

Protecting the Last Wild River in Europe from Hydropower Development in Albania: An Environmental Movement Strategy in a Flawed Democracy

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ABSTRACT In 2014, as anti-hydropower plant protests in Albania intensified, an initiative to protect rivers in the Balkans known as “Save the Blue Heart of Europe” launched the Vjosa River Campaign in Albania to save what is known as the “Last Wild River in Europe.” The Campaign’s main goals consisted of preventing the construction of hydropower plants and turning the Vjosa into Europe’s first “Wild River National Park,” a status that would severely limit future development. But, this Campaign would not be easy. Albania is a highly centralized, fragile democracy with a long history of political oppression and economic struggle whose top-down government is still generally inaccessible to public interest groups or influence. The country relies entirely on hydropower for its electricity production, leading to high uncertainties in energy security, especially in face of increasing periods of drought. The Campaign organizers and activists would have to strategize carefully and creatively to navigate the Albanian political landscape to reach its goals. What did they do? What worked or didn’t work along the way? Finally, would hydropower, considered a renewable energy source with low carbon emissions, enhance the country’s energy security? Or, would hydropower development on the Vjosa just not be worth it as a national and cultural treasure is destroyed alongside local livelihoods related to fisheries, agriculture, and tourism? Upon reading this case study, readers will learn about how environmental campaign organizers and activists mobilize in the face of the complexities of hydropower development in Albania, a struggling democracy. **KEYWORDS** hydropower, environmental campaign, Albania, anti-dam protest, strategic interaction

INTRODUCTION

The Vjosa River flows over 270 km from the Aoos River in Greece into Albania and the Adriatic Sea. Along the way, more water drains into the river from a 4,365 km² area across the Albanian landscape [1]. Unlike the majority of European rivers where the flow is intensely managed, the Vjosa flows mostly unhindered by such interventions, earning it the title, the “Last Wild River in Europe” [2–8]. It is home to 1175 species of which 39 are considered threatened according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) [2]. Some species populations, like the European Eel, are declining throughout Albania mainly due to hydropower plants (HPPs) [2, 7].

The Vjosa is not only an ecological and scientific wonder. It is a national tourist treasure and a culturally and nationally symbolic artifact. It supports local villages with fertile land for agricultural activities, local fishers, recreational tourism, and has emotional value based on

childhood memories and the country’s cultural heritage. Many girls today are named after the Vjosa, representing the natural beauty of the river.

It is also a potential site for expansive hydropower development to harness the river’s flow in order to turn it into much-needed electricity. For the Albanian Government and various private companies and investors, the Vjosa’s hydropower potential can bring a secure supply of energy and jobs (even if short-term, as some hydropower opponents claim) [9]. Out of the 40 government-planned HPPs within the Vjosa water drainage area, only seven small-scale HPPs have been built, thus far leaving the river system largely intact [10]. However, in 2013 when the Albanian government considered granting the permission to construct over 30 HPPs, protests broke out [10], the most contentious being related to the Kalivac proposal and another in the Langarica, a tributary and an officially designated nature reserve [11, 12].

In 2014, the environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) “Riverwatch” from Austria and “Euronatur” from Germany launched the initiative “Save the Blue Heart of Europe” to protect rivers in the Balkans from further exploitation and to preserve them as a European heritage [13]. As protests against HPPs development on the Vjosa further intensified, they launched the Vjosa River Campaign (VRC), together with EcoAlbania (Albania), to save the “Last Wild River in Europe.” The Campaign’s main goals consisted of preventing the construction of HPPs and turning the Vjosa into Europe’s first “Wild River National Park,” a status that would severely limit future development. But, this campaign would not be easy. The VRC organizers and activists would have to strategize carefully and creatively to navigate the Albanian political and energy landscape to reach its goals.

THE ALBANIAN POLITICAL AND ENERGY LANDSCAPE

Albania is located in Southeastern Europe in the Balkan Peninsula (figure 1). It is a struggling, but improving, democracy (“flawed democracy”) often embroiled in heavy party politics. Despite its long history of political oppression, it is now seeking to become a member state of the European Union (EU) and must meet certain requirements before being able to move forward. Albania relies almost entirely on hydropower for its electricity [14, 15]. Historically, per capita electricity consumption has been relatively low at 2.4 MWh per year in 2020 (OECD Europe: 5.7 MWh per capita in 2020), but the country has also undergone significant development in electricity availability during the last two decades as per capita consumption rose by 60% due to improved access [16]. Albania’s reliance on hydropower and its vulnerability to climate change increase the risks of energy insecurity alongside rising protests and conflicts over hydropower development.

Under the highly centralized leadership of prime minister Edi Rama since 2013, Albania recently moved up in rankings from a “hybrid regime” to a “flawed democracy” in the Economist Intelligence Units’ Democracy Index. This index ranks a political system in one of four categories, “full democracy (8-10 points),” “flawed democracy (6-8 points),” “hybrid regime (4-6 points),” or “authoritarian regime (0-4 points),” based on, for example, “electoral process and pluralism,” “functioning of government,” and “political participation.” Albania’s upgrade (6.08 points) is due to several factors, including increasing

public support for democracy and a series of electoral reforms to bring Albanian electoral law in line with EU standards as it prepares for the start of accession talks. However, it remains unclear whether these reforms will lead to more free and fair elections [17].

