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**Trouble with ‘Progress’:  
Serbia, Development and its Narrative Ruptures**

**Jelena Vićentić**

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Trouble with 'Progress': Serbia, Development and its Narrative Ruptures.

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## **Abstract**

This paper interrogates the development scenarios proliferating in the Serbian public sphere since the ‘Democratic change’ of October 2000. While the state’s mythologizing of ‘progress’ and the promise of development are reaching a peak under the current regime, the rhetoric of ‘new’ post-socialist and post-democratic modernity is losing its momentum. The disillusioned and the disenfranchised of the Serbian society - the rural and the disadvantaged populations - have begun to react to the continuing attempts at plunder of the land and its resources outside of the existing political venues and purposefully away from the established political elites. The paper explores potentials in the current emergence of values and understandings of life essentials of the people of the land, embodied in the popular movement and uprisings against the ‘theft of rivers’, occurring despite the constructed but all-consuming discourse of non-alternatives to the mainstream idea of ‘progress’.

Keywords: resource exploitation, narrative rupture, coloniality, elites, water

## Introduction

The last three decades in the lives of the majority population of Serbia have been marred by uncertainty. The last decade of the 20th century was marked by the experience of the disintegration of Yugoslav socialism, widening the space for proliferation of nationalism and advancement of the populist trends in the newly established multi-party system. The ‘democratic transition’ with the ‘5 October revolution’ in 2000 as its milestone, provides the opening theme of the 21st century. Nonetheless by 2010, concluding the first decade of democratic rule in Serbia, public judgement had been passed on the first generation of liberal democratic regimes: years had passed with state funds spent wastefully, redirected from the “painful-but-necessary reform” to “populist attempts to satisfy the needs of the people” (Cvjetičanin, 2010). The system ensuring rapid privatization of public entities, formerly state-owned companies and the commodities under their control, promoting an increase in consumption, while relying heavily on loans and subsidies from the West, was then declared by economists unfit and unsustainable, termed a model that drained all its possibilities. As a consequence of the intended ‘redistribution’ of the initial stages of transition, the wealth was accumulated in the possession of the very few, being economically inefficient in a larger picture. Furthermore, the financial sector at this point in time amounted to 80% foreign ownership (Drašković, 2010). In place of a solution for the Serbian ‘economy in ruins’, strategies and analyses were presented, ultimately placing an unrestrained emphasis on the free market and foreign investment in infrastructure (Bajec, 2010). Although hardly a novelty, as the previous regimes, both democratic and socialist, did not shy away from free market philosophy. Liberalization of the market and foreign investment were again reintroduced to the Serbian public as the answer to economic and social challenges.

The political takeover by the Serbian Party of Progress (*Srpska napredna stranka* - SNS, or ‘Progressives’) in 2012, officializes the neoliberal doctrine, although the regime was founded on the promise of war against corruption, reckless privatization, and clientelism. The SNS era, marked by the ‘Progressive’ trend ongoing at the time of writing, completes the ideological project initiated in the nineties. The significance of the legacy of the socialist state is made invisible, as all the while the power regime continues to maintain and rely on the remnants of institutions built in the socialist era, reconstructing history so that socialist state-building and social, economic and cultural heritage are either entirely erased or deemed inadequate or detrimental to further development (Petrović, 2012). The

era of ‘Democratic rule’ set the foundations of a regime of knowledge naturalizing a ‘survival of the fittest’ economic logic<sup>1</sup>. The era naturalized the turn towards European, capitalist, and individualist mindset: “Life is brutal, but only the determined and persistent ones survive. Those who for any reason do not use their chance as a country and as individuals may have good reasons or excuses for that, but they will remain out of the game”.<sup>2</sup>

The philosophy is reaffirmed by the ‘Progressives’, positioning the capitalist order as the sole functioning and life ensuring mode of existence, thus normalizing the order where “no regime protects the general social or state interest, but only the interest of big capital” (Milićević 2017:53). Inseparably from this, an understanding of progress as economic growth is aggressively promoted as the singular mode of economic planning. The conceptual frameworks of ‘capitalism’, ‘democracy’, ‘development’, ‘progress’ and ‘Europe’ are merged into one, providing the regime with a rationale and an aspiration<sup>3</sup>.

Rampant privatization and relative deregulation continue<sup>4</sup>, with the remaining public resources, including public goods or state property being sold, commissioned or leased to ‘investors’ and foreign ‘development partners’ of the government (Milićević, 2017). The ‘Progressive’ government, supported by European partners, continues the economic reform process leading towards EU accession. Significant EU funds have also been allocated for the enhancement of administrative capacities in the pre-accession phase and development of ‘a modern and sustainable infrastructure in order to speed up the preparations for EU membership’ (CFCU, 2018, 2019). This funding includes the energy sector and environmental protection. In accordance with the European Directive<sup>55</sup> prescribing a percentage of the energy to be retrieved from renewable sources, Serbia has set the goal of 27% of sustainable energy in its final gross energy consumption in 2020 (Energy Community, 2012; Ministarstvo energetike, 2013). So called ‘green transition’, involving investment in renewable energy technologies, thus becomes

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1 ‘Democratic rule’, as a shorthand for the period 2000-2012, the time of extensive social, economic and administrative reform after the defeat of the Slobodan Milošević regime in October 2000.

2 Zoran Đinđić, Serbian Primeminister 2001-2003, interview published in the daily *Nedeljni telegraf*, 07.08.2001. Available at the *Virtual Museum of Zoran Djindjic* at <https://www.zorandjindjic.org>

3 Additionally, “transition, privatization, structural adjustment, establishing a new economic and social system were magical words, that were often attributed the connotation and the echo of inevitable progress, a role of the magic formula that will solve all the problems” (Ristić, 2011).

4 Deregulation is relative, because the current ‘Progressive’ regime acts as the *ad hoc* regulating body, rather than the instrument of barrier removal. It enforces the practice of tailoring single-purpose legal provisions grounded in *leges speciales* in order to ensure legal framework for selected development projects (on the propensity of the Progressives towards special regulation see Nenadić, 2019).

