



FAKULTA  
SOCIÁLNÍCH VĚD  
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### **„Lost at the waterfront? Explaining the absence of green organisations in the *Let's not drown Belgrade movement*”**

Why are established NGOs not participating in contemporary protests in parts of South East Europe? Evidence from Poland and elsewhere in CEE suggests a re-birth of (left-liberal) political activism amongst established NGOs and a rediscovering of their civil society links. With a few exceptions, this not happening in the Western Balkans. The politics and politicians are no less-illiberal, the threat of corruption, denial of rights, or environmental degradation no less serious, and the tier of NGOs no less ubiquitous.

The paper focuses on the "Let's not drown Belgrade" - *ne da(vi)mo Beograd* protest movement against the Belgrade waterfront development. It is one of the most successful campaigns in Serbia, with its yellow duck insignia becoming a powerful symbol of resistance. Yet there has been no tangible participation by Belgrade's developed and well-established environmental NGOs. This is all the more surprising given the certain 'green' dimension to the campaign and the fact that the environmental NGOs in or around Belgrade pursue quite progressive agendas and action repertoires that are certainly congruent with the strategies of *ne da(vi)mo Beograd*.

The paper offers two broad explanations. First, whereas the renewed political activism of NGOs in CEE is a direct reaction to the illiberal turn in Poland under Law and Justice, and in Hungary under Viktor Orbán, Serbian politics, by contrast, has been illiberal throughout the post-Yugoslav and post-Milosevic periods. The NGOs that exist today did not emerge during a period of liberal reform only to be confronted in recent years (post-global crisis) with a right-wing populist illiberal backlash. Rather, they have always been on the margins, only ever partially institutionalised, and their links with communities and infra-politics have always been weak. They are thus caught between state and society; distrusted and disliked by both. Second, the lack of involvement of NGOs reflects the antipathy of protestors to what are (wrongly) perceived to be establishment institutions, deemed by many to be *part of the problem rather than the solution*.

The paper argues that the absence of NGOs in fact serves to weaken protest movements such as *Ne da(vi) mo Beograd* insofar as it denies the new generation of activists the knowledge and resources that the established organisations can provide. It also closes off a potential link, however tenuous, with political society that has proven critical elsewhere in empowering civil society to challenge political elites.

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