Despite gaining candidacy status for joining the EU (“EU accession”) in 2014, however, Albania continues to struggle with compliance with meeting the EU environmental requirements (“environmental EU acquis”) and others. In order to advance past candidacy status, for example, Albania will need to strengthen its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) protocols and other institutional mechanisms related to curtailing corruption and enhancing democratic processes [18–20]. EIA in Albania, for example, is plagued by bribery, collusion, undue influence, conflicts of interests, and a lack of transparency raising questions about the role of EIA expert consultants and the lack of crucial technical data [21].

There are approximately 290 HPPs in Albania and plans for 410 more in addition to the 24 new ones currently under construction, resulting in a total sum of 724 approved HPPs [22]. Since 2015, small capacity HPPs (below 2 MW) do not require a competitive concession procedure or public procurement. As of 2019, 223 HPPs were approved outside of the concession system [23, 24]. Despite the diminished carbon emissions associated with hydropower, climate change impacts (e.g., less precipitation and more prolonged droughts) are expected to increase fluctuations in hydro energy production [15, 25]. An estimated 15% to 20% decline in annual HPP generated electricity is anticipated by 2050 [26]. Even historic observations show the immense fluctuation in yearly power generation due to the sole reliance of water availability (2016: 7136 GWh; 2017: 4525 GWh; 2018: 8552 GWh; 2019: 5206 GWh) [15]. When it comes to hydropower, Southeast European states attempt a delicate balance between the global flow of capital (e.g., multinational corporations, World Bank Group, and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development), “selling their countries down the river” [27, p. 88], increasingly networked environmental protests and, in the case of Albania, becoming a member state of the EU.

An assessment study of 18 hydropower conflicts in Albania between the years 2012–2016 revealed that 34 people were detained and several casualties (mostly work-related) and one attempted murder occurred [28]. The study revealed the vulnerability of livelihoods linked to

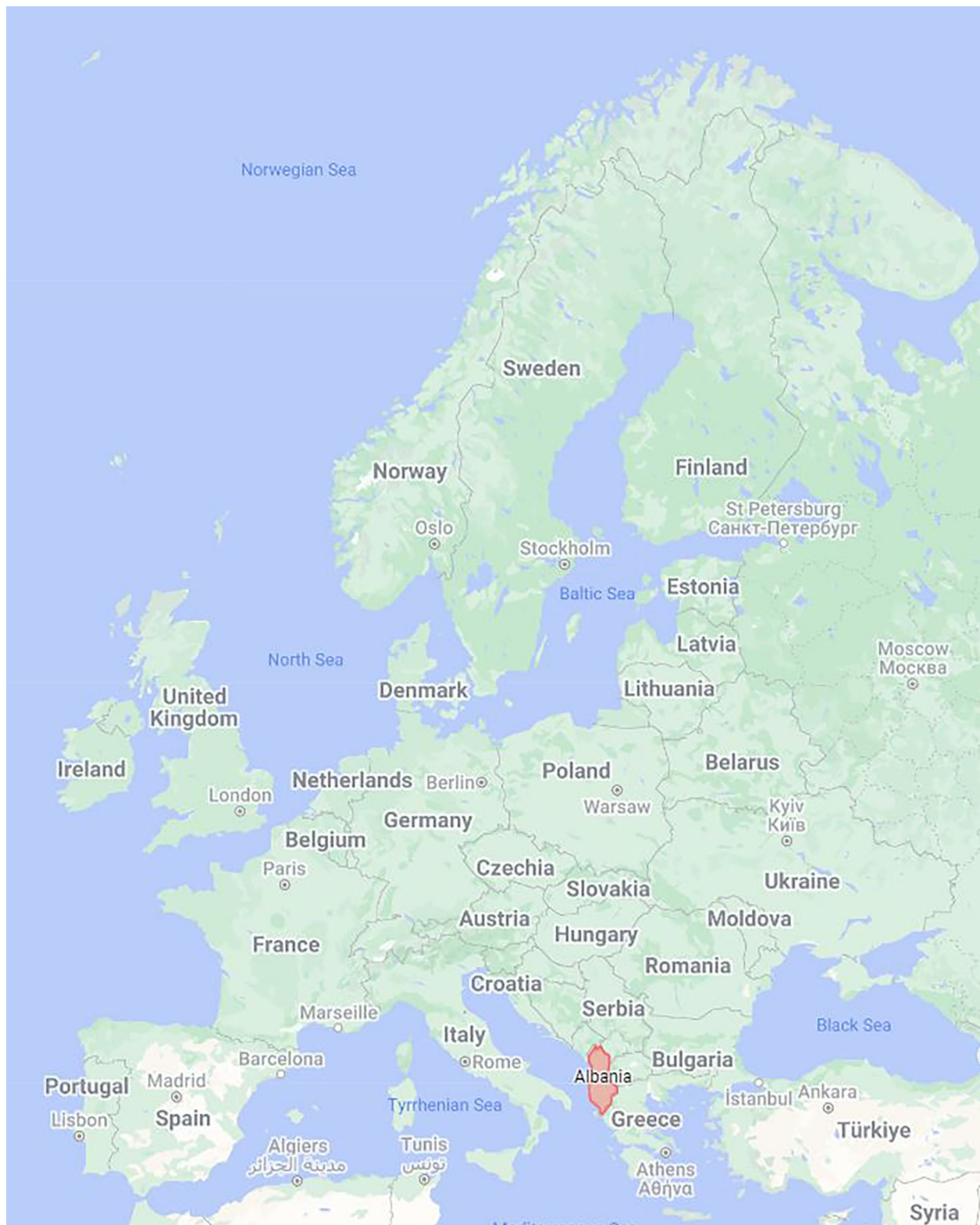


FIGURE 1. Location of Albania within Europe.

water resources, water sharing rights and irrigation, the lack of public consultation or participation, and fears associated with the loss of landscape and biodiversity,

deforestation, reduced hydrological connectivity, surface water pollution, food insecurity, and flooding [28, 29]. In many cases, locals in Albania are unaware of hydropower

development plans until construction has already started [29]. Other research identified flaws in following standard environmental permitting procedures for small HPPs in protected areas [25]. Hydropower development in the Shebenik-Jabllanicë National Park, for example, is not permitted due to its IUCN—Category II status, but environmental permitting criteria for preexisting HPPs were disregarded [25] leaving the riverbed dry¹ and causing water shortages for the entire park and for local farmers' crops and livestock [25].