5 Directive 2009/28/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2009 on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources, in regard of quotas also applicable on the states members of the Energy Community founded between European Union and the nine states of the Balkans in 2006 (European Parliament 2009; Energy Community 2019).

one of the funding priorities (EBRD, 2018). The combination of donor interest, favorable credit and expertise offered by the development partners, together with state subsidies, such as ‘stimulation measures’ for renewable energy production reserved for ‘producers with benefits’ provides a significant entrepreneurial incentive<sup>6</sup>. This has resulted in the rapid proliferation of hydropower plants, with small hydropower plants being the most accessible form<sup>7</sup> of investment and source of income in the sector (Popović, 2019b; Poznatov, 2013; Vlaović, 2018).

Many of the projects were initiated in areas under environmental protection, causing varying degree of environmental damage such as drying out of the stream, flooding and landslides, destruction of the river bed and river banks, drastic reduction of the protected animal and plant species. For example, ten small hydropower plants were placed in the zone of the natural reserve ‘Stara planina’ (Old Mountain, also known as Mount Balkan). In addition to the environmental harm, the affected villages in the Knjaževac and Pirot municipalities in the mountain region have suffered damage in the course of the construction work: dirt roads destroyed, disabling access to the village; heavy construction machinery destroying private agricultural land, which is a source of livelihood for majority elderly households; and, endangerment of access to pure drinking water (Jovičić, 2019). In addition to the absence of public discussion and consultation with the villagers on the use of the land and water in the affected areas, the common tactics involved construction work initiated suddenly and with no prior notice to the community. Irregular reports of physical assaults, sometimes against the elderly and the disabled, by private security contractors securing the construction site for the small hydropower plants have been made amongst the group (Georgievski, 2018b; Kljajić, 2019b)<sup>8</sup>. The protests against small hydropower plants, initially

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6 Some of the development partners supporting renewable energy projects include: European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) through direct loans and indirectly through other energy actors such as Western Balkans Sustainable Energy Financing Facility; Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), International Finance Corporation (IFC), Green for Growth Fund (GGF) founded by European Investment Bank and KfW (GGF/Unicredit, 2017); Erste Bank, financing 26 small hydropower plants, two in protected areas. A list of available legal arrangements ensuring privileged status and subsidies to this group of investors-producers is available in the webpage of the Ministry of Mining and Energy, <https://www.mre.gov.rs/latinica/dokumenta-efikasnost-izvori.php#obn>; The most recent available report submitted to the Energy Community states that 62% of small hydropower plant producers are in the status of ‘privileged producer’ receiving a state subsidized price (Ministry of Mining and Energy, 2019)

7 Evaluation of the hydro energy potential (from 1987 and 1989) mapped 869 locations as possible sites for small hydropower plant construction. It did not take into consideration current water potential, other environmental factors nor social and cultural aspects (Poznatov, 2013). Nonetheless, it was used as the factual groundwork for project planning in 2013, and according to Poznatov, permits had been issued for construction in all the locations mapped and many unlisted. The detailed study conducted in 2018-2019 confirms that no monitoring of the aquatic ecosystem had been conducted in any of the 90 plants inspected in order to establish the biological minimum of water (Ristić, 2019).

8 The media attention directed towards this issue has been scarce due to a number of factors such as remoteness of the areas in question and the ‘political’ sensitivity of the issue (for connections between the current regime and ‘green energy’ entrepreneurs, see Vlaović 2018; Vukašinović 2019; for the regional context Tomović, 2018). The state of the freedom of the media in Serbia, although a highly relevant factor for this analysis, cannot be discussed in detail as it is beyond the scope of this paper. For some additional information see Martens 2019; RSF, 2020.

random and uncoordinated, increased in numbers and organizational ability once grouped around the informal civic movement ‘Defend the rivers of Stara planina’ (*Odbranimo reke Stare planine, ORSP*) in 2018 and 2019.

The paper aims to trace the continuities in the idea of development as progress encompassing ideologically and politically diverse regimes governing Serbia over the course of last three decades. Exploitation of resources - public, social, natural - is approached as a commonality with special focus on the emerging environmental considerations and the instrumentality of the ‘green growth’ paradigm to further exploitation in the national context.

The following sections will present on the abovementioned ‘transition’, be it labelled as ‘democratic’ or ‘green’, as a part of the same civilizing process. The process signifies the adaptation and the transformation of the state, the society, and the individual in relation to aspirational ideas of ‘development’ and ‘Europe’. Subsequently the pertinence of the conceptual frameworks of neo-, discursive, and symbolic colonialism, will be assessed, as well as self- colonizing condition in the particular case of Serbia.

The final section will discuss the popular river defense movement and modes of resistance employed to subvert and counteract the damage inflicted to the communities and the natural environment by development actors. It will also put into perspective actions of resistance in relation to representations of ‘Europe’, ‘Europe’ embodied by the foreign and domestic institutions behind the ‘green energy’ development schemes, and ‘Europe’ perceived as a value system.

### **Legacy of underdevelopment, legacy of progress**

The introductory part of this section necessarily includes some explanatory background on the socialist historical legacy of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as an element of decisive significance for understanding the context of the current state of exploitation of resources, public, social and natural, in Serbia. The project of socialist development, not unlike the capitalist one, dogmatically bound to a linear and progressivist development philosophy, focused to a great extent on modernization and industrialization. Between the drive to modernization, and the aspiration to present exemplary industrial competitiveness in relation to capitalism, socialist industries and infrastructure development produced an indisputable outcome of environmental damage (Hill, 1992). Nonetheless, it was the social ideals that were the ultimate focus of the socialist state project and



institution building: elimination of extreme disparities in material status, education and access to food, health and employment on the foundation of the non-competitive, cooperative economic and social frameworks (Cleaver 2010:264).

Yugoslav socialism, known for its unique economic model of self-management, was the most frequently reformed economic system among the socialist states (Uvalić 2018). Uvalić emphasizes that the economy of Yugoslavia was built on the postulate of “a socially planned regulation of production in accordance with the needs both of society as a whole and of each individual” (2018:3). Furthermore, development was understood as a balancing act of avoidance of regional disparities for the purpose of national unity and cohesion, leading to creation of mechanisms for equalization of growth between the republics (Uvalić 2018:24; also Kukić 2017). For the length of its existence, the Yugoslav economy covered an economic spectrum from central control and planning, state ownership of the means of production, to social planning and self-management, and finally decentralization and market-oriented reforms, initiating transition to market economy in the 1980-ies (Kukić, 2017; Uvalić, 2018). From late 60s on, the country was performing another balancing act: investing in a ‘privileged’ relationship with the European Economic Community while maintaining cooperation and exchange with members of the Non-aligned Movement.<sup>9</sup> Finally, by the end of the 80s the country had already adopted a number of transformative measures signaling a shift towards capitalism. At the time of the dissolution of the SFRY in 1991, the socialist economic practice and ideology had already been replaced by free market ideology in all successor countries with varying level of success (Uvalić 2018:33).

