SRĐAN KUKOLJ

CONFLICT BY ANOTHER NAME ECOLOGICAL POSTPONEMENT AS INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Belgrade, 2026

Book Series SQUARE

Edited by:
Jelena Vasiljević

Title:
Conflict by Another Name
Ecological Postponement as Institutional Strategy in the Western Balkans

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Publishers:
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade
Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS
Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe

Proofreader:
Lucy Stevens

Cover design:
Nikola Stevanović

Typesetting:
Sonja Nikolić, Tijana Baltić

Place and year of publication:
Belgrade, 2026

ISBN:
978-86-6190-047-1

Replicate:
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Production run:
50 copies













This publication was created within the Regional Fellowship Program, implemented by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, in partnership with the Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS and the Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe, with the support of the Open Society Foundation Western Balkans, Erste Foundation, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund.
The views expressed in the text represent the views of the authors.

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Introduction

Ecological governance in the Western Balkans consistently produces a specific and recognizable outcome across different political contexts, documented harm is transformed into an administrative matter that remains permanently pending, while the underlying conditions that generate that harm remain substantially unchanged. Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have grown up within this pattern, inhaling air with pollution levels documented in successive EU Progress Reports[1] and Energy Community Secretariat assessments[2]. They live alongside rivers whose deterioration

[1] Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, Strategy and Reports, 2025 Enlargement Package, European Commission

[2] Contracting parties' implementation performance, 2025 Implementation Performance, Energy Community Secretariat

has generated international media coverage and youth protests of considerable scale. The results of this research suggest they have understood the pattern they inhabit for what it is.

This research examines, across the four countries, young people's perception of institutional management of ecological harm, their digital engagement with environmental politics, and whether the eco-digital practices they have developed carry political implications or remain structurally contained within the governance pattern they seek to address. The empirical base comprises an online questionnaire with 178 respondents aged 18 to 35, a systematically constructed corpus of 160 digital artifacts drawn from six platforms covering the period between 2023 and 2025, 19 semi-structured qualitative interviews with respondents aged 22 to 27, and a cross-methodological integrative analysis. Respondents have educational backgrounds ranging from secondary vocational training to postgraduate level and reside in both urban centers and smaller towns.

The concept that guides the analysis is *ecological postponement*. It refers to the systematic deferral of institutional response to documented environmental harm government actors produce successive cycles of assessment, planning, and consultation without achieving remediation commensurate with the scale or urgency of the conditions identified. Distinguished from administrative incapacity by its consistency across political cycles and governance contexts, ecological postponement operates as an active political technology for managing civic pressure while preserving existing distributions of economic and political power. The central arguments that follow from the evidence assembled here are that young people in the region have diagnosed this mechanism with considerable analytical precision, that the eco-digital practices they have developed in response constitute a form of democratic infrastructure, and that the political potential of this infrastructure is structurally constrained by the very institutional arrangements it seeks to address.

The Analytical Framework

Three bodies of scholarship inform the interpretation of the material presented here. Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence serves as the fundamental framework. Nixon defines slow violence as harm that is "neither spectacular nor instantaneous but instead incremental, whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries."[3] The political significance of this concept lies in what it explains about the relationship between temporal structure and accountability. Environmental harm that accumulates gradually does not produce the episodic visibility that triggers institutional response in governance systems calibrated toward the spectacular. Industrial air pollution, river degradation from small hydroelectric infrastructure, the chronic health consequences of coal combustion, and the long-term effects of industrial contamination of groundwater – all are, in Nixon's terms, forms of harm that are scientifically measurable, legally actionable and, in governance systems oriented toward dramatic events, institutionally deniable. In the Western Balkans, this deniability has been systematically exploited across successive political cycles.

The second framework is Bennett and Segerberg's analysis of connective action, which identifies a structurally distinct mode of political mobilization enabled by digital media.[4] Whereas classical collective action requires organizational infrastructure and shared collective identity, connective action operates through the personalized sharing of content across digital networks. Participation thresholds are lower, ideological alignment is less necessary, communication itself functions as an organizing mechanism, and formal membership is not a precondition for civic presence. This framework accounts for the high rates of digital ecological engagement documented in the survey while

[3] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 2.

[4] W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics," *Information, Communication and Society* 15(5), 2012, pp. 739–768.

clarifying why such engagement generates visibility without necessarily generating institutional accountability.