Corruption is assumed when it comes to hydropower development in Albania [9] and has been observed by local witnesses to various projects [30, 31]. Interviewees in Widing's research [32] asserted that there were physical threats and water cutoffs by international companies to get locals to relocate when it came to hydropower development on the Vjosa. Further, companies have engaged in "land colonialization" through, for example, unauthorized fencing and "divide and conquer" strategies (e.g., hiring village elders as private security guards for development sites) [29, p. 46]. In a case study of small-scale hydropower development in Bosnia and Herzegovina, corruption was particularly indicated at the planning phase (i.e., concessions trading between local investors and international corporations, bribes to navigate administrative complexity) [30]. Hence, HPP development can be lucrative even without completion.

Despite being considered more sustainable based on its renewability, hydropower development, like fossil fuels extraction, is conflict-intense [33]. To denote the similarly invasive processes between the two, the term "extravism of renewables" has been applied to capture the dynamics of hydropower development [34]. Concerns for livelihoods, landscapes, and local and democratic values come to fore in hydropower protests, especially when public consultation, benefit-sharing mechanisms, and social safeguards are lacking [35, 36]. But, does protesting work in weak democratic states that are financially and globally incentivized to develop hydropower?

There is significant research on mobilization strategies across such water management conflicts [34] and social movements. We know, for example, that governmental transparency and influential access can be limited when it comes to highly centralized regimes [37] or can look good on paper but in practice involve quick and short

1. Environmental permits require that small HPPs retain at least 30% of the water in the riverbed.

deadlines, avoidances of face-to face meetings or specific inquiries, and a lack of access to or availability of information [38]. We also know that social movements and campaigns are strengthened by government support and access and political alliances overall [35, 39–41]; applying multiple and diverse tactics [35, p. 2, 41]; making strategic choices [42] and being sensitive to media coverage. Legal strategies (e.g., lawsuits) and challenges to EIAs are also comparatively effective when combined as part of an overall environmental mobilization strategy [43].

International links, while not always forged, can also strengthen civic impact, particularly in the post-socialist region [44]. Transnational approaches, for example, can assert pressure on the state through international and local forces ("two-level game") [45] or by drawing on the strengths and influence of international political forums ("boomerang") [46]. Transnational initiatives, however, require a balancing act of sorts across local translation of meanings, international professional protocols and politicization, and civic authenticity [38]. Social movements can, furthermore, impact state and international politics through "framing, symbolic events, the enrolment of powerful actors, and naming and shaming" in addition to drawing on expert networks [46, p. 379].²

UNDERSTANDING THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE VJOSA RIVER

So far we have summarily introduced the context of our case study. In order to help investigate further how the VRC mobilized and navigated the Albanian political and energy landscape, we first see what previous research says about studying social movements and what helps or prevents social movements from achieving their goals. Based on other research, for example, we know that states must have a certain degree of receptivity to a social movement's demands in order for the movement to be able to reach its goals. But, what do you do if the government is not so open or accessible as in the case of Albania? Can a social movement still effect change? And if so, how?

Understanding social movements³ and how they effect change has been a long theoretical debate. Resource

2. For more on framing, see [47].

3. Based on the definition of social movements by Tarrow, Christiansen, Zirakzadeh, and Kriesi [32, 48–50], we define environmental movement for the purposes of this case study as a group of people who follow a common purpose for the benefit of the environment and try to make a lasting impact by challenging authorities and elites through collective action [51].

mobilization theory, for example, indicates that the ability of social movements to effectuate change is structured by their ability to mobilize resources [52, 53]. Political process theory or specifically political opportunity [39, 54–58] emphasizes the political environments in which social movements act including the degrees of state openness and repression and the stability (or lack) of elite alliances and engagement [39]. A closed political structure (e.g., oppressive regime), for example, inhibits social mobilization and their ability to achieve their goals. Political process theory or political opportunity structure, however, has been critiqued for not clarifying: (1) what’s included and what’s not included in the political structure (e.g., states or nations vs. political actors and influential elites), (2) the persistent versus dynamic aspects of political structures and mobilizations; and (3) the role of agency and the perspectives of movement actors and their stated goals [37, 59]. Can you study social movements comprised of campaigns and protests, for example, in a way that captures their dynamics and all that comes into play across actors and their roles, political scales and forums, media coverage, and so on? And, how do these aspects interact and impact each other?

If you wanted to know about the VRC and its ability to mobilize and achieve its goals, what would you focus on and why? For example, if you engage the resource mobilization theory, you might look at how the VRC access resources. If you engage political process theory, you might study the state and its orientation vis-à-vis civil society. But, what if you’re not sure what helps or hinders the movement, and want to identify and explore any relevant or significant issues with limits on your research timeline?