Nonetheless, immediately after the feat of the October 2000 ‘democratic’ revolution in Serbia, the new government’s mission of liberation of the society and the market was enunciated as a novel project. This time the overarching ideal rising over Yugoslavia’s ‘ashes’ and encompassing liberal values and a new vision of development was Europe. The ideological and highly idealized movement towards Europe has its practical manifestations: actions toward EU accession, undergirded by complete political, economic, legislative, legal and cultural transformation (Petrović 2014:3). The pillars of ‘democratization’, the deeply rooted urban elites, with connections to the European centers of power and drawing from European liberal traditions introduce a new discourse on development, consistently inducing an effect of a narrative rupture. Historical narrative ruptures, as constructed narratives of contemporaneity, “politically operative and enabling”, distance and

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<sup>9</sup> “From the early 1970s, the development strategy increasingly relied on foreign loans and external borrowing. As a result, Yugoslavia’s external debt increased from less than US\$ 2 billion in 1970 to US\$ 18 billion in 1980” (Uvalić 2018:23).

differentiate the past from the present, while proclaiming present outcomes resulting from a break with the previously dominant narrative as novel (Biccum, 2009:147).

As noted by Biccum, narrative ruptures are instituted by discursive elision or minimizing<sup>10</sup>. In the Serbian development discourse, two occurrences appear as inherent, firstly the erasure of socialist material and immaterial past in the form of the existing and uninterruptedly used structures (functioning institutions and public goods), accumulated wealth (inherited property and infrastructure) and spirit of solidarity and community (including the legacies of the Non-aligned Movement)<sup>11</sup>. Secondly, the conceptual frameworks of ‘development’, ‘progress’, ‘capitalism’ and ‘Europe’ all merge into a constitutive element of the aspirational new identity, identity-in- construction, acting as a marker of Europeanness, an inevitable step on the civilizational path. Disregarding the previous socialist period, spanning the life of three generations in existing socialism, the new order demands full transformation not solely of the institution of the state, but also individuals, as a reinvention of self.

## **Revolted departures and intimate conversions**

The reinvention of the society being contingent on personal transformation, presupposes an intimate conversion, demanding an admission of absolute inadequacies of socialism. In effect, it calls for a complete erasure of socialist historical legacy. This is apparent in the words of the first Serbian democratic prime minister, a philosopher and a revered figure, Zoran Đinđić, „I stand for urban, civilized and European society, and against dictatorship”<sup>12</sup>. The abbreviated binary contained in this statement positions both socialism and nationalism at the same end as ‘dictatorship’, while communicating a normative message. A complete break with the past, the rural or proletarian, the ‘uncivilised’ past of the Balkans arises as a measure necessary for survival, and a belated evolutionary step. Similarly, a new positioning needs to be envisaged, again removing Serbia from its previous place

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10 Biccum, in her analysis of the ‘return’ of the Empire and the accompanying ‘crisis of contemporaneity’, explains: “The narrative for the twentieth century is perpetually framed as *history-as-development* that is constituted by a narrative rupture which writes out or de-emphasizes the colonial moment” (Biccum, 2009:148). Biccum puts forward two ruptures at work – World War II and globalization, while Wilson examines the technique of narrative rupture in the case of 9/11 and the War on Terror (Wilson, 2012).

11 As Petrović notes (2008), it is the denial and retreat of socialist values that created the space for expansion of nationalism and consequences that followed. Post-socialism, post-nationalism and post-war liberal democratic revolutions come with the novel solution of the concept of multiculturalism and tolerance, placidly in denial of the living socialism’s ideals and existing practice of togetherness, brotherhood and unity.

12 Zoran Đinđić interview to *Le Monde*, 05.10.2001. Available at the Zoran Đinđić Virtual Museum.

among the Non-aligned, in the Balkans, or in the socialist 'East'. This positioning was presented as natural and inevitable, as in this quote by Đinđić "Just like the man who was kept under water for 50 years, in his wish to grasp air, oxygen, just like Serbia, nothing can get in the way of reaching that oxygen, and that is Europe, the family of democratic, modern, developed countries"<sup>13</sup>. Tanja Petrovic, drawing on Todorova, engages a concept of historical legacy as a useful analytical category:

„Unlike tradition, which is selective, a historical legacy is not a result of an active process of consciously choosing certain elements from the past... A historical legacy cannot be changed, but what we can do is either evoke it or conceal it, glorify or taboo it, depending on our present aspirations“ (Petrović 2008:4).

In the normative attitude of pillars of new democratization in Serbia, parallel to the position Petrović describes as the mindset of Europe, Yugoslav legacy is equated with socialism and socialism is "stigmatized and reduced to an oppressive political system" (2008:7). The erasure and 'distancing' act as catalysts for the dichotomy and the narrative rupture. The process of transformation and betterment demands serious alterations, it is challenging, painful and requires sacrifices. As expressed by Đinđić: "The surgeon operating you does not appear as sympathetic. You will like the doctor who convinces you that you are in a great condition, far better, that the surgery is not necessary and that you will get well by drinking teas."<sup>14</sup> This discursive practice of the first post-socialist regime rendered the people of the country 'other', as not belonging to the aspirational 'urban', 'civilized' or 'European', offering condemnation, exclusion and erasure where transformation does not appear to be feasible. These incapacities to comply with the newly established norm of 'Europeanness' were quickly placed within the same discursive realm as 'nationalism', 'chauvinism', 'primitivism', supporting the binary constructions of progressive Europe vs. primitive Serbia, liberal capitalism vs. irrational socialism, dark past vs. bright but contingent future. In case of Romania, Manuela Boatcă in her mapping of Orientalist discursive practices such as interiorization, exoticization, and racial othering presents the modes of employment of these practices in constructing national self-definitions, social and cultural policy, as well as particular productivity in profiling the region's peripheralization through culturalist explanations for Eastern Europe's low economic performance and political stability (Boatcă, 2006). The observation from the late 90s sums up the point of departure for this transformational thought:

The current, predominantly rightwing perception is of the Balkans as a contagious disease, an infectious sore in the soft underbelly of Europe, best left to fester in isolation. The opposing, mainly left-wing—but unconsciously neo-colonial—notion is of Balkan conflicts as revolting

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<sup>13</sup> Zoran Đinđić, Democratic party assembly, 04.10.2001. Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Zoran Đinđić, *Politika*, 25.10.2001. Ibid.

departures from the ideal of cosmopolitanism which could and should—to everyone’s benefit—be solved by mature and responsible powers wielding a big stick and a few small carrots” (Golsworthy, cited in Petrović, 2014).