The third framework concerns intergenerational justice as a political claim. Knappe and Renn have demonstrated how youth actors across Europe have inverted intergenerational equity from an abstract philosophical principle into a mobilizing political frame, connecting present inaction directly to the denial of future generations' potential to live full and dignified lives.[5] The research documented here suggests that Western Balkan youth have arrived at functionally equivalent framings through a different route, one that leads upward – from the daily experience of contaminated air and unresponsive institutions – rather than downward – from global climate discourse. This convergence is itself analytically significant.

The structural evidence

The survey produces a finding of unusual clarity. Respondents rated 15 attitudinal statements on a five-point scale, and the items that generated the highest agreement all concerned institutional failure. Agreement that ecological problems are systematically delayed rather than solved has a mean of 4.62, with 93.3% of respondents scoring this item at 4 or 5. Agreement that institutions speak without implementing reaches a mean of 4.53. The perception that institutions fail to grasp the urgency of ecological problems generates a mean of 4.51. These items cluster at the top of the scale across all four national sub-samples, with variation in degree but not in direction.

The lowest-scoring item in the survey is trust that institutions will make correct ecological decisions in the future, with a mean of 2.08 and a standard deviation of 1.09. This is the structural inversion at the center of the research. The same institutions, assessed with near-consensus as systematically delaying action, generate the lowest recorded levels of forward-looking confi-

[5] Henrike Knappe and Ortwin Renn, "Politicization of Intergenerational Justice: How Youth Actors Translate Sustainable Futures," *European Journal of Futures Research* 10(1), 2022.

dence among all items in the questionnaire. This assessment is reasonable, based on accumulated observations that lead to a consistent record with the objective of regional compliance with environmental law. The Energy Community Secretariat's annual implementation reports document persistent, and in some cases, worsening non-compliance with sulfur dioxide emission limits across the region's coal sector. EU Progress Reports for all four countries flag environmental governance as an area of continued inadequacy. The young people surveyed accurately described the institutional record.

The practical consequence of this reasonable assessment appears in a binary finding of equal significance. Of the 178 respondents, 92.7% reported personally experiencing an ecological problem that affected their daily life in the preceding 12 months. Of the same sample, 70.8% had never contacted an institution or organization about an ecological problem. The gap between near-universal experience of harm and minimal formal recourse is the empirical core of this research. It cannot be attributed to ignorance or indifference. The same respondents who have never contacted an institution generate a mean of 4.61 on perceived systematic delay. They have concluded, on the available evidence, that formal channels are unlikely to produce results. This is the difference between a motivational deficit and a structural barrier, a distinction with direct implications for policy design.

One additional finding warrants specific attention. Institutional trust is nearly identical across educational levels in the sample. Among respondents with secondary education, the mean is 2.12. Among those with intermediate qualifications, it reaches 1.92. Among those with higher or postgraduate education, it is 2.07. Education does not generate confidence in ecological institutions. Programs assuming that civic education or environmental literacy will restore institutional trust are addressing a condition that the data do not identify. The trust deficit is not a knowledge gap.

Cross-country variation within the regional pattern merits attention. Bosnia and Herzegovina records the highest scores for perceived systematic delay and institutional inaction, alongside

the strongest sense that youth voice carries little influence on public policy. Serbia records the lowest institutional trust score in the sample alongside the highest rate of digital ecological participation, a conjunction consistent with the sustained mobilization generated by the anti-lithium protests in the summer of 2024. Montenegro presents the most distinctive sub-pattern. While respondents in the other three countries describe environmental conditions as complicating their sense of belonging, Montenegrin respondents consistently note that ecological threat is intensifying place attachment, converting environmental pressure into a disposition to stay and defend rather than leave. The survey confirms, at scale, that Montenegro records the highest place attachment score (M=4.27) despite ecological problems, alongside the lowest score (M=2.46) for environmental conditions affecting emigration deliberation. North Macedonia's sub-sample shows the strongest orientation toward informative and educational digital content, suggesting a phase of movement infrastructure-building with less emphasis on crisis-reactive mobilization.