For our study, we drew on the loose notion of “strategic interaction,” “players” and “arenas” so that we could capture the complexity and the dynamic and mutually transformative aspects involved in the VRC [60]. Players consisted of “those who engage in strategic action with some goal in mind” [61, p. 10]. Arenas involve the “physical settings—true structures in the nonmetaphorical sense—with rules and expectations of action in which decisions can be made (or avoided) with something at stake” [60, p. 11]. We also considered the historical, cultural patterns and processes as you can see in our descriptions of the processes surrounding the HPP developments [62].

To study the players and arenas and their interactions, we relied on interview data to help us figure out what’s

important from the perspective of the campaigners and national and local government officials. We also conducted document analyses involving scientific research (e.g., academic publications), official reports, environmental nongovernmental organization information (e.g., websites), and media coverage. The first author of this manuscript conducted interviews with four VRC activists, two representatives from municipalities in the Vjosa Valley, one member of the Albanian Parliament, and a representative of the Albanian National Agency of Protected Areas between April 2021 and June 2021. One of our intentions was to provide insights into the politics of hydropower resistance in Albania that may also have implications for the region as a whole as environmental movements increasingly build networks across Southeast Europe to resist hydropower developments (as well as various extractive ventures). In this next section, we share our findings and analytical insights about the VRC based on the interactive dynamics of the players and arenas involved in the efforts to try and save the “Last Wild River of Europe.”

THE VRC’S MAIN GOALS

The VRC focused predominantly on preventing the construction of two HPPs—the Kalivac and the Pocem projects [25, 63] and turning the Vjosa into a national park. The Kalivac HPP development started back in 1997 when the Albanian government granted a concession for the proposed construction to the Italian “Becchetti Energy Group.” However, it experienced multiple delays due to changes and conflicts regarding the concession agreements and construction developments.⁴ The Kalivac HPP construction eventually started in 2007 when the Deutsche Bank bought 45% of the project shares, but only 30% of the construction was completed. In May 2017, the Albanian Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy cancelled the concession contract with the Becchetti Energy Group, and gave it instead to Ayen ALB—a joint venture between an Albanian company, Fusha sh. P.k. and a Turkish company called, Ayen Energji. The newly licensed Kalivac HPP, with an anticipated 111 MW capacity, would involve a 47 m high and 500 m wide dam with a 1700 ha reservoir [10, 28, 63]. As a comparison, the overall installed hydropower capacity of Albania accounts for approximately 2400 MW [64].

4. Including a court case against the Becchetti Group for contract infringement.

The Pocem HPP was concessioned to a joint venture between two Turkish companies: Ayen Enerjji and Cinar San. The plant would have 102 MW capacity. The dam would be 50 m high and 200 m wide and a 2400 ha reservoir that would cover 2000 ha of agricultural land within the Albanian municipalities of Selenica and Mallakstra [28, 63]. Three main contentions are asserted on the Save the Blue Heart of Europe, VRC's website: (1) lack of public hearings involving the affected communities and the municipal governments of Selenica and Mallakstra; (2) the EIA submitted to the Albanian National Agency of Environment in 2015 was not made publicly available before the concession for the HPP was granted; and (3) the scientific basis for the EIA approval was insufficient [65].

An important VRC goal was to achieve national park status for the Vjosa area based on IUCN Category II criteria that would potentially prevent further developments, especially HPPs. An area in this IUCN protection category aims to protect large natural areas and large-scale ecological processes and to include visitor education and recreation as an essential part of national park management [66]. The national park label is an increasingly recognized brand, attracting international tourists with the potential of generating income for the management of protected areas and the neighboring communities [67]. The idea had political salience but, in practice, it was complicated due to preexisting and potential partnerships between the Albanian government and various private companies, investors and financial institutions, and their value in forging strategic relationships.

Private-public partnerships allow Albania to attract foreign investments, improve energy security, and assert an influential role in the regional energy market [68, 69], especially with support from institutions like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank's International Finance Corporation [70]. The proposed Kalivac and Pocem HPPs were both granted to the Turkish investor group "Ayen Enerjji" in the absence of sufficient public tendering, indicating Albanian intentions to strengthen relations with Turkey which had proved to be a reliable partner for Albania in the past. Contractual obligations toward private companies, however, can also impede the scope of governmental action [50]. An existing contract with the Shell Company signed in 2018, for example, granted oil exploration in the Vjosa catchment [71] which could prevent the

government from declaring a Vjosa National Park. Also, terminating some of the previous Albanian government's concessions for eight smaller HPPs in the Vjosa Valley could lead to costly legal entanglements for the current administration.

After repeated initial claims of support for establishing a Vjosa National Park, prime minister Rama corrected his original claim and stated that classifying the Vjosa Valley as a national park would be "a bit too much" [72] as it could prevent agriculture, for example. The prime minister opted instead for establishing a "Nature Park" (IUCN Category IV or V) and, therefore, not protected against industrial development projects [66, 72]. On December 28th 2020, the National Council of the Territory (KTT), chaired by Albanian prime minister Rama, approved the boundaries of the protected area. Maps of the designated area, published by ExitNews, indicate that the spots where the Kalivac and Pocem HPPs were planned were left out of the protected area [73, 74]. Prime minister Rama, however, repeatedly stressed that no HPPs will be built on the Vjosa but that the designation of a National Park would be harmful to the local economy [74, 75].

CAMPAIGNING FOR THE VJOSA RIVER IN A FLAWED DEMOCRACY

The VRC strategy was multipronged and transnational involving: (1) the assertion of political alliances across local, national, and international scales in the absence of being able to access the prime minister's office; (2) engaging international forums through official complaint procedures; (3) taking legal action; (4) articulating a scientific basis for the ecological status and potential HPP impacts on the Vjosa; and (5) media outreach involving celebrities and the private outdoor gear company, Patagonia. While these efforts together comprise an important overall strategy, some of the actions proved to be especially important in helping the VRC move toward achieving its goals.