The first part of this observation, although referring to the external perceptions<sup>15</sup> of the Balkans (‘contagious disease’, ‘infected sore’), is to an equal extent applicable to the previously offered domestic view of the Balkans predicament as a disease expressed through the painful-but- corrective surgery as cure metaphor. On the other hand, the notion of ‘unconsciously neo-colonial’, but redeemingly mature and responsible powers manipulating the necessary corrections to the Balkans aberration, requires more insight into the (un)consciousness of (neo)colonization.

In the light of the willing efforts invested in societal and individual transformation, Kiossev’s concept of self-colonizing (1995) appears to be the appropriate category to employ:

The concept of self-colonizing can be used for cultures having succumbed to the cultural power of Europe and the west without having been invaded and turned into colonies in actual fact. Historical circumstances transformed them into an extracolonial “periphery,” lateral viewers who have not been directly affected either by important colonial conflicts or by the techniques of colonial rule.

The emphasis in Kiossev’s understanding of the position of the self-colonized is placed on the social imagination, merging of the image of Europe as a guiding principle with the enthusiasm of the initial state building project. An additional distinguishing trait of the self-colonizing concept is the absence of ‘colonial realities’ such as military presence, political dominance, administrative rule, social engineering and economic exploitation (Kiossev, 1995).

Petrović, on the other hand, notes that ‘colonization as self-perception goes beyond intellectual debates in the Balkans and takes on more tangible forms’, such as the presence of the international entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and their role in formation of the legislation, territorial organization, creation of national institutions, political practices and validation of political actors. Regarding the discussion on the beneficial presence of a benign colonial regime, Petrović writes:

The idea that some kind of colonial administration in the Balkans is indispensable for maintaining peace and enabling the development of the entire European continent was frequently echoed in journal articles, essays, and pseudo-academic literature dating from the 1990s (Petrović, 2014:8).

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<sup>15</sup> And internalized, self-Orientalizing ones, as in case of the current president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić: “In 21<sup>st</sup> century... I want us to talk about our heroes, but to have no new ones. I want our heroes to be the ones exporting software... To walk in tune with the world. To work hard in the future like we waged war in the past.” In the same speech the president proclaimed that “Serbia is cured of [economic] cancer” (RTS, 2019).

In the case of Serbia and the Balkans, this can be observed in “discourses of aid and expertise, and discourses of administration inevitably recall postcolonial relations” (Petrović 2014:9). These discourses are supported by the paradigmatic othering of people of the Balkans as ‘children of communism’, ‘irrational and in need of urgent assistance, supervision, and education’ (Buden in Petrović 2014:10). With Orientalism and reductionist view of socialism as point of departure, several discursive functions are achieved, further degradation and erasure of socialism, repositioning of Balkans into the domain of the ‘Third world’ or periphery and the reaffirmation of the need for trusteeship by the responsible and the enlightened.

The contemporary “European Orientalism” also places the Balkan countries in the past and presents EU membership as their only possible future. In addition, the Balkans are traditionally perceived as an area inhabited by the peoples obsessed with history who build their identity on myths and are not capable of “facing the present” and “turning to the future”. ... On the other hand, in Europe’s perception of itself, the idea of progress is inherent to Europe; it is a space characterized by a linear flow of time, as contrasted with the non-European, cyclic perception of time and endless repetition. (Petrović 2008)

Linear and hierarchist understanding of development and necessity of ‘progress’ on Eurocentric terms defined the initial political, economic and social rationale for action in the first decade of the ‘Democratic’ rule. The subsequent ‘Progressive’ regime’s entry into power rested on the promise of anti-corruption, war against crime, and an economic ‘shift’. It espoused two courses of action as unavoidable: investment-oriented growth and enhancement of the EU integration processes. Consequently: “The money and the benefits will not arrive without Brussels... The choice is only ours, but our options are very limited” (Bajec in Kostić 2010). The rhetoric of the ‘Progressive’ regime places the previous, ‘Democratic’ regime’s achievements into the sphere of the corrupt and the criminal, while continuing the same course of operation: erasure of historical legacies of alternative economic practices, privatization beyond the minimal social protections existing in the previous period, extending into the domain of public goods and natural resources, such as the land and the water. Structural adjustment measures continue at the expense of the impoverished population, coinciding with procurement of loans increasing indebtedness, while the emphasis remains on ‘growth’ as the indicator of regime’s success (Marini, 2014). It is fitting to note the point made by Rist on the ideological function of growth, “making people believe that inequalities are decreasing, given that the cake is said to be growing bigger all the time and so its fairer distribution is not an issue” (2008:16).

The implicit or sometimes open declaration of dependency and subjugation to the

international and European institutions and governments acting as development ‘partners’ manifests itself in the highly publicized relationship of the ‘Progressive’ regime with the World Bank. The accounts of that interaction are communicated to the Serbian public as acts of submissiveness, encounters filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and striving to fulfil World Bank officials’ expectations<sup>16</sup>. The current regime, despite the promise of a radical turn repeats the same auto-racist patterns as the previous one, which would fit the self-colonizing matrix: the president declares his ‘fear of the Serbian mentality’ as it is the only obstacle to the EU accession, highlighting the ‘struggle’, ‘fighting for transformation’, ‘hard work’ and ‘pain’ to reach the level of the Union, reminiscent of the former regime’s surgery metaphor (Beta, 2014; Marini, 2014; Vučić, 2016). Furthermore, references to ‘protestant ethics’ and Max Weber’s writings as the source of formulaic knowledge necessary to cope with the ongoing transition<sup>17</sup>, ‘IKEA’ as a symbol of prosperity and example of good practice<sup>18</sup>, and Germany, Switzerland and Austria as the bright examples of self-made prosperity, are only some of the repetitive themes present in the ‘Progressive’ public discourse (Gligorijević, 2017). Can these framings be used to substantiate the proposal that Serbia had succumbed to the cultural power of Europe, without colonization ‘in actual fact’? According to Boatcă, status of candidate states characterized by legal and economic dependence on an external authority, “ideologically supported by means of a continued reconstruction of ‘modern’ identities in which an Orientalist imaginary plays a central part” results in quasi-colonial situation (Boatcă 2006:103). This is where the negotiations and the willing actions to comply with the accession conditions acknowledge the position of incomplete Europeanness or “lesser whiteness” (Boatcă 2006:103). The question remains whether Serbia’s predicament can be appropriately defined as metaphorical, symbolic, or discursive colonization.

