

From Moldova to Kosovo, environmental activists across the Balkans are mobilising to tackle issues from air and river pollution to illegal logging, fossil fuel use and hydropower. Environmental activists are waging a battle to combat environmental destruction in Southeast Europe, engaging in “flash mob” campaigns, orchestrating mass protests and starting film festivals to promote conservation – all the while rattling and challenging local authorities.

Who’s at the forefront of these crusades?

BIRN has selected six activists from across Southeast Europe to highlight some of the key issues they’re campaigning against and their battles to improve the lives of ordinary citizens.

Meet them below.

Kosovo: Activist who Took on World Bank

It is not easy to generate headlines in a country as politicised as Kosovo. But rules have any exception, even here. Dajana Berisha, Director of Kosovo’s Forum for Civic Initiatives, FIQ, surprised many in 2016 when, after filing a complaint, she forced the World Bank to withdraw from one of Kosovo’s biggest and most controversial power projects in the last decade.

The bank had previously agreed to fund a new coal-fired power plant “Kosova e Re” (New Kosovo), and the plans envisaged the involuntary resettlement of a whole village of Hade, 15 kilometres from the capital, Pristina, to make space for it.

“It’s a cause that stands really close to me, stands close to my heart, and I have been living with this cause for years now,” Berisha says, three years on.

She has spent a lot of her time alongside local villagers, taking part in their protests, whatever the weather.

“There are two scenarios for everybody: one is to ignore everything wrong happening to the society in which you live, because ‘it does not affect me, so I refuse to participate’ – and the other scenario is when you are very sensitive towards everything happening to the society in which you live, and to your fellow citizens and especially to the children, the next generation,” Berisha says.

“I chose the second option – to get involved and oppose everything unjust that is happening to my country and to our children. I genuinely wish to do something for my country,” she elaborates.

Her ambition is to continue participating in public life, and make policy makers understand

that the environment is central to Kosovo's development.

"What frustrates me mostly with policy-makers is their lack of professional competence in understanding the importance of environment in the general development of Kosovo," she says.

Serbia: Green advocates who don't duck a challenge

The Let's Not Drown Belgrade movement started as an informal group of people protesting against the demolition of Belgrade's Savamala district to pave the way for the Waterside redevelopment project in April 2016. Bulldozers moved in to tear down buildings under the cover of darkness.

Thousands of people soon joined a wave of mass protests, boosting the popularity of Let's Not Drown Belgrade, which eventually decided to participate in the local elections for Belgrade in 2018.

The movement also stepped in to help regular citizens in other initiatives, to save city parks, stop hydropower plants being built and deal with waste disposal. Its activists regularly participated in these demonstrations – no matter how small.

"Let's Not Drown Belgrade has advocated a green city right from the start, for a city that devotes itself to protecting the environment," Aleksa Petkovic, a member of Let's Not Drown Belgrade, told BIRN.

Air pollution is high on their current agenda. "The [fight against] air pollution I think is where we have achieved the most," Petkovic said.

On October 31, the movement organised a protest against the dangerously high levels of air pollution in Belgrade, which is often ranked among the most polluted cities in the world in winter.

To change this, they launched a petition demanding that the city and state authorities take concrete measures against air pollution.

Their demands include traffic reductions in days of extreme polluted air and the temporary closure of kindergartens and schools in parts of cities mostly endangered by pollution.

The movement is also known for its guerilla methods and "flash mob" actions. They once parked a two-metre replica yellow duck in front of the city assembly, which became a symbol of resistance to the controversial Belgrade Waterfront and is now an iconic feature of the movement's campaigns.

What next for Let's Not Drown Belgrade? "A great battle awaits us with the Vinca incinerator," Petkovic said, referring to a waste incinerator which is due to be built in

Belgrade's Vinca neighbourhood, which the movement claims will have a costly impact on waste recycling and air pollution.

Croatia: Eco-warrior who uses films to spread awareness

Daniel Pavlic, Croatian eco-activist, journalist and film director, has been struggling with environmental issues for a decade. He lives in Hrvatska Kostajnica, a small town in central Croatia, located on the Una river, bordering neighbouring Bosnia, near an area where Croatia is considering storing medium- and low-level radioactive waste from the Krsko nuclear power plant that is jointly managed and owned by Croatia and Slovenia.

Pavlic describes himself as a man who has always "lived in nature and loved nature", and he sees the radioactive storage plan as one of the crucial environmental issues in Croatia today.

He is trying "to activate people to invoke the UN's ESPOO convention", which specifies environmental protections and which Pavlic says "warns that no such landfill should be built near a border".

One of his many campaigns has been to organise the Smaragdni (Emerald) Eco Film Festival in Hrvatska Kostajnica and the surrounding area, which screens educational films that aim to raise ecological awareness.

"Since I've been organising the festival... I can make a cross-section of the 12 years since we started, and... [change] is visible," Pavlic says, adding that more people in Croatia are now starting to think about the global climate.