In these next sections we explore each part of the strategy, providing a basis for assessing their efficacy.

Political Walls and Alliances

Albania is highly centralized⁵ and state ministries and agencies are seen by campaign activists and select political actors more as executors of the prime minister Rama's

5. Decentralization with increased autonomy of local government is only in the beginning stages of implementation [76, 77].

political will rather than having their own respective authority. One activist recalls that in the beginning of the VRC when he could meet personally with the former Minister of Energy and Infrastructure, the minister would end the meetings this way, “*You might be right, but the Prime Minister has decided.*” Likewise, another campaign activist observed that although specific ministries are responsible for HPP development, the hierarchy stands, “*there are the ministries, there are the ministers—but above them is Edi Rama.*” The inability of governmental representatives to enter into meaningful dialogue with activists was considered one of the VRC’s biggest recurring challenges. As one of the campaign activists reflects on this dynamic:

I see that as one of the great difficulties that we simply did not manage to enter into this dialogue [with government officials at the national scale]. And we could take a critical look at what part we played in this, or at what point it was no longer possible at all, and why.

... But at the end of the day, I think it has a lot to do with the way Edi Rama sees himself as a politician and the way he acts.

Local government officials also reported a lack of engagement when it came to, for example, HPP construction permits. One municipal representative explained the predicament with regard to the Pocem HPP:

We have been informed [about Pocem HPP] by the media and by an environmental association that operates in Albania. Regarding the construction of the Pocem HPP, there has been a marked lack of transparency and information on the part of the government and its subordinate institutions. The purpose of all this has been to act in the hidden so as not to have reactions that oppose the plan.

Their requests for meetings and information about the construction procedure were also to no avail. Local mayors contested the relevant HPPs by supporting the formation of local citizen alliances and the dissemination of information through public meetings and seminars. In some cases, however, local municipalities were careful to avoid challenging state-level politics.

Albanian president Ilir Meta, however, has been one of the VCR’s most influential political allies.

Interviewees noted that president Meta’s support may not be solely for the good of the Vjosa River, but perhaps the political means to counter his current political rival,

prime minister Rama.⁶ On September 24th 2020, president Meta hosted a scientific round table discussion for international scientists to present their findings on the impacts of HPPs on the Vjosa River. One day later, he inaugurated the Vjosa Research Center together with representatives from the Universities of Tirana and Vienna and the local mayor in Tepelena [78, 79]. On the next day, prime minister Rama released an official statement on Twitter revealing the history and tensions between the two rivals as well as the particular resonant resistance to HPP development:

I agree with Ilir Meta that the future is not destruction, but how good it would have been if he had protected Valbona [HPP site in a protected area] from destruction when he was deputy head of Sali Berisha’s government, just as he protects the Vjosa today from the imaginary danger of hydropower plants that are not built. Our government has declared the Upper Vjosa a national park. Our Ministry of Environment has officially refused to give permission for HPP projects in the lower Vjosa that will be integrated with the park! The devastating wave of the old government over the rivers as a whole has long since receded! [80].

Campaign activists believe that president Meta’s outspoken support for the VRC was a catalyst leading up to prime minister Rama’s tweet in 2020 that stated that no HPPs shall be built on the Vjosa River.

At the international level, the Council of Europe has encouraged Albania to halt the construction of HPPs on both Pocem and Kalivac due to their ecological impacts and the “wild” status of the river [81]. The European Parliament has hosted special events on the Vjosa. The Vjosa is also regularly mentioned in EU accession reports on Albania as a concern [10, 18, 19, 20]. However, interviewees expressed that the EU is currently not playing a strong political role in supporting the claims for establishing a Vjosa National Park and believe that only when the bilateral commitments of Albania’s EU accession are established will the EU’s political influence on this topic be more substantial [50]. Meanwhile, VRC activists have been trying to convince the relevant institutions and investors like the European Investment Bank to approve financial contributions to establish a Vjosa National Park.

6. Parliamentary efforts to impeach president Meta in 2021 were unsuccessful when Albania’s Constitutional Court overturned the decision in 2022.

Official Complaints in International Forums

The Bern Convention decided to open a case file against Albania and called on Albania to halt the hydropower projects on the Vjosa River after EcoAlbania filed an official complaint [82]. The Standing Committee urged the Albanian authorities to suspend all preparations toward the Pocem and Kalivac HPPs until a Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment and social impact studies could be carried out [83]. In 2019, the VRC organizers also filed a complaint with the Energy Community, of which Albania has been a member since 2006, due to violations of the EIA Directive (Directive 2011/92/EU) involving the Kalivac and Pocem HPPs. In September 2020, the Secretariat opened a dispute settlement procedure against Albania for a noncompliant EIA on the Pocem HPP [84]. One campaign activist noted their surprise at the outcomes of their transnational efforts and the influential nature of the different forums:

... here, for the first time in their history, they [the Energy Community] actually opened a case against a member country, Albania, because of a hydropower plant. This has never happened before. And that was also done by the Bern Convention, but the Energy Community is more helpful because it is more influential.

Another activist highlighted the unprecedented efficiency in processing these cases, but also remarked that they are not legally binding measures that can be enforced on the national level.