## **(Un)expected outcomes**

Following the thread of discursive colonization in the Balkans, Petrović observes that the countries most frequently making use of mechanisms of colonial representation - tropes of development aid, assistance, expertise and guidance on

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16 This is captured in the statement by the president of Serbia declaring that World Bank director for Southeast Europe is ‘his boss’. Vučić: Tanjug, “Rama i ja imamo zajedničku šeficu” (Vučić: [Albanian prime minister] Rama and I have the same boss), Blic daily, Belgrade, 14.10.2016.

17 On Max Weber and the condition of Occidentalism see Manuela Boatcă, “Modernity, Citizenship and Occidental Epistemology in Max Weber and Beyond”, in: *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research*, 22.06.2017 <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/7005>

18 “There is no IKEA only there where there is no desire to think and work in a new, different way”, Vučić 2017. On wider meaning of IKEA as sign of progress see Erdei 2014.

the path to Europe - reap the greatest economic benefit from the Balkans region. She also proposes, drawing from the experience of Slovenia's accession, that EU membership can function as "basis for exclusion and inclusion" and "a repository of discursive patterns" enabling members to shape and produce colonial, Orientalist and racist discourse and 'otherness' (Petrović, 2008).

As to Europe as a whole, this colonization enables it to continue building and maintaining a self-satisfied image while shunning, or ascribing to those outside, everything that might possibly challenge such an image (Petrović 2013:123).

An important point made by Petrović in her analysis of the colonial context of EU integrations draws on Todorova's identification of distinctive traits of Balkanism in relation to Orientalism. In addition to the significant discursive overlap, Todorova observes the absence of 'elusiveness' of the 'Orient' in the discourse on Balkans, a notion of a dreamy realm enticing with the promise of wealth and freedom from 'civilization':

The Balkans, on the other hand, with their unimaginative concreteness, and almost total lack of wealth, induced a straightforward attitude, usually negative, but rarely nuanced." (Todorova, cited in Petrović 2014:6).

This specific Orientalizing practice is repeated in the official downplaying of the privatization of public resources and in silences surrounding large land- and resource acquisitions by foreign corporations. The repetitive notion of Serbia as static, nothing-to-offer country, shameful in its poverty and marked by resource scarcity, appears simultaneously with the 'transition' and 'transformation' tropes. The presence of foreign business entities, mostly aiming to benefit from low-cost labor and tax waiver measures enabled by the state, appears to be celebrated by the official media as generosity and beneficial steps leading towards greater development (Tanjug, 2018c). Similarly, the presence of foreign entities - significantly companies and banks from Germany, Austria, Italy, Norway - in the area of renewable energy sources, seems to enjoy state endorsement, support and often particular incentives for cooperation (eKapija, 2018; Janković, 2016; RTV, 2011; Spalović, 2010; Tanjug, 2014; VM/Tanjug, 2013). The tropes of 'expertise' and 'aid', as identified by Petrović, are strongly at work in this context, as the foreign contribution is appreciated, and experience used as a model and justification of action.<sup>19</sup> The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in

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<sup>19</sup> National association of small hydropower plants in their outreach uses the example of 'Europe' with its 24.000 small hydropower plants, Sweden (1900 plants), Norway (2250), Slovenia (350), Austria (3100) and Switzerland (1000) as self-justifying evidence (Popović, 2019b). "Ambassador emphasized the significance of Austrian investment in Serbia, in regard of the amount of investments and considering the rich experience and high level of expertise in the area of renewable energy resources as well as the environmental protection", *Austria ready to invest into small hydropower plants in Serbia* (Tanjug, 2018b). Also see *Quebec hydroelectric firm rides Balkan 'dam tsunami' in*

its Serbia strategy specifies the priority areas for guidance, leading to enhanced competitiveness, governance, regional integration, and 'green transition'. The strategy identifies all relevant development actors - EU, World Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, International Financial Corporation, European Investment Bank, and Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau - as involved in both policy design and in significant investment into energy sector (EBRD 2018:16). Similarly, national strategies, such as the Strategy for sustainable development, all place EU at the center as the source and instigator of development, or hierarchically at the top, as the ultimate precondition and the enabler of action, formulating an understanding of agency positioned entirely outside of the national context and fully contingent upon the needs and the directive as defined by EU (see National strategy for Sustainable Development, 2008).

A more informative analytical framework is found in the roles of the Energy Community and EU Directive on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources supplemented by the national strategies for 'green energy' imports and exports, as well as in the gaps in existing regulations enabling consumption of 'dirty' energy from external sources (EurActiv, 2012; RTS, 2011; Tanjug, 2018a). The concept of climate colonialism is relevant for interpretation of the relationships described. In this regard Doreen Martinez has proposed that a 'shift in terminology and conceptual significance from climate change to climate colonialism is a necessary tool of decoloniality', in order 'to unmask the limited situation of modern knowledge and the link to coloniality' (Martinez 2014:79).

This relocates northern (Western/European) theory, or theory which has only been accessible and created by credentialed and/or favored experts, to theory centered on the people, communities, and organizations developing, discussing, and negotiating theory (discussed in various southern theory works). (Martinez 2014:71)

The 'green transition' in Serbia and its implications for the communities affected is comparative to the reported abuses and unexpected outcomes of programs such as the *United Nations Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries Program* (REDD, subsequently REDD+). REDD was identified as upholding carbon fetishism and inflicting multiple losses on the indigenous populations, just as the 'green transition' offers no way of recourse to the affected communities in Serbia (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2018; Mousseau, 2019). In parallel to Martinez' observation of indigeneity as the force, the case of Balkans and its marginalized communities calls for a similar action for the right to be free of fear,

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*showcase of Canadian expertise*, Damon Van Der Linde, Financial Post, August 19, 2016.