"Unfortunately, those changes are always felt by those who are far away [from the sources of pollution]. Hrvatska Kostajnica has felt it. In the last few years, we have had great floods. We had one landslide that destroyed eight houses," he recalls.

Although he plans to leave Croatia next year, he does not plan to give the fight for environmental protection.

"I will continue to do it, but not in this country. I will probably continue my activism outside Croatia because I think I still have the energy and the strength to fight. I believe that there will be some global changes," he says.

Bosnia: Engineer who became environmental guardian

Engineer Anes Podic left his job in informatics in 2009 to found the Eco Action Association in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. A long-time mountaineer and nature lover, he wanted

to help preserve and expand Bosnia's protected areas, which he says make up only 2 per cent of the country's territory.

But on discovering the breadth of environmental issues facing the country, he quickly expanded his focus and Eco Action started to work intensively also on air quality, water protection, green spaces, and waste disposal.

"No system of environmental protection really exists in Bosnia and Herzegovina at all," Podic says. "What is happening is a general robbery of resources. First we had a wave of privatisation, when our companies were robbed, and now they came after our forests, rivers and drinking water."

Among his most famous actions were the defence of the Una River from plans to build a hydropower plant on it in 2015, and the campaign for better water in Sarajevo – "Water Defence 2017".

But the fight goes on. "There are now attempts to build a small hydropower plant on every river, on every creek in Bosnia and Herzegovina," Podic warns.

"We urgently need a moratorium on the construction of new hydroelectric power plants; we really do not need them."

One of the "biggest acts of heroism" he witnessed in recent years was the successful protest by local people in the northwestern town of Bihac against the council's plan to build a hydroelectric plant in Martin Brod, in the heart of a national park.

"Citizens can do extraordinary things if they have faith in themselves," he says.

"But the war continues. Our politicians are just looking for another chance to continue the same attempts to privatise our resources."

Podic says environmental activism isn't just about safeguarding nature; it has a wider impact on society as a whole and on the quality of life.

"A society where there is no concern for the environment is full of problems, and the only way to try to prevent this is through activism," Podic says. "We have to preserve this truly fragile and precious living world we have."

Romania: Mountaineer who is battling to save ancient fish

A professional climber who has climbed seven 8,000-metre peaks with no bottled oxygen or the help of high-altitude porters, Alex Gavan is also a relentless environmentalist, involved in several causes to save the planet both in Romania and abroad.

Gavan has taken an active part in the recent drive by green organisations in Romania end to illegal logging and save what is left of the country's once vast forests, the biggest in the EU

outside Scandinavia.

But Gavan's most iconic campaign has been to save the asprete or *romanichthys valsanicola*, an extremely rare kind of perch dating back 65 million years, which was contemporary with the dinosaurs and is now on the verge of extinction.

With no more than 10 specimens left, all living along one single kilometer stretch of the Valsan river in central Romania, after decades of exploitation of their habitat to generate hydroelectric energy, the asprete will disappear forever in a few years if nothing is done.

"Saving this fish is going to be a big statement not only for Romania but for the whole planet - a bright ray of hope," says Gavan, who is mobilising politicians, businessmen and scientists to launch a successful repopulation plan that will hopefully allow this species to continue "the odyssey it started 65 million years ago."

Moldova: MP who became a 'keeper of rivers'

Sixty-five-year-old biologist, author and former MP Ilya Trombisky was one of the first activists in Moldova to tackle environmental issues in the 1990s, and is widely known today for his many projects devoted to ecology in Eastern Europe generally.

With a PhD in biology from Moscow State University, he is now director of the International Ecological Association of River Keepers, ECO-TIRAS, a transboundary river basin association that unites some 50 eco-NGOs of the Dniester River basin, spanning Moldova and Ukraine.

"At a conference in California [in the early-1990s], I discovered how important NGOs are in everyday life in democratic societies. After coming back, I established one of the first environmental NGOs in Moldova," Trombisky recalls.

His focus has long been the Dniester River, which provides 80 per cent of drinking water in Moldova, but which he says is being badly damaged by waste, pollution and erosion from a lack of soil protection.

"The main issue is territory management, which means that we did not take into consideration the many environmental needs of the territory. We did not respect the management of the rivers, like the construction of the protection green belts along the rivers," he says.

He argues that in many cases, land has been privatised despite legislation against it, "and we did not consider the issues that have come from this".

As a deputy in the first parliament formed after Moldova gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Trombisky pushed environmental law on to the attention of his

colleagues. Later, as an MP from 1994 to 2001, he had important input in the creation of legislation on NGOs in Moldova.

His next challenge is to expand this ecologist expertise into the whole Black Sea basin. "If these rivers [going into the Black Sea] are clean, the Black Sea itself will also be healthier," he says.

Source: balkaninsight.com