparked massive protests all over the country; but why? Things that were changed in the law were along the lines of allowing projects of “public interest” to be international projects, including projects of private companies that had Serbia as one of its signatories. Other changes implied narrowing down the time frame in which the Government can determine public interest expropriations destined to take place, as well as the time in which citizens affected can express their opinions. The people protested, and only after the massive blockades of the main roads, these changes were taken back. Nevertheless, they demonstrate well enough in which direction the majority of the current decision-makers in Serbia want to take policies on this matter.

### **Social implications of highway construction and citizens’ response in the example of the Moravian Corridor**

The “Moravian Corridor” is one of many road infrastructure projects in Serbia undertaken in the recent years. Its work started by the end of 2019, and it’s planned to be finished by March 2024. This Corridor is set to connect several bigger cities of central-south Serbia, a territory that is a home for more than half a million people, and in addition to that, conforms an important part of the country’s natural environment, both in terms of agriculture and in terms of biodiversity<sup>127</sup>.

In 2021, local communities situated along the planned highway route started protesting for a number of different reasons connected to the road planning and construction: additional expropriation attempts on short notice, loss of land - their only source of income, low estimations for expropriations, lack of compensation for the land degradation and lost agricultural yields, etc.<sup>128</sup> In some cases, people reported that they were being offered as little as ~1 EUR per square meter of land. Locals insisted that they were not against the highway itself, but rather against the unfair procedures that took place around its construction.

With the purpose of looking into this human rights/environmental struggle from the perspective of a local, I spoke with a young activist from the area, and I tried to get further information and better insight into the stances on the issues arisen around the highway construction. The activist is Andrijana Kuzmanović, a 27 year-old architect from Donja Gorevnica, near Čačak.

*“Throughout my education, the issues of social equality and justice have been the foundation of my attitude towards knowledge, learning and activism. I am building my life in Belgrade, but at the same time I am an inseparable part of my family’s rural household, and as an older sister, my responsibilities are mainly ‘public relations’ in all crisis situations. The stories about my grandfather’s fiery struggles for the welfare of our family and the village were my main inspiration and motivation during last year’s unfortunate events that befell the Moravian neighbourhood.”*

As mentioned before, protests were ongoing for a series of reasons around the highway construction. However, due to low media coverage at the very beginning of the villagers’ mobilization, it is not clear what was the initial driving cause of the protests from the media outlets alone. Therefore, Andrijana shares an overview of the story:

*“Protests took place due to the expropriation of agricultural, arable land, which was in turn due to the need for landfills and material loans during the construction of the Moravian Corridor highway. Primarily, parcels of land were expropriated from the people in the villages only on the right side of the river Zapadna Morava - a necessity for the highway route itself. They were segments of a width of 60m. Sales inquiries came first, followed by court decisions. Nobody objected or spoke up negatively, also because, as it was previously explained to us at a public hearing in the municipality, the list of parcels to be expropriated cannot be altered because*

127 <http://www.minpolj.gov.rs/download/ZK-2021-I-knjiga.pdf>

128 <https://rs.n1info.com/tag/autoput/>

*the highway route has been carefully designed. Even if it'd go over some family's home, change at that point was simply not possible. Therefore, people came to terms with the first wave of expropriation and the loss of that precious, Moravian land. However, after a year, with the machines coming in and the start of the construction work on the highway, people suddenly began receiving new decisions about the urgent confiscations of additional land, that is, the only land with remaining fertile humus soil on the right side of Morava in the entire municipality of Čačak. These land parcels were needed by the contractors in order to extract sand from them, which is located at a depth of tens of metres, as well as for the disposal of rubble, construction material, excavated soil and other waste. In any case, the land would be irreversibly destroyed and disabled for any future agricultural production. Relevant municipal institutions had no response to this very invasive highway construction planning that left people without jobs and a viable future, which caused great dissatisfaction and revolt amongst farmers, whose soil was literally slipping away from under their feet. Protests remained as the only possible move."*



Image 3: Protest poster "We don't give up on fertile soil" (source: Andrijana Kuzmanović)

Andrijana further tells us about the official's lack of concern for the time frame in which farmers were cultivating different vegetable

crops, and the changing prices, which made this situation even more difficult for the local community:

*"Notifications for expropriations under the urgent procedure were arriving a couple of weeks before the machines would enter the fields. Bearing in mind that all of this happened at the end of summer, when all of the crops ripen and were supposed to be harvested in the early autumn. The farmers were not only deprived of their land, but also of all its yield. This would be compensated according to the previous year's price per kilogram, however, it was not nearly enough of a compensation for the double loss farmers were bearing, which threatened to become a triple loss, because the price that year was several times higher than the previous one. In any case, there was a lack of care for the new position people in the countryside found themselves in, in terms of their jobs, plans and possibilities for their future... Their land was seen as a suitable resource for the future project, but the life of people in those regions was not taken into account. The whole situation was complicated even more by the fact that some villagers were working on land they did not own, but had been leased through contracts. They would get the information about the entry of machinery into their fields usually by accident, one day in advance, and only because neighbours would witness the disturbance in typical farm activities."*

The lack of sensitivity towards the local community during this highway project reflects in the treatment towards Andrijana's family too:

*"By a sole mistake of the contractor, my family's 80-acre field that they had been cultivating for years, which cabbage only needed another 7-15 days to cut and sell, was buried. The seriousness of this situation for a household is inexplicable, because time, water, labour force, fuel, and chemicals are invested throughout the season in crops, just so that one day someone buries it all with humus*

*that field workers also cultivated. That particular field became a symbol of struggle and injustice towards the villagers.”*

Since the protests started, locals have been visited by the director of “Serbia Roads” (“Putevi Srbije”) and the state secretary of the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, with promises to comply with their requests for a proper compensation for the expropriated land and their houses will be processed by authorities. Some time before parliamentary and presidential elections in 2022, protesters also managed to meet several times with the Prime Minister and other representatives of relevant institutions. The first reaction to these issues by the Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, at the opening of a finished highway segment for traffic was *“I do not know what are the problems but I will look into it”*.

Andrijana reflects on the communication with institutions:

*“We decided to protest because we were left with no other way to call upon our rights and defend our land and livelihoods. All the authorities and municipal institutions were already aware of the problem, but only after the protests did they respond to the requests and pleas to solve this challenging situation and predicament that fell on the villagers’ shoulders. Consequently, promises that the highway plans would be reconsidered and that an additional 60 hectares of agricultural land would be saved followed.”*

Moving forward into the post-electoral time, protests continued, since lots of the cases remained unsolved, and people refused to leave their homes without getting appropriate compensation. The mayor of the city of Čačak, Milun Todorović, under whose administrative region there are many of the affected villages, also shared his position, which initially seemed to bring a great deal of support and understanding towards the villagers. However, it wasn’t followed by

much action on it: *“... at this point everything is in the hands of the courts dealing with the cases.”*

Apart from the municipal and governmental response to the protests, Andrijana recounts some of the general perspectives people had:

*“The protesters themselves were seen as violent, having a “lack of cultural knowledge” and as politically motivated, probably with the aim of discrediting the real suffering of people. People were symbolically slowing down the traffic as they knew that the following year they would not be able to participate in that same traffic with their own tractors, because they would not have any reason to. Paradoxically, these protests were the only thing that managed to bring some relief to the people.”*

Speaking about the issues around this “project of public interest”, Andrijana points out to non-transparency as a crucial burden that further alienated locals from the processes that took place:

*“Highway construction planning cannot be a process that takes place only behind the closed doors of engineer planners who then pass their decisions on to lawyers and officials who, behind some other inaccessible doors, formulate those decisions into demands addressed to the population. It’s like asking someone a question without knowing who they are and what you’re actually asking them. If you ask someone to give you their only remaining fertile land and you do this for dozens of kilometres along the river Morava, you must be aware that in addition to taking away the areas with humus and cubes of sand, you are taking away someone’s means of support for their future. No process, neither in nature nor in society, is one-sided - if you take something away, you must know what the consequences are. And you must know that they are not always compensable with money.”*



Moving away from the contextualization of the problem, as mentioned earlier in the discussion, protests did manage to bring a positive result to the villagers to some extent:

*“The issue was mended up for some by saving 60 hectares of land initially intended for expropriation; people were left with a minimum of agricultural land, which was enough not to lose regular customers and fall out of the market completely. But for many, all the land was gone and they were forced to look for alternatives and redirect to other activities. However, there was no support in the form of consultations with the local population about their means of adaptation, the redirection of surplus agricultural equipment, facilities, support in the search for new occupations, expansion of production to other branches, or provision of any support in a situation where a state project impairs the quality of life.”*

In order to stop the construction of the Moravian corridor, protesters blocked traffic for 3 months, making it the longest lasting blockage in this story. In the beginning of October 2022, it stopped temporarily. Protesters managed to make an agreement with the director of Serbia Roads about partial payments until the court cases were resolved (which can last more than 2 years), and not bringing down houses of families who still didn't get their new housing secured. Some protests, however, continue, and the fate of villagers is yet to be settled.

At some point, the villagers' protests were even intersecting with the protests for the price of food and other goods. Struggling with inflation, farmers were asking for the minimum buy-in prices to be raised, as, in the past, with lower production costs they were being paid more – a situation that turned around in 2022.

Andrijana shares how villagers in Čačak got out of these highway-related issues empowered and more confident to act on potential struggles they might face again:

*“People realised that they had to fight for themselves, for a fair system and a calm environment that would not run them over without thinking, therefore, they remained in constant communication between themselves, and exchanged experiences and information. Moreover, what meant a lot to them was the support of people from the surrounding cities and regions who found each other facing similar challenges. Our will to show solidarity and empathy back to them is also something that kept us together and on the streets. I think that the local community realised how they were being systematically invisibilised and then decided to keep a close eye on anything that happened in the city, region, and country. I believe that this kind of transparency and participation must be available for every member of the community. We have to take care of each other and we can't let someone grow and thrive on other peoples' suffering. Such circumstances lead us nowhere other than towards the deepening of societal gaps, in every sense. In their current empowered position, the farmers from Čačak will not allow for future injustices and inequalities to happen, and I hope that, with the challenges we shared, we will know that only by working together will we be able to reach benefits and new values for all to share, involving aspects that range from the land, new irrigation systems, education about the local community and its strengths, or education about the processes that take place in society, to proactive action in the local community.”*

Finally, farmers were supported by different organisations, which was welcomed and recognised by Andrijana as something that helped to bring more visibility to the protests by the pressured authorities:

*“We received the support of environmental organisations from other parts of Serbia, and I can say that without that joint action and pressure on the authorities, we would not have succeeded in our goals. Without the joint work, success would be short-lived or*

*impossible. Therefore, I think it would be useful to formulate all that we share as goals and values, including problems, and then translate them together into activities. I think it is the only effective way to consolidate activism in the local community, as a matter that affects everyone. It is important to collectively respond to the negative products of present-time political practices. We must have a say in societal matters. We must voice our focal issues and bring ourselves into focus too. Otherwise, the logic that sustains that farmers are poor because someone else will always profit from them and make decisions on their behalf will endure.”*

Farmers found consolations in helping each other out, in uniting in their struggle for decent lives, and the fight for their rights. There are many learning points to be taken out of the story shared, but one that is specially worth noting might be the following – in the face of all of the problems ahead of us, and those unfolding right before our eyes, only by working together and leaving nobody behind can we bring justice for all, shake down institutional repressions one battle at a time, and ensure a true green transition.

*“I kakvo je to napred ako put koji se prelazi ostavlja nekoga bez prilike da gradi i sadi svoju budućnost?” [And what kind of step forward is it, if the path leaves someone without the opportunity to build and set the seeds of their future?]*

*- Andrijana Kuzmanović*

In the following article, we dive deeper in the local context and look into some particularities concerning activism in Serbia. More precisely, text covers a story about a feminist network of activists from various movements, their struggles and values, which came with joining forces.

## Network of women for the nature and environmental protection in Serbia

BY: ELENA PETROVSKA

Much like it's neighbouring countries, Serbia presents a challenging environment for local activists<sup>129</sup>. In the past years numerous cases of activists' exposure to intimidations, arrests, police brutality during protests, media lynch, etc. have been recorded<sup>130, 131, 132</sup>. These threats not only fall upon individual activists, but also upon entire organisations, movements and independent journalists. One of the most extreme cases (still under trial) of such oppression was the burning down of the house of a journalist who wrote about financial embezzlement in one of Belgrade's municipalities in 2018<sup>133</sup>.



Image 4: Road blockades in Belgrade for the expropriation law changes and Rio Tinto company mentioned in previous story, December 2021 (source: www.masina.rs)

129 <https://bezbednost.org/publikacija/studija-slucaja-pretnje-i-pritisci-na-aktiviste-i-nezavisne-novinare-u-srbiji-2/>

130 <https://autonomija.info/tribina-aktivisti-u-srbiji-su-potpuno-izlozeni-i-nebezbedni/>

131 <https://www.masina.rs/krivicne-prijave-novosadskim-aktivistima-kriminalizacija-aktivizma/>

132 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/videos/2022/11/1/napadi-na-aktiviste-u-srbiji-od-zastrasivanja-do-fizickih-obracuna>

133 <https://013info.rs/vesti/srbija/sudenje-za-paljenje-kuce-novinara-pocelo-ispocetka-optuzeni-negirali-krivicu>

Even though there is existing data that suggests that citizen activism and will for engagement are generally on a low level in Serbia<sup>134</sup>, it seems that there have been growing movements in recent times, and protests happening more often, specially those connected to the environment. Some of the biggest environmentally motivated protests (for the air, water and other earth constituents affected by pollution) took place in the last few years<sup>135, 136</sup>. This seems logical if we consider that the capital city of Belgrade has taken first place as the most polluted city in the world more than once lately, or the fact that work on the wastewater treatment system in Belgrade started only in 2022. The country is facing numerous environmental and social issues, and, with an awakening consciousness, people have started to refer to their broken constitutional rights, specifically their right for a healthy environment.

So, how does feminism fit into these growing movements? The unique perspective of any political and intellectual project that feminism offers encourages us to explore how patriarchal social systems are oppressive and exploitative. In this sense, feminism and the mentioned environmental and social movements in Serbia are complementary, they both fight oppression of some kind. One of the most important aspects of feminism lies in fighting oppression on all its levels, or rather nurturing an intersectional approach in these movements. Hence, connecting different actors in social movements has great value achieving the comprehensive systemic changes we strive for.