“confronting the constant paradox of the visible- invisibleness in climate change policy development by identifying the policies/practices as forms of colonization and explicit/implicit challenges to sovereignty and survivance” (Martinez 2014:63).

## **Captured state, captured water**

*“Our river is not accustomed to slavery, what we have here is a river in captivity.” Danilo Stojanov, Rakita villager*

Water is one of the few remaining resources within the domain of public goods. The ‘green energy’ agenda created an incentive for the construction of small hydropower plants in some of the most pristine areas of Serbia. State institutions, both local and national, ensuing the EU Directive, administer and facilitate this work justifying the destruction of waters with the necessity to enact environmental preservation through exploitation of clean energy resources. The paradox of environmental destruction in the name of environmental protection enables an unobstructed dictate of the ‘investment’, “whether it is to please the capital or due to a feeling of powerlessness before it, is irrelevant” (Selaković, 2019). The small hydropower plants phenomenon exposes a shift in the paradigm of natural resource consumption and devastation of nature, where the rationale for exploitation is not grounded in modernity, industrialization, and economic development as such. The underlying themes are sustainable development and supposed entrepreneurial innovation<sup>20</sup>. Whether the circumstances of these processes are interpreted as self-colonization, neo- colonization, or the continuation of large-scale expansion of Western capitalist forms of commodification and exploitation, the captured state appears to play a valuable and inimitable role. In contrast to the power of capital, the phenomenon of state capture in this case needs to be seen in the light of the interplay between European and ‘international’ actors on one side and, on the other, clientelist national elites, ensuring Eurocentric and anthropocentric (self)colonization<sup>21</sup>.

The decolonial understanding of modernity reveals its double denial - exclusion of the ‘other’ and the concealment of the exclusion. Accordingly, the ongoing process

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20 Similarly, indigenous groups in Norway, Sweden and Finland report on the devastating effects of ‘green energy’ preoccupation of the governments, leading to construction of the small hydropower plants and massive wind power stations placed in the ancestral lands of the Sami people of the Northern Europe. The consequences include deforestation, altering of ecological balance and reduction in certain plant, bird and lichen species, affecting movement of the people and animals and livelihoods of the people (Sami Parliament 2015:14; Fjellheim 2019).

21 “The case of small hydropower plants has completely revealed the true nature of the power and the institutions of the captured state. Its sole function is to ensure more privileges for the individuals that had usurped it. And those [privileges] are to come from us. In this case through the electricity bill item that we all pay regularly” (Selaković 2018, 2019)

in Serbia appears to keep rendering the people of the country as ‘other’, imposing exclusion and erasure in case of non-compliance with the new Eurocentric and consumerist order (Vázquez 2012). This order leaves the disprivileged majority, separate from the elites and without the autonomous space needed for deliberation, in a state beyond dependency or marginality, a state of no consequence. The river defense movement, exemplified by the ORSP, emerges as the spontaneous space created by the disadvantaged populations, villagers, and the people of the wider affected regions. Such space is generated for articulation of their demands outside of the disciplinary formats and venues of the domestic official politics and organized civil society. Its rationale appears to be founded on the logic that puts aside the Eurocentric progressivist reasoning and considers the communal, cultural, and spiritual significance of waters on equal terms with the environmental concerns. The nationwide river defense movement originates in the resistance of the villagers and activists of the eastern Serbian municipalities of Pirot and Knjaževac, to the construction of the small hydropower plants. Rakita, a remote mountain village of that region, became the site of alignment and identification of non-violent and deeply political resistance external to elite politics and against regimes that commodified environmental devastation.<sup>22</sup> With the struggle of the villagers against the construction work becoming known to the general public - initially through word of mouth and eventually through social media - the movement gained support throughout the country, inspiring new forms of local resistance, and new protest groups emerging and joining in<sup>23</sup>. Currently a non-homogenous informal coalition comprising of villagers, farmers, rural community associations, local environmental groups, and activists from a wide range of professions, it is founded on the premiss of inclusivity and non-hierarchical volunteer leadership<sup>24</sup>.

The treatment of the communities living in the immediate vicinity of the small hydropower plants by the state, exhibits features of colonial governmentality. This includes: facilitation of the investment as a primary objective rather than ensuring compliance with the existing legal arrangements for environmental protection and community rights; absence of or feigning the consultative process guaranteed by

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22 The forms of peaceful resistance practiced by the groups include standing in front of bulldozers, collective crying, collective prayer and lighting candles, traditional meal preparation, poetry telling and the recent case of oath taking never to allow investors desecrate the water and the ancestral land. “Who is the new hero of the people, a haiduk who cries when bulldozers show up, fighting against the man who mortgaged the river?” (Savanović, 2018);

23 In addition to rural community groups, the list of supporters includes citizens against evictions movement, urban groups preventing privatization of public spaces, and other grassroots activist groups for environmental protection. The author has conducted research on the movement through participant observation in the period 2018-2020.

24 It is important to note that the river defense movement in Serbia draws inspiration and knowledge from the similar movements in the Balkans: women of Kruščica (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and their brave 500 day struggle (2017-2018), Albanian movement to save Vjosa river (2016-) and many others (Šeremet, 2018; EcoAlbania, 2019).

law; absence and prevention of organizing referenda legally available as a tool in such circumstances; the permissiveness of the state's judicial system for the legal processes to be instrumentalized as repercussions against the protestors to suppress further resistance. Ultimately, violence against the communities due to involvement of private security contractors, threats and intimidation by private investors, indicate that this is an uninhibited expansion of the neoliberal state at the expense of the life or death of the marginalized people (Georgievski, 2018a, 2018b). The abovementioned companies and investors engage in the practices of concealment, as expressed by one of the villagers after a violent village take-over by a private security company contracted by the investor: "They want us to disappear. Once the water is gone, we will be gone too. Once we are gone, the mountain will be at their disposal as a vacant space to mine and search for minerals and other resources."<sup>25</sup>

