

Society

Policy Brief: Civil society and the EU can contribute to environmental democracy in the Western Balkans

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Environmental protests in Serbia, December 2021; Photo: Facebook / Ne davimo Beograd

VIENNA – Environmental issues in Western Balkan countries have become topical, particularly in recent years, with a significant increase in the number of NGOs active in this sector. Their participation in the implementation of environmental policies should be supported to reinforce environmental democracy, recommends Policy Brief [“Environmental democracy in the Western Balkans between dependent capitalism and integration into the European Union”](#) published within the “WB2EU




“Network.

The developments such as Chinese investments in energy sector, construction of mini-hydropower plants across the region and lithium mining projects in Serbia by the Anglo-Australian multinational company Rio Tinto have been followed by the actions of local NGOs against these projects and have seen the emergence of environmental conflicts, which have led to changes in the positions of local governments, the document reads.

This contributed to the strengthening of environmental democracy in Serbia, which is based on three pillars: first, free access to information on environmental problems and quality; second, participation in decision-making; and third, enforcement of environmental laws.

Another important actor for the promotion of environmental democracy in the Western Balkans is the European Union, which achieves this goal through European projects and the negotiation of the *acquis communautaire* for the accession of these countries into the EU.

One of the ways in which this is achieved is the demand to strengthen the institutional framework and capacity for enforcement of environmental and climate change legislation, which remains an issue in the region.

In this context, as well, the role of civil society organisations dealing with the environment sector is crucial, policy brief assess. However, without a clear calendar for EU integration of the Western Balkan countries, economic dependence from non-EU international actors can continue with the reinforcement of dependent capitalism and its negative effects on the environment. 

In 2020, EU presented a “Green Agenda for the Western Balkans”, which is formed by five broad areas covered by the “European Green Deal”: decarbonisation, depollution of air, water, and soil, circular economy, farming and food production, and protecting biodiversity. The region is committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, aligning with key elements of the European Green Deal, and implementing the Action Plan on the Western Balkans.

The energy sector in the Western Balkans is still characterised by insufficient and obsolete infrastructure, high dependence on fossil fuels, late adoption of renewables except for residential biomass and hydropower, limited energy efficiency, high rates of energy poverty despite generally high levels of subsidies, limited market mechanisms, and private sector participation, the document reminds.

The Policy Brief is published in the framework of the WB2EU project. The project aims at the establishment of a network of renowned think-tanks, do-tanks, universities, higher education institutes and policy centres from the Western Balkans, neighbouring countries and EU member states that will be most decisive for the enlargement process and Europeanisation of the region in the upcoming years. The WB2EU project is co-funded by the European Commission under its Erasmus+ Jean Monnet programme.