An interesting case in Serbia, with a focus on building connections different organizations, is the Network of Women for Nature and Environmental Protection, founded in the second half of 2020. With the aim of sharing information with the world about this Network, which operates in such a difficult context, I've spoken with one of their members, Sara Ristić. Sara is also part of the initiative "Right to water" from Serbia, and, previously, she worked on humanitarian programs for the prevention

134 <https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/istrazivanje/politicki-aktivizam-u-srbiji/131>

135 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-59520271>

136 <https://www.masina.rs/sadrzaj/zivotna-sredina/>

of gender based violence towards refugee women and girls. She studied psychology, with a focus on collective trauma research. She told us a bit about the network development and how its goals changed over the years:

*"Serbia experiences an important social moment in which domestic environmental issues have been placed at the centre of social debate. This meant a significant mobilisation of people in fighting for the environment in the local communities. What remains under the radar is that the bulk of work in the Green movement – from research, writing, organising, and undertaking emotional work, all the way to cooking – is done by women. These women come from different social classes and educational backgrounds, they are of different age, they have different political ideologies, etc., but they all face inequalities within the movements. These inequalities are seen in terms of public representation and speaking, (not) having a seat at the table where decisions are being made, (not) having a say in how movements are shaped etc. In the course of supporting various local environmental movements, the "Pravo na vodu" (Right to water) initiative witnessed such issues first hand and initiated "Žene za reke" (Women for rivers), an informal network of women fighting for the protection of rivers in Serbia, as an instrument to address the specific environmental issues. The network members had a first meeting attended by women activists from 17 different organisations, initiatives and groups, in September 2020. On the very first meeting, the members realised through discussion that the network ought to serve all women activists in the green movement, not just those who focus on the rivers' protection. So, the network was renamed to "Mreža žena za prirodu i životnu sredinu" (Network of women for nature and environmental protection). In the following months, the women continued working on the joint vision and strategies of the network, and, on their second meeting, they defined a shared goal: 'We want to build a world in which*

*there is no oppression exerted by humankind on nature and other beings, and no oppression exerted by men on women.”*

The way in which these women united and still operate show that the inclusive and intersectional steps were truly necessary for this network to reach its aims. What unites them are their common goals, but, with so many members, a significant amount of network management is required in terms of meetings, activities and membership. These are the principles according to which they operate:

*“All women that are active in the environmental protection movement in Serbia within an organisation, institution, or an informal group or initiative are welcome to join the network. At the moment, the network has more than 70 members from across the country. These are women that are active in their local communities, and who cover a wide range of environmental issues: water pollution, mini hydro power plants, air pollution, mining, destruction of forests, political ecology and education – to name just a few. The members meet in person twice a year on average to discuss the network’s strategies and steps to go forward, to talk about the kinds of support to offer and where they are needed – mostly for women activists, as well as to share experiences and practical skills (i.e. public speaking, ecological policies, fight against SLAPP [strategic litigation against public participation], different forms of engaging with the local institutions, etc). The network’s activities are organised by a committee of six women activists who work on a voluntary basis. Yet all major decisions of the network are made jointly with the members. Secondly, the members attend different forms of public events to speak up about the position of women activists, propose alternatives to improve the situation, represent the network and its activities, and to show solidarity with other movements for women’s rights in the country. Lastly, we have a monthly newsletter, which should serve to exchange information on past and future activities and opportunities for the members.”*

As is the case in any joint movement, especially those operating in a non-democratic country, they face many challenges. Here is what they point out as major issues and the steps taken to overcome them:

*“One of the first issues we wanted to address with the network’s activities was the lack of women representatives in the Green movement. Women are mostly invisible in the public eye and often do not speak out in public although they know a lot about the issue at hand and they respond to it as much as their man comrades. The first step to address it was working on the skills of women activists and their confidence in public speaking, which we did through offering trainings, mentorship programmes and on-site support. Another one of the key lessons learnt is the importance of targeted funding and support for projects that address the climate crisis from a feminist perspective, and to tackle the issues at the intersection between the environmental/climate justice (ECJ) movement and gender. As we have seen, in the lack of focused attention towards this discussion, narratives within the movement as well as the funds, are dominated by man activists. Additionally, we have learnt that the women activists, network and the movement in Serbia can all benefit from reaching out to feminist and women-led initiatives that are not only focused on ecological issues. This helps spread the messages and expand the fights of the Green movement, and it also broadens the activists’ horizons within the movement, especially women, to include feminist principles. And lastly, in order to burst our social bubble, spread the word on our work, and mobilise support, we need to find creative ways to design our activities, and we need to get moving to reach out to different places, classes and ideological positions of current and potential supporters.”*

It seems that their methods to find support and successful cooperation do indeed work – the cooperation with activists from the region is

a big part of their work. They collaborate in different ways:

*“During the course of various activities we have reached out to similar networks of women activists in the ECJ movement in the Balkan region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia), in EU (the Czech Republic), and Africa (South Africa). Through these contacts and cooperation, we exchanged knowledge on the process of building networks, consolidating membership, modes of cooperation, ideas for different activities, and creative solutions to common struggles. Also, internally, it was important for the network’s members to realise that they are not alone in the challenges and discrimination they are facing – it unfortunately happens to women activists worldwide and it is not their fault. Externally, such cooperation sends out a powerful message to male comrades in the movement and to society in general, and that is that there are many women in the ECJ movement and that we stand in solidarity with each other across borders.”*

The path towards change for the better takes some time, but they already see positive outcomes as a result of the network activities:

*“Although the core social change that the network fights for is complex, requires long term commitment, and cannot easily be measured, we still observe small steps forwards regularly. This can be seen through members speaking up during protests, panels and events; through new alliances formed both between women activists in the Green movement and with women activists in the feminist movement in general in Serbia; as well as by putting the ecofeminist principles and agenda on the table when different environmental issues are discussed.”*

The work that the network does is showing to be very relevant on a local level, where it makes sustainable changes in terms of the political and personal empowerment of women. However, we have seen in

previous cases throughout this publication that discrimination within the Green, environmental and feminist movements is deeply rooted worldwide. It is yet another form of oppression of women, which is not discussed in public nearly enough as it should be. The network is a positive example, a success story of how such issues can be tackled on a local level in order to create a more intersectional and inclusive movement. Although they are a young network, in a relatively short time, they have become pioneers in these public discussions and in the activist sphere in Serbia, which is a massive advance compared to the previous state of the matter. This is one of the many accomplishments by the network in the past 2 years, and it is bringing hope for what can be expected in the following years of their work.