The chain of legal events incrementally unravels the paradox of the villagers' situation. An initial suspension of law takes place at the expense of communities and environment, to the benefit of investment, profit and 'green energy' infrastructure development, as well as to allow adherence to the European directives. *Ad hoc* legal provisions are produced with the dual purpose of maintaining the notion of the legal order of the sovereign state, as well as demonstrating some semblance of 'rule of law' to satisfy the requirements of the EU accession process. This legal manipulation occurs without harmonization within the legal system. The resulting situation is oversaturated by plethora of legal measures and means, repeatedly requiring interpretation and alteration. This puts the local population in the position of retreating to the defense of the original legal order, existing prior to the power plant construction. It occurs as a compromise, committed in the belief that 'rule of law', with all its apparent deficiencies, must guarantee minimum legal protections. Paradoxically, it is the same legal basis that is the source of the punitive and disciplinary legal frameworks used against the people for their resistance. There is no legally sanctioned alteration to the investor's activities, only repeated actions favoring the investor and the project. This condition is resolved with silence on behalf of the responsible institutions. The suspension of 'rule of law' thus takes place in the silences<sup>26</sup>.

In his study of the law as enabler of the colonial power and its role in consolidation of the colonial state, Hussain shows how the colonial legal custom develops as the "constructed product of colonial knowledge and of specific historical transactions

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<sup>25</sup> Desimir Desko Stojanov in a video published online by the ORSP.

<sup>26</sup> At a protest gathering in Belgrade in 2018, Desimir Desko Stojanov, one of the village leaders of the river defense movement stated: "It is in Rakita that the rule of law has been suspended".

between colonizers and local elites” (Hussain 2003:5). These generative processes are taking place outside of the sphere of indigenous law. Additionally, even the most arbitrary acts seeming to abrogate the rule of law serve the stability of the colonial regime (Hussain 2003:5). The colonial legal domain is characterized by fragmentation and divisions into “special exemptions and statuses”, “classes of juridical subjects” and different categories of law and jurisdiction (Hussain, 2003:9). Nonetheless, the colonial legal system in all its intricacy has a distinct function:

Government by rules became the basis for the conceptualization of the “moral legitimacy” of colonial rule.... Legality became the preeminent signifier of state legitimacy and of “civilization” (Hussain 2003:4).

An experience of grassroots social agency “criminalized by various means, including ‘the rule of law’” shared by Martínez Salazar shows the elasticity of the law in protecting the permanency of coloniality of law (Martínez Salazar, 2012:55):

“Bureaucracies of death are able to make terror their central element of governance because the planners and executioners of this terror act with total or near-total levels of impunity, either by bending the rule of law, or by creating other rules of law that abandon those who have been conceived of as politically and racially undesirable, and as economically expendable. ...To continue to affirm that “exceptional horrors” are the product of the suspension of the rule of law is to believe that the rule of law is intrinsically just” (Martínez Salazar, 2012:146).

The liberal rhetoric of the ‘Progressive’ regime complemented with an exclusionary logic of rupture results in normalization of the inconsequentiality of people’s lives. Practices of obscuring the rule of law and its arbitrary interpretation, combined with exclusion of the marginalized people from its protections, evoke the colonial exercise of power outside the law. As all is permitted in the service of ‘civilization’, consistency in application or exceptions to the rule of law in the colonial context become redundant and out of place (Mbembe, 2003:23-24). One villager of Rakita, when asked about the source of violence, put it in these terms: “Private security commits violence, the police intimidates” (Zorica Stojanov in Vojtehovski 2018).

Rejection of the capitalist model of development imposed by the state and state supported actors of enhanced development is implicit. No programmatic activity or strategy of the movement had been produced or elaborated on that would make an attempt at systematic interrogation of the official narrative of ‘progress’. Individual members - local movement representatives, village leaders and activists - take a critical stance on capitalism (“One cannot take what is nobody’s and everybody’s”, Desimir Desko Stojanov in Vojtehovski 2018). While calling on the people in a rare media interview, to step in and undo the work of the investors, disassembling the

small hydropower plant constructions and cleaning the rivers, a Rakita village activist made a reference to the socialist past and voluntary workforce actions (*omladinske radne akcije*)<sup>27</sup>(Vojtehovski 2018). Attitude expressed towards the state indicates withdrawal from the project of neoliberal state formation: “We all appeal to the state, we all refer to the law. But the state had consciously broken its own laws. We will put them back into force on state’s behalf.” (Vojtehovski 2018). These are signs that the river defense movement is rejecting the opportunity to contribute to the dissolution of the social state or to reassert the destruction of the socialist state by providing any form of implicit or explicit endorsement of the new exploitative mode of state building or development. The movement builds on the actual historical memory of socialism and possibility of ‘other’ ways, based on social, cultural, and spiritual practices preceding, coinciding and surviving any of the remembered state orders, shedding the idealized image of the socialist past<sup>28</sup>.

At the time of the writing of this paper, river defense movement was continuing its activities as an informal, volunteer-based movement, rejecting attempts at formalizing its status and professionalizing its operations. However, some potential threats that could lead to disruption, derailment or fragmentation of the movement can be identified. The global trend in increased proliferation of NGOs from the nineties onward, similarly affected Serbia. Professional civil society organizations had been an effective tool in agenda setting and the mobilization of the liberal-democratic middle class (Vetta, 2012). They played an important role in vetting the issues for the public agenda and facilitating exclusion/inclusion of various segments of Serbian society. This was also achieved by assigning fixed positions of ‘target groups’ and ‘beneficiaries’ on one side, while reserving the roles of ‘educators’, ‘trainers’ and ‘facilitators’ for pro-European educated, urban middle-class NGO representatives on the other. In recent years, the number of environmental NGOs, following donor trends and prioritizing ‘green transition’ has grown to 5,800<sup>29</sup>. Selaković (2018) explains that despite good intentions, the momentum and the energy of NGOs are lost in the project cycle of awareness raising, training, visibility actions and project reporting. In the most recent phase of the river defense, with the visibility of the issue relatively increased and some successful outcomes, the environmental NGOs, and quasi-political leftist organizations have more frequently followed the trend to associate their own work with the movement

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27 Voluntary work provided by the students and the workers in Socialist Yugoslavia that built the residential and traffic infrastructure of the country.