Legal Action

In 2015, the Albanian government approved the Pocem HPP EIA and granted a concession contract to two Turkish companies “Ayen Energji” and “Cinar San.” The VRC activists asserted that the EIA was missing an in-situ examination and that more than 50% of it was copied from another preexisting EIA unrelated to the Vjosa [85]. In 2017, affiliated residents and the ENGOs Riverwatch, EuroNature, and EcoAlbania subsequently filed a lawsuit requesting an annulment of the Pocem HPP contract with the Albanian Administrative Court. The Administrative Court of First Instance in Tirana ruled that the administrative acts and procedures related to the Pocem HPP contract (i.e., public consultation process, EIA approval, and concession) are invalid, making it the first time in Albania that such an important lawsuit was decided in favor of the environment [86]. Ayen Energji,

Cinar San, the Albanian Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, and the Ministry of Environment challenged the ruling in the Court of Appeals in Tirana which is still pending [85, 87, 88], thereby suspending construction until further notice.

Within a month following the Albanian Administrative Court’s ruling on the Pocem HPP, the Albanian Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy announced its decision to unilaterally cancel the contract with the Becchetti group for the construction of the Kalivac HPP and subsequently agreed on a concession with a Turkish-Albanian business consortium, called Ayen ALB, upon completion of the permitting process [85]. EcoAlbania filed a complaint on January 9th 2018 with the Commissioner for the Right of Information and Personal Data Protection upon being denied access to the Kalivac HPP EIA and feasibility study by the Ministries of Tourism and Environment and of Infrastructure and Energy. Based on the Commissioner’s investigation, the Head of the energy sector in the Department of Public–Private Partnerships, Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy was fined and given a deadline for disclosure. According to EcoAlbania et al. [85], no information has been disclosed and the Commissioner has not taken further action.

In 2021, after prime minister Rama tweeted that no HPPs shall be built on the Vjosa and the Albanian Minister of the Environment rejected Ayen ALB’s request for an environmental permit for the Kalivac HPP project, Ayen ALB took the Albanian Ministry of the Environment to court. Riverwatch, EcoAlbania, and Euronatur and 38 local residents joined the Ministry of the Environment as defendants [89]. The Administrative Court of Tirana rejected the lawsuit averting Kalivac HPP development for the time being. For campaign activists, this meant that the court had ruled fairly based on the science. One acknowledged that:

It is worth noting that now also the judiciary in the country did not rule in favor of the money, for better or worse, but actually ruled in favor of the facts on the Vjosa.

Since 2016, the Albanian judiciary has undergone reforms to strengthen the rule of law in alignment with EU standards (e.g., accountability, access to justice, separation of powers, and independence) [90] with demonstrated improvements in independence and impartiality of magistrates and judges [18]. However, according to

interviewees, court victories are not stand-alone successes as they are connected to work at various levels (e.g., scientific research, international lobbying, and media attention) that ultimately influence the Albanian courts as well. Scientific research, in particular, helped to support these cases and the campaign overall with information on the ecological status of the Vjosa. Activists further claim that they are increasingly being invited as experts on the Vjosa for meetings and media coverage and that legal requests for information from various Albanian administrative bodies had the effect of building the capacities of Albanian authorities when processing access to information requests.

Science and Public Awareness

Save the Blue Heart of Europe campaign organizers reached out to national and international scientists to conduct and publish research on the ecological conditions of the Vjosa River area and the potential impacts of hydropower development. EcoAlbania itself was established by activists from the Save the Blue Heart of Europe campaign and scientists from Tirana University. This scientists' network determined that HPP development would be dire for the ecological well-being of the Vjosa catchment and published these findings [2, 3, 5–7]. In addition to publishing their findings in academic journals, the respective scientists also presented their findings to various audiences at meetings, press conferences, public events, workshops, and round tables [10]. Engaging science in this way can raise the authority of claims, increase publicity and raise further awareness at the local scale especially if knowledge is coproduced [91].

In addition to spreading knowledge about the Vjosa catchment and the potential impacts of HPP development, an essential purpose of the scientific work was to demonstrate the insufficiencies of the EIA. Scientists challenged the Pocem HPP EIA, particularly the methodology [92]. When the VRC filed a lawsuit against the Pocem HPP in 2016, their scientific claims against the adequacy of the EIA were considered to be a crucial factor that led to the legal nullification of the concession contract. Under the name “Vjosa-Tour,” EcoAlbania launched a series of meetings across the Vjosa valley to establish connections, form alliances, raise awareness, and articulate a vision for a National Park [93]. The science ultimately provided the basis for asserting claims across different alliances, forums, and media.

Media Coverage

The VRC drew attention and support through social media, the private sector, celebrities, and musicians. They introduced the hashtag #VjosaNationalParkNow for everyone who wanted to sign a petition and voice their support for the VRC including the proposed Vjosa National Park. One international campaign activist described the importance of their media work and the way that it could circle back around at the political level,

The media work is really crucial because it has a large share in the formation of opinion in the population. But also because what changes in the population has some kind of influence on the political level, of course.

The outdoor gear and clothing company Patagonia that focuses on sustainability within its company's mission statement officially supported the claim for a Vjosa National Park. Together with the Save the Blue Heart Campaign, Patagonia produced two movies on HPP development in Southeast Europe and on the Vjosa in particular [94, 95]. As of February 2022, each of the movies had around 1,000,000 views on Youtube.

The outspoken support for the VRC by actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Edward Norton and PopMusic singer Ellie Goulding [96] rallied support for the campaign, particularly at the national scale.