The strongest relationship in the dataset is a correlation of 0.788 between environmental conditions that affect the decision to remain in the country and the difficulty imagining a future there. This describes what might be called the collapse of temporal citizenship, understood as the capacity to project a meaningful life within an existing political community. Young people who find it difficult to imagine a future in their country due to ecological reasons are expressing something beyond the intent to emigrate, articulating a political condition in which belonging has become conditional and provisional, sustained by attachment to place but no longer supported by trust in the political structures that manage it.

Digital engagement and its internal paradox

Exactly 50.6% of the survey sample participated in a digital ecology-related activity in the 12 months preceding the survey. The digital artifacts corpus provides structural details that the survey alone cannot capture. Among the 160 artifacts coded across the four national sub-samples, 74% are classified as in-

formative or advocacy content, indicating sustained and deliberate production of environmental knowledge rather than reactive response to acute events. The corpus includes air quality data presented in accessible visual formats, documenting river conditions before and after extraction activity, satirical commentary on government declarations, petitions with detailed factual annexes, and monitoring networks that produce regular reports across months. The assumption that youth eco-digital engagement is primarily crisis-reactive is not supported by the evidence.

A finding of particular interest concerns participation rates across age cohorts. The highest participation is recorded among the 25 to 29 age group at 53.5%, above the 18 to 24 cohort at 49.3% and the 30 to 35 cohort at 47.2%. The most digitally active ecological cohort in the sample is consequently the 25-29 group, those who combine digital fluency with sufficient civic socialization to engage in structured campaigns. This has direct implications for how youth eco-digital movements are resourced and supported, because the strategic core of regional eco-digital activism is concentrated in a specific generational slice whose participation cannot be expected to flow automatically from age or digital nativity.

The most analytically productive finding in the digital data concerns the relationship between participation and efficacy. Cross-tabulation reveals that respondents who participated in digital ecological activities score lower on institutional trust (M=1.92) than those who did not (M=2.23). Digitally active respondents score almost identically to inactive respondents on the perception that youth voice has little influence (M=3.74 versus M=3.72). Across the full sample, digital engagement does not generate a greater sense of political efficacy. Young people who devote time and effort to digital ecological campaigns believe their voice is no more significant than that of those who do not. One reading of this finding is that digital engagement has not produced visible institutional responsiveness sufficient to shift the subjective sense of efficacy. A second reading, supported by qualitative data, is that digital participation in this context serves functions only partially related to institutional influence, and that

measuring it solely against an efficacy standard misidentifies its purpose.

What the qualitative evidence reveals

The 19 interviews clarify and extend the quantitative findings in three analytically distinct directions. The first concerns the mechanism of institutional delay. Respondents across all four countries, at educational levels ranging from secondary vocational training to postgraduate study, offer accounts as to why ecological inaction persists that converge on a single structural explanation. One interviewee describes institutions as measuring "the extent to which dissatisfaction must be assuaged before it becomes a more serious political cost" (*koliko nezadovoljstvo mora biti ublaženo da ne bi prešlo u ozbiljniji politički trošak*). Another argues that "institutional delay is not passive, it is an active form of conflict management" (*institucionalno odlaganje nije pasivno, ono je aktivan oblik upravljanja konfliktom*). A third identifies the role of technical language in this process, observing that "technical language is often used as a way to depoliticize what is deeply political" (*tehnički jezik često se koristi kao način da se depolitizuje ono što je duboko politički*). These formulations were produced independently, across different countries and educational backgrounds, in response to open-ended questions about institutional behavior. Their convergence constitutes a finding in itself, confirming that young people in this region have developed a shared structural understanding of how their claims are managed, and that this understanding is analytically accurate.

The second finding concerns the precise location of the boundary between acceptable and consequential youth participation. Respondents describe this boundary with a specificity that recurs across all four national contexts. The boundary consistently and predictably falls at the point where youth participation would acquire procedural consequences. Engagement with questions of values, sustainability, awareness, and intergenerational responsibility is welcomed. Requests for documentation, named responsible parties, measurable commitments, legal bases, and mechanisms of accountability reduce the available space.

One interviewee describes this as the moment where young people "are no longer a desirable element of the process" (*više nismo tako poželjan element procesa*). Another observes that youth are "welcome as long as they do not change the distribution of power" (*dobrodošli dok god ne menjaju raspored moći*). A diagnosis so consistent across countries that differ in political systems, institutional structures, and EU integration status suggests that the architecture of symbolic inclusion is integral to the region's mode of managing youth ecological claims.