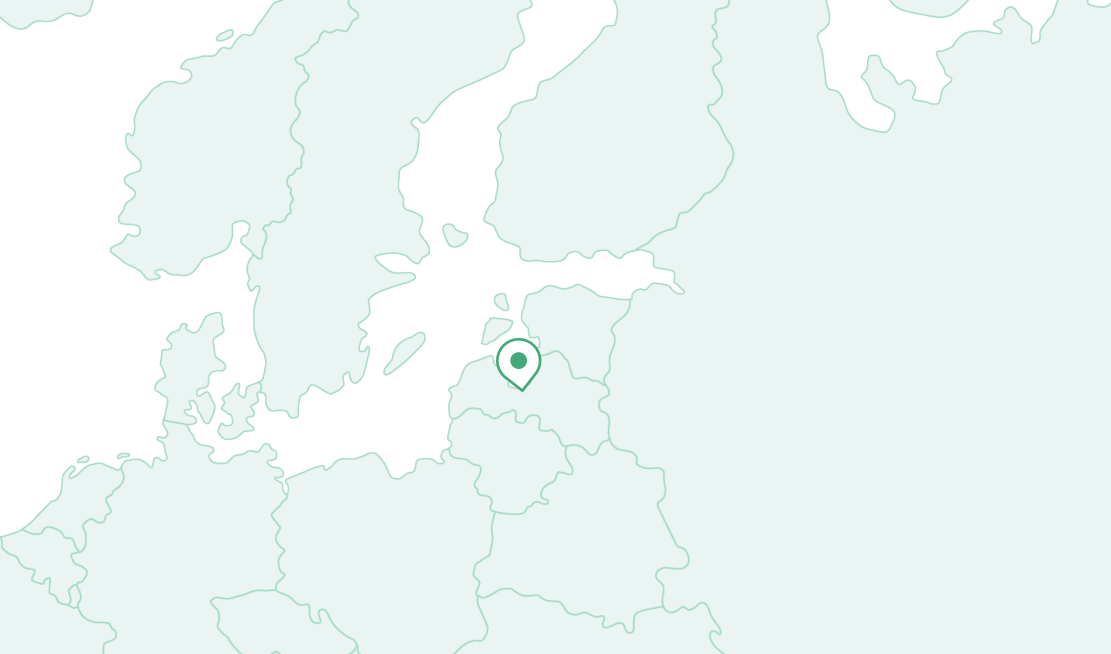


Image 1: Coast of Baltic sea

## Shades of the Baltic Sea: stories of coastal Latvia

BY: PALINA BURKO

I have always been attracted to the Baltic Sea. I saw it for the first time in 2012, when I was only 13 years old, and I fell in love with it. It seems to me that nature takes one of its most beautiful forms in the Baltic Sea region - that is if one can actually say that some forms of nature are more beautiful than others. In any case, I've never felt better than among these tall magical trees and white sand dunes.

Ever since I was a teenager, I wanted to live by the Baltic Sea. As I grew up, I became a very emotional person, and every time I came to the coast, I felt so inspired that I thought I was the happiest person on the planet. I understood that the sea has such a great effect on me that it gives me the strength to move towards achieving my dreams.

Ironically, I moved close to the Baltic Sea after a few years, but not the way I would have liked. In 2020, mass peaceful protests began in my homeland, Belarus, followed by terrible, sometimes bloody repressions. All the activists began to be persecuted, including me. I had to

move to avoid illegal arrest and inhumane detention in prison. And it so happened that I moved to Riga. The sea here, in Latvia, saved me from everything I had to face. I left my homeland in December 2021, when it was dark and cold outside almost all the time. I missed my family terribly, and only trips to the coast helped me out.

Then, in February 2022, my mother was illegally detained in Belarus, and a few days later the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. It seemed to me that I was losing my mind, as it was difficult for me to accept reality. I came to Jurmala to calm down a little, looking at the endless expansiveness of the sea. Over time, I began, no matter how strange and scary it was, to get used to all the horror that was happening. I began to gradually get used to life in a new country, meet new people, explore the city and even offer a little help to those who needed it.

I started meeting a lot of people who live by the sea, because they also adore it as much as I do. I noticed that many people of the Belarusian diaspora in Latvia live near the coast, it was interesting to observe. There are jokes that we simply don't have our own sea, so we go some place that has it. Locals from Riga also visit the seaside often or simply move to areas closer to the sea. Once, I met a woman who

lives in one of the neighbourhoods of Riga close to one of the beaches. She was so enthusiastic about telling me how nice it is to live in the city, but at the same time to smell the sea.

Many, like me, are drawn to clean air and a clean environment. I have always assumed that since it is cold, there are few tourists here. This, in a way, means that human activity does not affect nature very much. I was surprised when one day, while talking to my locals, I was informed this was wrong. I found out that the Baltic Sea is considered one of the most polluted in the world. My whole idea of a piece of paradise on Earth collapsed because of what seemed to have become commonplace – the excessive and harmful use of nature by people.

I found out that, in addition to the plastic pollution that has become common for any sea, as well as oil pollution and overfishing<sup>137</sup>, there is a large amount of nuclear waste, which was dumped into the water by Russian troops during the collapse of the Soviet Union<sup>138</sup>. I was also told that sometimes phosphorus bombs from World War II come ashore after storms, which people confuse with amber<sup>139</sup>. If they touch them, they burn their skin badly and even end up in hospitals.

These are not all the environmental problems of the Baltic Sea, but only common knowledge among the locals. That's why I decided to go deeper into this topic to understand what else the sea hides: what makes an influence on it in a negative way, as well as what, on the contrary, preserves the environment of the region or even makes the environmental situation better.

In this article I have collected the stories of young women who live near the sea not far from Riga. Every day they see nature and what happens to it. I specifically wanted to show their different, sometimes contrasting experiences, so that readers would understand how different the perception of life can be, even if you live just a few kilometres from each other. I want to show the beauty of the Baltic Sea

<sup>137</sup> <https://www.wwf.baltic.org/about-the-baltic/#nature>

<sup>138</sup> <https://www.eupoliticalreport.eu/sweden-and-the-baltic-countries-may-receive-multi-billion-compensation-for-russian-nuclear-waste-burial-in-the-baltic-sea/>

and the horrors that are happening to it at the hands of humans. *I want to show all the shades of the Baltic Sea.*

#### STORY 1.

##### Syringes and alcoholism

I met with the first participant of my research right at the train station. We found conversation topics very quickly: she briefly told me about herself, about her life and her attitude towards politics. We discussed the upcoming parliamentary elections in Latvia. It was interesting to hear about the way that a young woman who has always lived in a democratic society thinks about politics.

Her name is Lauma, and she is a 24 year-old woman living in Kauguri. She was born in Jelgava, but moved to the coast about three years ago, as she decided to live with her boyfriend who has spent most of his life there. In her free time, Lauma likes to do outdoor sports and activities, for example, riding her bike, skating and roller skating; she also likes going on walks to the forest or by the beach, and making art. As she mentioned that, now that there is a new park built in Kauguri, there are definitely a lot more things to do in her spare time. Her favourite places are the beach and the forest, which are 15 minutes away from her home:

Image 2: Kauguri beach



*“I like to go to the forest. I think it has something to do with the fact that I have lived most of my life in a place far from nature, so now everything around me looks even more beautiful.”*

However, she does not like the area around the rail station, where we met. She reflects on the feeling of safety in Kauguri:

*“I don’t feel safe here. A lot of people with alcoholism gather at the railway station, they also meet in other places. I have had unsafe situations, like a drunk man running after me and yelling gross things because I was wearing a dress in summer. It happened in the afternoon, in broad daylight. Now I’m generally afraid to go out alone, I try to ask my boyfriend to meet me somewhere. I think something should be done about the amount of people with an alcoholism problem here in Kauguri. I also noticed that there are drug addicts in this place. Once, at the beach, I saw used syringes with needles in the sand, and now I’m afraid to step on one by accident. I try to check the sand before sitting on it.”*

She points out that substance abuse is a very big problem in the area, impacting overall safety, even in the areas frequently visited by tourists:

*“Many educated and financially well-off people move from here to Riga, and those who for one or another reason cannot afford it, stay here. Often, they are people who do not know what else to do with themselves, except for alcohol and other substances. So it turns out that this place is becoming more dangerous. [...] This area, unlike other places by the sea in Latvia, is not very touristic, although we can see an increase in tourists over time. Young families live here, so they are the ones who spend time at the beach during the day. But this does not make the place safer, I think it’s quite the opposite. Due to the small number of tourists, the authorities have little control over this area, the police works poorly here.*

*They can still check the beach, but other places where people with addictions gather are not being checked at all. For example, the forest near the beach is not checked in any way, so nothing stops those who want to drink alcohol near the sea; they can just go a few steps away. This creates environmental problems apart from common littering.”*

The environmental problems in Kauguri come in many forms and not only from littering:

*“There’s a lot of plastic and glass bottles in different areas, including by the sea. Sometimes you can see garbage bags or everyday waste left in forests; also, as I mentioned already, used needles. I strongly believe that it’s all caused by the same people because of their bad habits and not caring about the environment.”*



Image 3: Kauguri beach in winter

However, Lauma mentions that other type of people can also be additional sources of litter:

*“Baby diapers or other hygiene products can often be found on*



*beaches, especially in changing cabins. I also saw a lot of children's toys and other similar items left in the sand. Once, my boyfriend and I found a seagull that was holding someone's sock in its beak. Recently, I listened to a podcast in which specialists talk about all the micro-plastics found in the stomachs of dead gulls from the Latvian Baltic coast, and what was said there really bothers me."*

According to Lauma, another threat for the natural landscape are the new harmful construction projects in the area:

*"I have noticed that parts of the forest are being cut down because there are new houses being built. I don't think it's necessary. Perhaps, it is worth making some kind of law that will stop the tendency to buy land near the sea, cut down the forest in that place, and then stop the construction due to lack of money. This happens very often and it spoils the natural landscape. Also, after construction, there is a lot of construction debris that no one has been removing for several years."*

It appears that there are no projects to solve these environmental issues, and locals are self-reliant:

*"I honestly don't know of anyone doing this. Neither the state, nor NGOs, nor any businesses. Nevertheless, in Latvia, there is a tradition called Taka that takes place in April, when people gather together to clear some of the territory at the beach that is full of garbage. In my opinion, once a year is definitely not enough."*

She reflects on her future vision of Kauguri and potential for improvement:

*"I think in 10 years the seashore will be different, also because of the climate change. Hopefully Kauguri will be calmer and nicer,*

*and the problem with substance abuse will be decreased. I really do believe that not only society would benefit from it, but so would nature. It's probably the quality of life what makes people be ignorant about their surroundings. It's possible that if it increased, they would start to care about things such as the environment. That's what I would like to change the most. I feel that it's easy to change this place. There's not a lot wrong with Kauguri. It's just that the things that are wrong have become a big problem. Just basic awareness-raising events would be a great start. And maybe with time, Kauguri would attract more tourists, and that would make the authorities pay closer attention to these problems."*

## **STORY 2.**

### **Ancestral home**

The second interviewee lives very close to the Melliži train station, which is located only about 6 km away from Kauguri. I was only there that one time, but I really liked it for its peace.

Her name is Justīne, she is 23 years old. She is starting to study nursing. She likes to spend most of her time peacefully:

*"I like that it is quiet in Melliži, I spend my time mostly alone. I like studying here, reading books, gardening and doing some other hobbies. If I go outside, I like to sit somewhere on the riverside and just listen to music or read a book. I definitely like spending time in nature."*

Justīne explains what it is like for young people in Melliži:

*"Although there are some cafes nearby, it seems to me that there is nothing for young people to do here. So many people, including me, in order to spend time more actively, just go to Riga."*

According to her, there are not enough cultural activities in the region that would allow young people to spend their free time better:

*“It seems to me that the problem is that those young people who are interested in spending their time more culturally cannot find anything here. Yes, you can spend time actively doing sports, such as going for a walk somewhere in nature, to the beach or the forest, playing basketball or volleyball. But there are no cultural events taking place here. There are one or two museums, but they don’t organize anything at all, especially for youth. Maybe there are more cultural events taking place in nearby Kauguri. But I don’t like going there because of the local communities in that area.”*

Inspired by the first interviewee’s reply, I asked Justīne to tell me about the safety in the region. It turned out to be a quite different answer: she lived here for many years and feels absolutely comfortable in her neighbourhood. Despite that, she is familiar with the issues in the neighbouring area:

*“I can say that I feel safe in this place. I know that this is not the case everywhere near here: in Kauguri, the level of criminality is much higher due to the large number of people with alcoholism and other addictions, and I do not feel comfortable there. But here, I feel absolutely calm. It is not obvious that there are people with alcohol addiction or dependence on other substances in Melluži. There are a lot of tourists here, and I think they also feel quite comfortable. There are almost no crimes committed, and even if things are often stolen from tourists in different resort places, this doesn’t happen here.”*

However, there is a place that she doesn’t like or feel safe in:

*“The railway here can be dangerous. To get to the beach, you need to cross it. There is a special crossing, and trains do not go fast, since there are residential areas there, and the stations are very close to each other. Maybe there is even a law or a rule for trains that does not allow drivers to go fast there. In some places there*

*are also fences near the railway. But nevertheless, it seems to me that in that place, as it happens in the whole of Latvia, there is not enough infrastructure to ensure safety on the railway, people continue to cross it in dangerous places, as it is a common practice. I really hope that now, with the construction of Rail Baltica, the situation will somehow change.”*

The feeling of safety in the area is connected to the fact that she knows the place very well. Her ancestors lived there for many centuries:

*“My family has lived here since the very foundation of this place, back when there was a forest here. Then the forest began to be cut down, and more and more houses began to be built here. It turns out that we know all the neighbours and the whole area, so understanding this also makes me feel safer here. The people nearby are very good and calm and the area itself is very comfortable for living.”*

Justīne told me that when her neighbourhood started to appear, people cut down part of the forest. Unfortunately, something similar continues even now:

*“It’s clear that it used to be different before. Back then, it wasn’t such a big problem. The whole area was covered with forests, and people needed to live somehow, especially fishermen who liked to settle here because of the proximity to the sea. They built small houses, but this was by no means an industrial area. Now, unfortunately, this place is turning into a more industrial one, and it is starting to become a problem. It seems to me that the main issue right now is on the seaside. The environment here is protected, including the dunes, but there is corruption in the country. And people bribe the authorities to cut down trees near the sea and build houses. Of course, this is done by rich people who can pay for it.”*

In addition to deforestation, she also mentions other environmental problems:

*“The flora on the beach and in the surrounding area is deteriorating because more and more cafes are being built. In Majori, a place not far from here, they wanted to put asphalt in front of the cafes at the beach. It’s just awful. Also, sometimes algae bloom in the sea in summer, which is a bad sign. But this is not even surprising, because the Baltic Sea itself is very polluted, not only from the Latvian side. It also seems to me that we have a big problem with recycling garbage. There are bins for separate garbage collection, but they are located far from residential buildings. Not everyone can go there, and also it’s impossible to just leave, let’s say, plastic in some other bin so that it can still be taken away for recycling. I think because of this, many people reject the idea of collecting garbage separately. In some places in Latvia people do not have to pay for collection of recycled garbage, I think this is a very good idea, which for some reason has not been implemented here.”*



Image 4: Melluži beach

Unfortunately, in the current political situation, according to Justīne, the authorities are not doing anything to environmental issues:

*“My grandmother works as a biology teacher, and, at school, I did a lot of projects on the topic of ecology. The more I learnt about the situation of the Baltic Sea, the sadder I became. I became very dissatisfied with the government that allows those problems [mentioned above] to happen. Politicians are not doing enough to stop illegal deforestation, or to correct the situation with vegetation on the beach, or on any other topic. They are really very corrupt, and it depresses me. I have never tried to change this situation on my own. Maybe if I had tried to approach the authorities with the problem of insufficient number of garbage bins for separate collection, I would think differently now. But I don’t really have faith in those who make decisions. There are definitely organisations that deal with these problems, but I feel that they are not really working together, they are working against each other, so they cannot influence the government in any way. I think this needs to be fixed.”*

Nevertheless, she thinks that, in addition to state bodies, other organisations, initiatives and individuals might attempt to resolve some of the problems. Some actions are visible, while others are not:

*“There are EU projects that are somehow related to this topic. The seaside makes up for 2/3 of Latvia’s border<sup>140</sup>, so it is in the military and economic interests of the EU. As for businesses, it doesn’t seem to me that any of them care about the environment. The only thing they want is to make money. I believe that among the local people there are individuals who clean the surroundings on their own initiative. They have been living there for a long time, everything around the area is their home, so it is obvious that they want to take care of it. However, environmental problems are not something that people around know well. Yes, there might be someone who is researching this, but an ordinary person is unlikely to be interested.”*

<sup>140</sup> Note from author: about 27% of Latvia’s border is the coastal zone, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography\\_of\\_Latvia#Geographic\\_features](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Latvia#Geographic_features)

At the end, she imagined what the place would be like in the future and also shared her ideas on how to fix the environmental situation in the region:

*“I think that, now, the protection of nature here is going in the wrong direction. Unfortunately, I feel that the environment will be more disrupted after a while, and I don’t believe the situation is improving in any way. Probably, the only good news is that the asphalt in front of the cafes in Majori was still not put. It means that there is still hope, although nothing is improving currently. I believe there should be more lessons on the topic of environment at schools. However, formal education is not enough. I would also like the process of cutting down the trees to stop, and the forest to remain untouched. I want the vegetation by the sea to be as it should be. The problem is not so huge, but if it is not solved, it gets worse. I am very attached to this place, I would like to see more good things happening.”*

### STORY 3.

#### Perspective of a migrant woman in Latvia

The third participant of my interview I had known for several months. We are both migrants from Belarus, and we differ only in the way we left our homeland.

Her name is Emma, she is 26 years old. We met each other in winter, one and a half months after I moved to Latvia. She moved a little earlier, in the fall of 2021, with her husband and wonderful pug. Both Emma and her husband work in the IT sector, so they moved with the help of a relocation program in the company they worked for in Belarus. She named two reasons for moving: the political situation and economic interests.

I was always curious why the couple chose to move not to Riga, as it is often the case among other IT migrants, but to a small place by the sea, Dzintari. Emma explained this choice:

*“We moved here for a fairly simple reason: life in a big city has never attracted us, me and my husband felt that something closer to nature suits us more. Living in a city is too noisy, there are too many cars, and bad air conditions.”*

Emma also told me about the way her lifestyle changed after moving:

*“In Belarus I lived in Minsk, the capital and the largest city, so I noticed that my leisure time changed after moving. I became more active, started walking a lot, riding a bike, doing sports. I think this place allows me to do my favourite things: there are enough bike paths, and places for walking. I really love the sea, I like that it’s close to my home now. I sometimes come to the beach to meditate or just get some fresh air. Overall, I think there is a good infrastructure for spending quality time here in Dzintari.”*

When I asked Emma a similar question to that posed to the other participants - that is, if she feels safe doing the activities she loves, her answer was ambiguous:

*“Overall, I feel safe. However, in winter, for example, I don’t feel very comfortable going out alone when it’s already dark. Perhaps this is not because something is wrong in Latvia, but simply because of some of my beliefs. In Belarus, we are taught not to walk alone in dark courtyards, and this message remains in my head. So if I go out in winter in the dark, I don’t feel very comfortable, because there are very few people around. In summer, the situation is different. There are a lot of people here, both locals and tourists. Everyone comes to the sea. That’s why I feel fine, even if it’s dark outside and I’m alone. It seems to me that old abandoned houses here often evoke a sense of danger in me. I understand that different marginal people can spend time in such places, which can be dangerous.”*

Those buildings have a deeper story behind them:

*“Such buildings cannot be demolished as they are often cultural heritage. But no one wants to restore them either, since it costs a lot of money. Of course, it’s good that such places are not being destroyed, but there should be some regulations. For example, if for a certain period of time no one wants to buy that house and do something with it, it would probably be more logical to put it to use under some initiative, let people use it, do something with it. There is not much sense in abandoned places in touristic areas, since they are a source of danger and it also spoils the view, which makes people see Latvia in a different, often more negative light. Not everyone knows about the history of these buildings. The abandoned places here are mostly old sanatoriums, most likely built during the Soviet occupation. There are many abandoned residential houses, which are also included in the list of buildings that belong to protected cultural heritage. Unfortunately, no one wants to live there, there is not enough left of them to even restore them. But no one has the right to demolish these buildings either.”*

Similarly as deforestation in previous story, coastal area is attractive for certain economic activities:

*“I have heard that such old houses are sometimes set on fire, specifically to free up land for the construction of something new. This is the only way to do something with a plot of land where an old unused building stands. Even if you walk around the houses here in Dzintari, you can see the areas where the burnt buildings used to be. However, an empty plot, even where something was burnt down, will still cost a lot of money, more than an old wooden house. But it is obvious that burning buildings is, to say the least, dangerous, for neighbours as well.”*

As for environmental problems in the area, she does not see anything serious:

*“I think the beaches here are pretty clean. There are no garbage issues here, but this may be due to the fact that the place is just very touristic, it is taken care of and cleaned often. We go to other places near the sea in Latvia from time to time, but it’s clean there too. [...] it is nice to be there, as it is clear that people care about the nature around them. I believe that it is inherent in the local culture that garbage should not be thrown around.”*

She also noticed some of the issues previously mentioned, which occur in Kauguri, and the polar opposite happening in some communities that are just a few kilometers away.

Emma also talked about the social problems in the area where she lives, and in Latvia in general. As a migrant, she has a different perspective to that of some locals, and her transnational identity makes her feel more exposed to political issues.

*“I feel that people here are different. By people, I mean Russian speakers: I speak this language myself, but I see how much I differ from them. The political views of many of them are in conflict with my own views, even with my mentality. The number of those who support Putin’s policies scares me a lot. However, even when I encountered opposing beliefs, I felt safe. I knew that we just talk, share our thoughts, and nothing will happen to me because of this. This is a big difference with Belarus.”*

She shared her perspective about how problems, in general, are solved in Latvia:

*“Various organizations, and even the state, are engaged in solving some problems, but some other issues are not even taken into consideration. As for abandoned houses, it seems to me that everyone*

*knows about the problem, but no one does anything about it at all. At least, I haven't heard anything about it."*

Although Emma has only lived in Dzintari for a short time, she has already imagined what the place could be like in the future:

*"I would like to somehow change the cultural life here, because apart from sports and my own activities at home with friends, nothing ever happens. I would like to have the opportunity to go out somewhere. There are cafes here, but they all close early. Maybe it's just economically inconvenient for them to work for a long time because there are fewer tourists now than a few years ago. Of course, I would want the place to preserve its natural resources. It is not necessary to expand the number of residential areas, factories, it is not necessary to cut down the trees. In fact, it's great that there is such vegetation, pine trees all around. I really hope that no one is ever tempted to make profit out of this. Fortunately, I've noticed that when something new is being built here, people try to preserve the trees and even protect them."*

#### **STORY 4.**

##### **Neighbouring Russia**

I found the fourth participant for my interview through my ex-colleague, who is one of the people who moved to Riga from the coast. Her friend Lida, whom I interviewed, still lives on the seaside. Lida is 23 years old, she graduated from university, and now works as an administrator in a hotel near her home. Like the first interviewed participant, she lives in Kauguri:

*"I have been living here since I was born, my whole family lives here. Here I went to school and studied. Now I live apart from my family members, but very close to them."*

She explained why she loves that place and doesn't think about moving to any other place in Latvia:

*"I like that there is a forest nearby, where I spend a lot of time. Along the forest there are good trails where I walk sometimes or ride my bike. In general, there is wonderful nature, a beautiful bay, and fresh air."*