At a music concert in Tirana in 2017, “Mos ma prek Vjosën!” (Hands off the Vjosa!), prominent Albanian musicians sang for the protection of the Vjosa River in front of more than 4000 spectators [96]. The approach garnered international and local support that ultimately came back around to the national-level (“two-level game”). As one campaign activist explained:

If Leonardo di Caprio, for example, posted something at the beginning, then it was in every main broadcast in Albania. People think “how can it be that this guy from Hollywood even knows about our Vjosa?” This creates an appreciation of one's own through the reflection from the outside. That is why media work from the outside is also important, which has also led to the media in Albania taking a closer look.

In the beginning it had been difficult to gain the media's attention, especially the national media, but as soon as the campaign received international media coverage, the national media started covering it as well [10] through a “boomerang” effect. One activist expressed that, with time, the national media expressed increasing

concern about the preservation of the Vjosa and became more open to making connections with the campaign activists.

In order to garner media attention and support, the VRC activists emphasized the natural heritage, pristine-ness, and uniqueness of the Vjosa River. They provided tours, aesthetic pictures, and movies of the landscape combined with warnings about the impacts of HPPs on the ecosystems and local communities, their livelihoods, and traditional values. The Vjosa hydropower case was also used to draw attention to how Albanian elites understand politics and democracy. The lack of public participation and missing information were seen as exemplary of the government's understanding of how to do politics and that such conduct should not be tolerated [51].

In this way, the VRC was able to capture and convey resonant elements of the Vjosa River. This circled back around to decision-makers, particularly at election time in April 2021 when, according to one campaign activist, political actors were strategically faced with increasing public and journalistic inquiries about their plans for the Vjosa. With further support from Patagonia, the campaign was also able to run television commercials at this time. One campaign organizer stated that in the last five days before the election, a 30-s spot calling for “#VjosaNationalParkNow” ran five times in the evenings before primetime on four major Albanian stations [51].

The Rama administration was reelected with the majority of the seats in parliament as the VRC gained national traction. A campaign organizer explained:

It was one of the first and few environmental cases to be discussed on the political table during an election campaign because the environment as a topic has always been seen as a low priority, and it is still the same. But the Vjosa this time was something totally different. It has been discussed on the prime-time public debates where the high-level politicians were invited. All of the top politicians were faced with questions regarding the Vjosa from the journalists and from the activists . . .

During the public debates, all of the invited politicians supported the idea of putting the Vjosa under a protectoral regime and abolishing HPP projects for good. Bringing up environmental issues just before parliamentary elections has proven historically to be a good move. Waste imports, for example, were politically salient just before a previous election. Rama initially banned waste imports, fulfilling one of his main election promises, but then

eventually supported a draft law allowing the import of certain types of wastes and concessions for waste incinerators and landfills [97].

While there was no direct access to the Albanian Prime Minister's Office, collectively the campaign actions gained ground based on the evocation of scientific findings on the Vjosa and transnational efforts that rally international support to reassert domestic pressures⁷ that resulted in a successful domestic court case, a shift in the prime minister's public statements about HPP development on the Vjosa, and, according to campaign activists, an increase in the state's administrative awareness and responsiveness regarding information sharing. The scientific production and distribution of knowledge was a “linchpin” facilitating the other aspects of the strategy. Legal action tested a transforming judiciary and, according to campaign activists, facilitated capacity-building in the dissemination of information by Albania's public administration.

Latest Developments

On June 13, 2022, the Albanian government signed a memorandum of understanding with CEO of Patagonia Ryan Gellert, joined by representatives of Riverwatch, Euronatur, and Eco Albania, to develop the Vjosa National Park. The agreement states that the Vjosa and all its free-flowing tributaries shall be upgraded to a protection level according to IUCN Category II criteria. Then, in March 2023, another milestone was reached when the official commitment to establish the Vjosa River National Park was published. The national park is planned to stretch over more than 400 km of waterways and its first phase is scheduled to be operational in early 2024 [99] (figure 2).

CONCLUSION

The VRC demonstrates a multipronged, transnational strategy in a highly centralized, weak democratic state. In applying an interactive analytical approach focused on the VRC players and arena, this research captures not only the different prongs of the strategy but also how they interacted or mutually informed each other. The production and distribution of scientific knowledge, for example, especially strengthened the other strategic activities, operating as a linchpin in the campaign arena. Activists perceived the legal ruling on the Pocem HPP court case to have influenced the subsequent Kalivac HPP development