28 The shaming designation ‘Yugonostalgia’ is coined for the purposes of disciplining the memory of the socialist era by declaring it ridiculously idealistic, irrational, and sentimental.

29 2018 edition of the *Database of ecological NGOs in the Republic of Serbia*, available at <http://www.epodzaci.org>. It is a significant increase as the Regional Environmental Center in their 2006 *Registry of environmental protection NGOs of Serbia* lists 114 organizations ([http://documents.rec.org/publications/serbian\\_ngo.pdf](http://documents.rec.org/publications/serbian_ngo.pdf)).

(Gucunski, 2019; Levi samit Srbije, 2019; Vejnović, 2019). The movement however managed to avoid cooptation and ‘NGOization’. The river defense activists have consistently upheld their vision of having a non-exclusive movement, while not agreeing to or complying with any political party or NGO agendas.

A pattern in the media treatment reveals a paternalistic occurrence in relation to the assignment of a specific, hierarchic status between the movement and the NGOs. Media statements by NGO spokespersons are used for the purposes of verification of movement members’ claims, thus undermining the authority and knowledge base of the movement. Furthermore, they are engaged to ‘correct’ the (dis)course towards institutionalist solutions (Kljajić, 2019a; Popović, 2019a, 2019b). A network of European NGOs conducted the useful and informative mapping of the hydropower plants’ construction in the Balkan region and financial institutions supporting it, including campaigning to raise awareness about the damage done to nature reserves. However, their campaigning reveals the Eurocentric focus, as the emphasis lies on the idea of the ‘last pristine rivers of Europe’ and the need for the enlightened European consciousness to save them, as can be seen in the close reading of the quote below (Bankwatch, 2015; Gallop, 2018; Schwarz, 2015).

If one thinks about the Balkans, vacation at the Mediterranean Sea or past wars come to mind – but certainly no stunning rivers. Indeed, Europe’s Blue Heart beats on the Balkan peninsula: this is where one can still find the wildest and most beautiful rivers of the continent. And hardly anyone knows about it. (RiverWatch, 2019)

The presentation is for European eyes only, as it is addressing and evoking the images known to or ‘coming to mind’ of a European. While both exoticizing tropes of seaside pleasures and dark violent past are summoned, the colonial imagery of ‘discovery’ of the ‘wild beauty’ is introduced<sup>30</sup>. Clearly, as more than 50 million people living in the Balkans in all probability would have noticed the rivers, but they are ‘hardly anyone’. The subtle emphasis on wilderness in the second sentence distracts from one important detail: it is purportedly *Europe’s* blue heart that beats in the Balkans (emphasis added). Together with this claim of ownership, an even more subtle, but nonetheless colonial trope of extinction arises in the delicate presence of the word ‘still’. It imposes the notion of the imminent (self)destruction unless the enlightened and benevolent hand comes to rescue. Elsewhere on the campaign website involvement of ‘Western businesses and loans’ in the project of destruction is mentioned, while declaring the intention of the two European organizations to ‘save this *European* heritage from destruction’ (emphasis added).

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30 It is important to keep in mind Enrique Dussel’s interpretation of ‘discovery’ as ‘concealment’ (Dussel, 2000).

As ‘local partners’ are mentioned but invisibilized<sup>31</sup>, the readers can be assured that the Eurocentric equilibrium will not be disturbed, as the ultimate agency - for the correction as much as for the transgression - is placed into European hands.

The enduring self-colonizing ideal that Europe holds for the Balkans remains one of the most substantial challenges to be faced by the river defense movement. Communications within the movement sometimes reveal that European involvement in the ‘theft of rivers’ is understood by some activists as an aberration, accidental straying from the intended course. The myths of democratic, rule-of-law abiding, strict-but-just, human-centered Europe, as promoted by the Serbian state, remain deeply rooted in the imaginary of some of the people. This is often expressed through attempts to address European institutions or business entities in the hope that these could initiate a change for good. On the other hand, Europe is also seen as ‘declaratively being on our side, while keeping its eyes closed to every atrocity, because [Europe] is behind all this’ (Jovanović in Vojtehovski 2018). However, ironically, various European countries have been praised and set as examples of good practice in environmental protection and preservation, while their financial or expert contribution to the harmful exploitation of rivers in Serbia is not widely known. While Europe is positioned as the authority on knowledge and values, paradoxically, solutions are being sought from the source behind the river theft predicament.

## **Conclusion**

The paper provides an overview of the ideological frameworks and self-colonizing processes currently at work in the Balkans, and Serbia in particular, while interrogating the self-inflicted aspects of the ongoing colonization. These are inseparable parts of progress which, put into practice, causes lasting and possibly irreversible damage to the natural environment, rural communities and the existing life infrastructure. Eurocentric mechanisms of narrative control and perpetual disciplining through employment of self-Orientalizing tropes support the role of the state as the channel of development. The reductive repetitions of ‘Balkanism’ and its modes of obscuring and elision contribute to marginalization and discounting of the people, making their suffering and the natural devastation the inevitable cost of development.

The nexus between the captured state, foreign investment incentive and ‘green’

31 The contact page, though, presents the list of organizations involved: the two Austrian coordinating entities as ‘International team’ and the NGOs from various countries in the Balkans as ‘local partners’. On the development language and racialization embedded into terms such as ‘cooperation’, ‘partnership’, ‘local’ and ‘international’ see Crewe 1998.

normative framework breeds a form of exploitation where it is not the resource use that generates the wealth. It is the resource devastation for the purposes of demonstrating adherence to the green energy agenda that does so. Applying the decolonial lens on the 'green transition' enables a better understanding of the situating of Serbia in relation to Europe. With contributions of European and other international development partners, the commodification of natural resources is taken further.

The river defense movement arises as a spontaneous resistance of the affected populations otherwise unable to voice their fears for survival or exhaustion with the perpetual dispossession and disenfranchisement in a societal, economic and legal vacuum. The movement engages epistemologies of custodianship and conviviality, challenging the resilience of the progress paradigm and the development project. However, it is not negating the need for development as such, and it is yet to arrive at a longer-term plan and vision. The struggle to save the rivers has served as a source of solidarity and mutual support between various movements. Regardless of the future outcomes of the movement, the reemergence of solidarity as a value and the potential of collective action outside of the spheres of economic interest, have opened a space for living solutions coming out of experience and aspiration.

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