She also added that Kauguri has a variety of activities that a person can do:

*"Many people come here to pick mushrooms or berries. You can also swim in the sea in summer. Usually, various other things are organised at the beaches for leisure, so I also seize them. Of course, there are not as many activities as in a big city, like in Riga, but it's still enough. Recently, a large park was built in Kauguri with a very good playground. Now, many families with children use it. And there is also a place for skateboarding, roller skating, or riding a scooter, but this place is also mostly used only by children."*

Lida, as other participants, shared a few words about her favourite place in Kauguri:

*"I love the forest by the sea. When I was little, my dad often took me there, and we played badminton and ball, we cycled, and generally spent a lot of time walking in the woods. There are small hills in the forest, and when I was little, I really liked running around them, playing hide-and-peek... I can say that I grew up in this forest, so this is my favourite place.[...] I love the forest for the feeling of peace that it gives to me."*

Continuing the topic of peace, I asked her if she feels safe there. Unfortunately, the answer was negative, and it was interesting to compare it with the response of the other participant from Kauguri. Per-

haps only few months ago it would have been different, but today her answer resonates with many young people who found themselves under influence of a terrorist sate:

*“Looking at the current socio-political situation in the world, it is difficult for me to feel safe anywhere, but especially in Latvia. It’s not even about Kauguri, but about Latvia as a whole. It is a small country, and I’m afraid a war can easily start here since Russia is close. Unfortunately, I’m not sure that people here are ready to fight. I see that many are thinking of leaving, and honestly, I am also considering moving to another country if the war starts here, no matter how much I love Kauguri and Latvia as a whole. As for Kauguri itself, it seems to me that this place is quite simple and calm. However, in rare cases, due to the fact that different people live here, with different socio-economic statuses, there may be some dangers.”*

The aforementioned substance abuse issues in Kauguri are noticed by Lida as well, and she remembers stories of many terrible situations, even femicide stories:

*“There was a case of a man with an alcohol addiction that killed his ex-wife, who worked at a railway station. There were also rumours that a maniac lived somewhere in this area. Of course, I hear about things like these very rarely, but it happens. And it’s scary.”*

Some stories of the interviewed women are similar, and surely relatable to many around the world: *“In the evenings, when it’s already dark, it’s better not to walk alone, even in more or less safe places.”* Lida also has a similar perspective to the others’ on environmental issues, and compares the situation with her experiences in Riga:

*“People leave garbage just everywhere. We didn’t have enough bins before, but now they’ve finally been put up. Despite that, the*

*problem still exists. Cleaning actions do not solve the problem completely. In the forest, where I like to be, I often see empty bottles, cigarette butts, and other garbage. In general, I wouldn’t say that it is very dirty here. If I compare it with Riga, there is much more garbage there. But understanding this is unlikely to make me feel any better. At the very least, I would like the garbage bins to be put closer to the forest. Maybe this would fix the problem at least a little.”*

As for the ecological situation in the sea itself, she thinks that everything is more or less good in Latvia:

*“In other countries, I have seen more plastic in the water than here. I know that at least the coastal zone is being cleaned in Kauguri, although unfortunately, the dunes are not being cleaned enough and all the garbage remains there. In general, this is a resort area, so the government also takes care of it. However, where there are no tourists, the place may not be cleaned at all, for example, there may be a lot of algae.”*

Lida is not hopeful for improvements in the economic and social situation in the region, due to the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and the socio-political issues:

*“I think there will be fewer tourists in this place and the economic situation will decline, especially in the tourism sector. I also reckon that cultural life in Kauguri will get worse. Previously, there were large events where a lot of people gathered, but now there are only small ones to which almost no one comes. It’s sad for me as a young woman. I’m afraid there won’t be anything related to cultural life here in the future.”*

She notices the role of young people in making a better future for Kau-

guri, and Latvia in general: *“There are a lot of people living here who still have a soviet mentality. I’m afraid they will hinder progressive change. This place could be changed by young people, but they all tend to leave for big cities. Perhaps in 5-10 years there will be no youth left here at all. And this is actually not only because of the urbanisation process, but also because of the socio-political situation.”*

In the end, she recognises some improvements regarding environmental care, but hopes for more: *“I wish people would not leave garbage everywhere. I can see some progress now since we have more bins, but I would like to see further change.”*

### Conclusion

The stories I heard and documented did not weaken my love for the Baltic Sea. Unfortunately, some of the suspected local issues turned out to be true, but there is also something wonderful about the shores of Latvia that keeps us here.

Although the stories don’t specifically present cases of organised action for the preservation of the environment, they are very valuable when talking about the different intersections of gender, youth and the environment. Some things, for example, the excessive consumption of alcohol and other substances by the local people in Kauguri, deforestation near the sea, and the lack of access to entertainment and cultural life, echoed in the stories of each of the women. Some problems were only mentioned in one of the interviews, but that doesn’t make them any less important. They also mentioned many issues that many people can relate to, such as the feeling of a lack of safe spaces and the ever present phenomena of young people leaving rural areas, specifically in context of political issues. In addition to many questions brought up about life next to the Baltic sea, although not specifically mentioned by interviewees, we must not forget about the stories hidden in the sea itself.

I hope that attention will be paid to this region both at local and Euro-

pean levels. It is painful to realise that young women most often had no idea that the problems they mentioned could somehow be solved effectively. But their safety and the future of many other young people in Latvia depend on it. I believe that someday, looking at the Baltic Sea, we will be able to think only of its beauty. We’ll have the possibility to peacefully enjoy those wonderful tall pines, to hide behind the dunes when we need them to block the wind, and to breathe in the fresh smell of the sea. That is not the case so far, but let this article become an inspiration to fight to save not only the Latvian coastal region, but also the environment of the entire country, all seas and oceans, and the whole world.

Let’s protect nature together.





## Reflections from the editorial team

Dear reader,

We hope you have found the stories insightful. We explored together many topics and their intersections. In them, you maybe found good feelings of inspiration, hope, or strength. Or maybe quite the opposite. This is exactly why we are here: we all needed to discover how different it is to cope with environmental (and other) issues in non-urban areas. It is often something we don't hear about. In rural areas, it is often about basic well-being, if not even survival.

Some of the stories have shown us the activist perspectives, perspectives of communities who had enough support to stand up to the issues. However, we have also seen the perspectives of those who do not – and to whom standing up against the issue could cost everything. Some have strong motives rooted in the presence of environmental hazards, while others are giving food for thought and inviting you to look outside the box and see the depth of the issues in different rural communities.

When we take into account all the different forms of neglect that governments have against rural communities, which were shown in almost all stories, it is easier to empathise and understand why the “passivity” of some communities is at a point where the problem is not even a problem anymore – it is just the way they live. But we must not normalise this slow oppression, silencing and invisibilising our rural areas. We must offer space and support for them to fight for their well-being, and, as many state, the well-being of future generations. Especially, we must give much more space to women, who, along with the “normalised” issues, carry the burden of traditions and deeply gendered roles in rural communities.

Many times we have seen that these gender roles and expected obligations toward families lead women to shape their identities as care-givers. In such cases, it is valuable to recognise the strength they have in this identity, and observe it from the perspectives of the

developing feminist movement, which has different implications in deeply traditional environments.

In some stories, the women are the resilient leaders of the change who fight for a better environment, and their stories in this publication will hopefully be inspiring examples for many others in similar situations. Their strength came from the support of their family, close circles, and like-minded activists. However, we must not forget the challenges they face when they are empowered to speak up on-par with the same conservative politics that put them in the position of the oppressed ones. This is an issue we must systemically work on, not only in rural communities, but worldwide.