7. Known as a “boomerang” effect according to [98].

 Wild River National Park
  Vjosa Valley

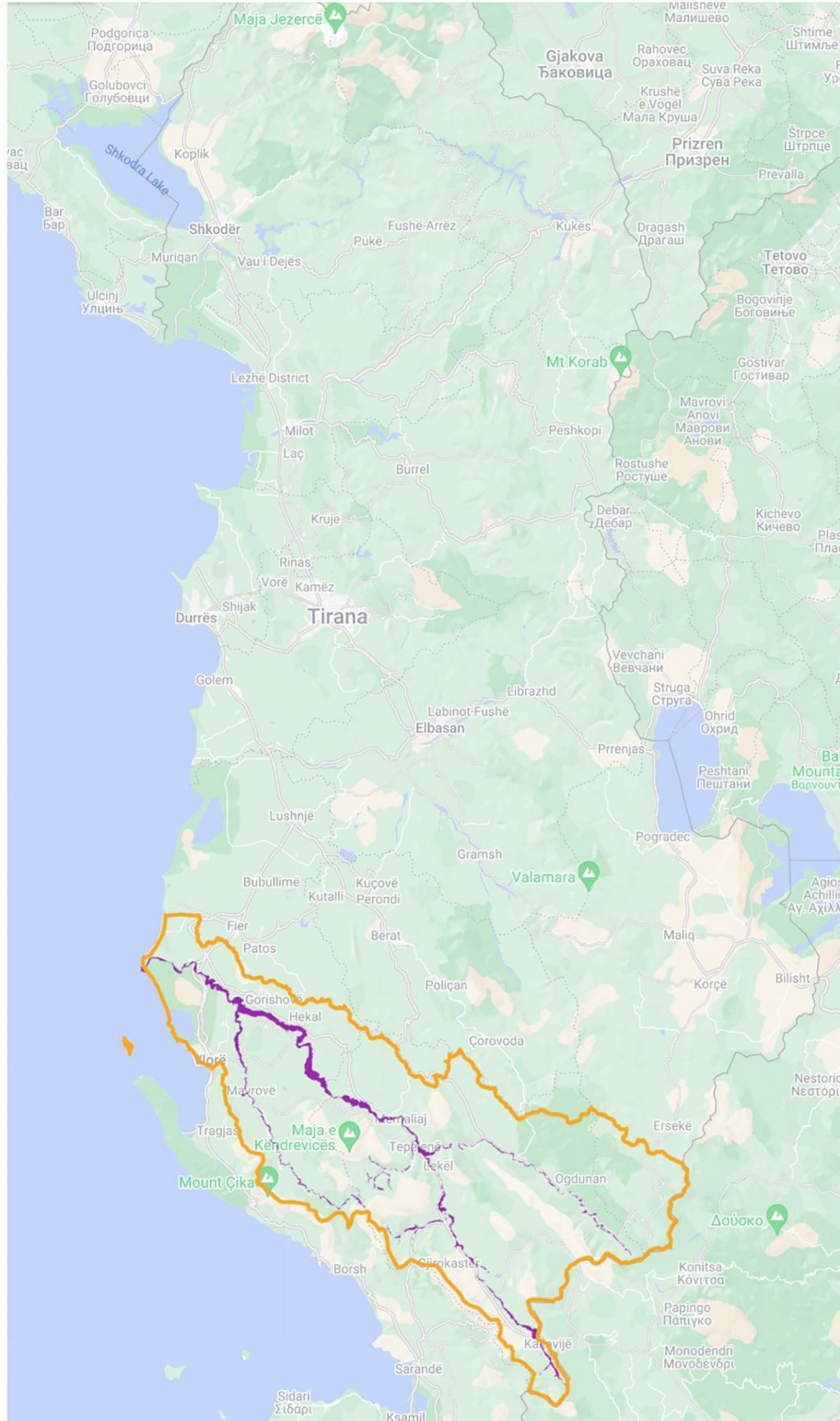


FIGURE 2. Wild River National Park alongside the Vjosa River and its tributaries and the broader Vjosa Valley in Southern Albania.

process. Both Pocem and Kalivac HPPs have been halted, despite the ongoing Kalivac appeal process. The more long-term aspects of the VRC arena included how the functionality of the Albanian judiciary in Tirana proved to be reliable from the perspective of campaign strategists and there was a recognizable learning curve for the state's administrative bodies when it came to assisting with information needed for the legal cases.

The VRC's strategy successfully contributed to stalling HPP development on the Vjosa. In June 2022, the Albanian Government, together with the sports gear company Patagonia, signed a memorandum of understanding with the commitment to establish a Vjosa Wild River National Park in the presence of the VRC campaign. According to the most recent plans, the first phase of the national park is scheduled to be operational in early 2024.

The multipronged strategic approach that was analyzed in this case study proved to be of success within the centralized political system of Albania. Further research could examine environmental movements with similar concerns for their successes or failures, taking into account the local political landscape and their strategic interaction.

CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

This case study raises several important insights on environmental movement strategizing as well as the nature of studying the effectiveness of environmental movements in general, but in particular in what might be a budding democracy. The VRC case raises several questions not only about how to study environmental movements but especially about environmental movement strategizing.

1. How do you assess an environmental movement in order to gain insights on effective mobilization strategies? What are the key variables and how do you capture their interactive dynamics? Are there aspects that weren't captured in this case study that you might include or emphasize more to draw out the VRC's strategy and its impacts?
2. In what ways are hydropower and fossil fuel development similar when it comes to energy development? In what ways do they differ? And, what about their implications for climate change?
3. To what extent do local, national, and international politics, relations, policies and legal or administrative forums, the environment or nature, local

communities, science and scientists, media coverage, and economic considerations matter? How did these variables play out in the VRC case, and which ones appear more favorable for the VRC than others, and how? Did any variables affect the outcomes or trajectory of others? If so, explain. Is there one key variable that you would point to as being absolutely key to the effectiveness of the VRC?

4. How do you explain the judicial outcomes presented in the VRC case? Consider both the Albanian Administrative Courts' decisions and the investigative outcome presented by the Commissioner for the Right of Information and Personal Data Protection.
5. What changes might you suggest to the Albanian administrative bodies when it comes to public participation or service? Can you recall how the VRC itself influenced the administrative bodies along these lines?
6. Is there anything that can be done in the face of political rivalries when it comes to environmental activism in a flawed democracy? How did the VRC navigate the political rivalries between prime minister Rama and president Meta? What might be some of the future implications of their approach, if any, when it comes to national election's time?
7. Finally, what advice might you offer the VRC operatives in going forward? Can they now rest on their laurels, secure in the notion that the Vjosa River will be protected against future hydropower plant development? What might be some changing dynamics (i.e., war in Ukraine, climate change), for example, that could affect the future of hydropower development on the Vjosa River, and how?

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Christian Puecker: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing—Original Draft.

Tamara Steger: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing—Review and Editing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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