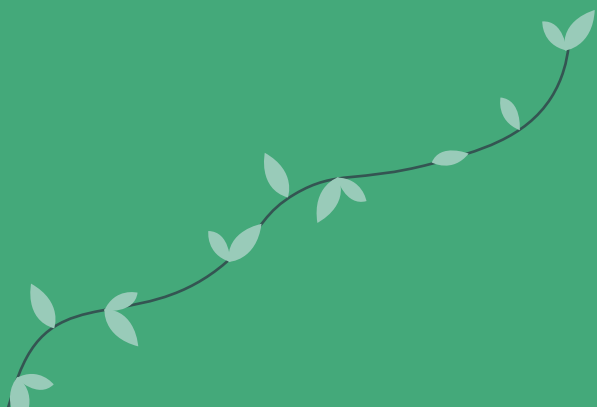
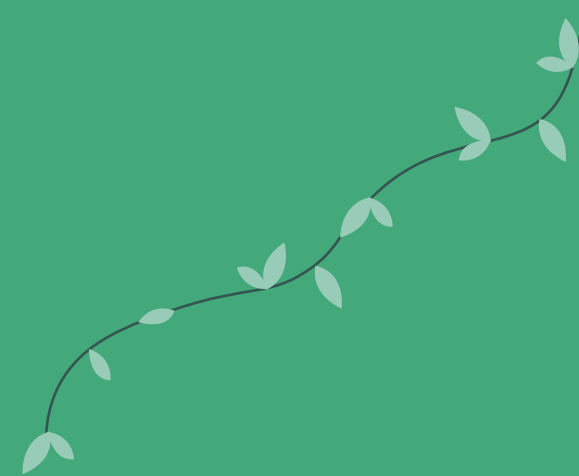
Along with deeply rooted patriarchy, in the stories shared, a reoccurring issue seems to be one we are all familiar with: profit-driven governments that neglect the well-being of citizens. Although it is a general issue, in rural communities it is of much greater impact. The support to rural areas is limited, mainly because of the lack of visibility and fair political representation. Around Europe, it is not uncommon to see protests in cities with thousands of people – they create pressure and often there is a response. But who will listen and point a camera to a village with a few houses? Unfortunately, this disregard gives a lot of space for the exploitation of land and people, corruption, and illegal actions.

Feminist and environmental movements are often gathering people by calling for solidarity and justice. And this is exactly what we need when we talk about environmental (as well as cultural, political and economic) struggles in rural areas. Through the stories, you are likely to have noticed the “out of sight, out of mind” motive for transferring issues to other countries, often to a “less developed” country, or simply to the periphery. EU or not EU, border or no border, Europe or Asia, Danube or the Atlantic Ocean; it is one planet. Environmental hazards and climate change do not have borders. The toxic fumes from the coal power plant in rural Turkey or the waste incinerator from rural Croatia, are taken by the wind, and they destroy forests and pollute

lakes thousands of kilometres away, on a different part of the planet. Young people are leaving their homes in rural areas in hopes for a better future, and it is only a matter of time before people are caught up with the same, if not worse struggles. This is exactly why we must all unite in a path of solidarity, sustainability and we must demand immediate action from our governments and European institutions!

We thank you for taking the time to read this publication. The stories and local cases leave many open questions and space for discussions, and we invite you to share with us your thoughts and spark new discussions, as well to share the publication further.

In solidarity,  
THE EDITORIAL TEAM



## Team behind the publication



**MAJA KLIMENTIĆ** (she/her) is 23 years old, from Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where she started her activist path in local NGOs working in the areas of gender, environment, youth education & empowerment. She is an Activity Assistant in the Feminists in the Environmental Movement (FEM) project and a member of Gender Working Group of CDN.

She currently lives and studies in the Czech Republic, where she also did the FEM local research.



**KARLA KURTOIĆ** (she/her) is 26 and lives in Zagreb, Croatia. She has had an interest for nature and environmental issues ever since she was a child and participated in various eco programs. She joined the Sustainable Development Forum Green Window in 2020 with the goal of gaining more practical

experience in environmental activism and policy making. She loves thrifting and upcycling.



**ANAMARIJA DIVKOVIĆ** (she/her) is 24 years old. Anamarija lives in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where she started her activism journey when she was 16 years old. Currently, she works in safe house for women victims of (domestic) violence and with women that survived war torture during

the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her hobby is creating bookmarks made of wild-flowers.



**ÖZGE DORUK** (she/her) is an activist and researcher. She is an advocate for environmental rights in particular. Her education is in fields of sociology and she completed her master's degree in the program of Managing and Organising of Civil Society. She conducts researches, collects archives

and gathers stories, and films documentaries on local environmental movements, climate justice, coal thermal power plants, and remembrance. The documentaries she produced are The Town of Thermal Power Plants, Çırpılar: An Anatomy of a Struggle and Tracing the Water in Troas. She currently works as a NGO professional for the Green Thought Association.



**NATALYA SOFRONOVA** (she/her) is 23 years old, from Cheboksary, Russia. She started her activist path in local environmental and climate movements in 2017 and currently volunteers at LGBTQ+ NGO in Moscow. She is a member of Gender Working Group of CDN. She likes drawing and social sciences.



**ELENA PETROVSKA** (she/her) is 24 years old, from Belgrade, Serbia, where she first got active with the local Young Greens back in 2018. Her interests grew from environmental protection at the beginning to an umbrella of intertwined topics of climate and social justice. She studies climate change at the Environmental Sciences program, and she devotes her free time to envisioning and acting in different ways towards a more just and safe world.

environmental Sciences program, and she devotes her free time to envisioning and acting in different ways towards a more just and safe world.



**PALINA BURKO** (she/her) is an activist of the Belarusian Young Greens. Recently, she started working for the Belarusian environmental organization “Ecohome”. She is one of the founders of the Ancestral Medicine Working Group of CDN, interested in topics such as

mental health and psychoactive substances. Due to political persecution in her homeland, Palina was forced to leave the country. Now she lives in Latvia, where she received refugee status.



**MARIAM (MASHA) DZNELADZE** (she/they) is the Project Coordinator of CDN. She joined the Green movement in 2012 in Georgia through CDN’s Member Organisation “Georgian Young Greens” (now Young Greens of Georgia). In 2013-2014 Masha was an EC member of the organisation and worked a lot with

the local community of young greens as well as participating in several international activities that inspired them to continue working on the international level with CDN. In 2015-2017 Masha was an EC member of CDN and worked closely with the Alternative Urbanisation Working Group, but also developed an interest towards and gained experience with other topics like climate, gender and digitisation. Masha is also interested in languages, arts and yoga.



**PAULA “PABLO” LUĪZE PASTORE** (she/they) has always had a passion for progressive and green topics, but they joined the official movement in 2021. They are a board member of a Latvian youth organization “Protests”. Pablo is interested in intersectional feminism, gender theory, workers’ rights, and anti-racism. In their

free time, Pablo enjoys writing, making posters, reading feminist literature, watching old movies, going on long walks, and talking with friends. Within CDN’s gender working group, Pablo created a feminist reading club.

A series of horizontal dotted lines for taking notes, spanning the right side of the page.



## Connect with us

---

### Green European Foundation



gef.eu



GEF\_Europe



GreenEuropeanFoundation



GEF\_Europe

### Cooperation and Development Network EE



cdnee.org



cdn\_ee



CDNEE



cdnee



Cooperation Development Network Eastern Europe