The third finding concerns the relationship between ecological exposure and belonging. Interview participants across Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia articulate a version of what one respondent formulates as "loving a place and trusting it are no longer the same" (*ljubav prema mestu i vjerovati mu više nisu isto*). This formulation describes a decoupling, with no implication of absence. Belonging persists, as the survey's high place-connection attachment scores confirm. What has been eroded is the political trust that once made belonging uncomplicated. The Montenegrin sub-sample presents a partial exception. There, attachment to natural landscape intensifies in response to ecological threat, generating a combative rather than evacuative response. This differentiation aligns precisely with the survey data and suggests that the relationship between environmental conditions and political subjectivity is mediated by the specific character of both the threat and the landscape under pressure.

Eco-digital practices as democratic infrastructure

The three empirical components of this research converge on a finding that no single component could generate. Young people in the Western Balkans have built, without organizational resources or institutional support, a sustained civic ecosystem oriented toward ecological accountability. They have done so in response to a governance failure whose mechanisms they describe with analytical precision. They have developed shared metaphorical vocabulary, cross-national informational networks, documented monitoring practices, and sophisticated diagnoses

of the political mechanisms sustaining the circumstances they face.

The qualitative corpus reveals four metaphorical clusters that serve as shared political language across national contexts. The first concerns containment and suffocation, expressed through visions of a city trapped under a lid, beneath stagnant air that, in winter, becomes a permanent state of enforced enclosure. The second concerns temporal theft and inherited debt, expressed through the appropriation of future time through present inaction and the political technology of the perpetually deferred tomorrow. The third concerns structural renovation without structural repair, expressed through visions of a house that is continuously patched while its foundations shift, suggesting a plan that signals seriousness without producing real change. The fourth concerns breath as a political condition, expressed through the somatic experience of contaminated air as the most immediate register of institutional failure, and its inversion into the bureaucratic metaphor of "breathing through administration" (*disanje kroz administraciju*), in which procedural obstruction obstructs a full life in the same way as physical pollution.

These metaphorical repertoires are the product of sustained collective sense-making. They circulate in digital artifacts, appear across interviews conducted in different countries, and correspond structurally to the theoretical accounts of slow violence and intergenerational dispossession developed in the academic literature. Young people in the Western Balkans have developed functionally equivalent frameworks based on their lived experience within the circumstances those frameworks describe. This convergence is itself evidence that the circumstances are real, consistent, and politically consequential.

The research simultaneously documents the structural limits of this civic ecosystem. Interview participants are precise about what digital engagement can and cannot accomplish. One respondent observes that "platforms love intensity, while political change requires duration" (*platforme vole intenzitet, a politička promjena traži trajanje*). Another states that "visibility is not the same as power" (*vidljivost nije isto što i moć*). A third argues that networks can raise topics, increase visibility, shorten the path to

information, and create a sense of urgency, but "cannot secure accountability alone" (*ne mogu same da obezbede odgovornost*). The young people in this research have identified the gap between the civic infrastructure they have built and the institutional accountability they require, and they have done so accurately.

Implications for policy

Several conclusions follow from the evidence assembled here, directed at EU institutions and international foundations whose work intersects with the conditions this research documents.

The first is that the design of the region's youth participation mechanisms needs to be fundamentally revised. The evidence across all four national contexts indicates that existing mechanisms extract the legitimizing function of youth engagement while systematically withholding procedural power. Youth advisory bodies, consultative panels, environmental forums, formal and informal platforms, and civil dialogue processes that cannot produce binding input into regulatory decisions effectively serve as institutional management tools. Any framework that takes seriously the 70.8% who have never contacted an institution despite experiencing documented harm must address the institutional side of that gap. Capacity-building and digital literacy interventions are appropriate responses to a motivational deficit and wholly inadequate responses to a structural one.

The second conclusion concerns the character of institutional trust as a policy variable. A mean institutional trust score of 2.08 across 178 respondents from four countries is a measure of observed institutional behavior over time, formed by rational assessment of available evidence. The Energy Community Secretariat infringement proceedings, the EU Progress Report assessments, the United Nations Children's Fund regional documentation of air quality conditions affecting child health,[6] and the Carnegie Endowment analyses of the Western Balkans ener-

[6] United Nations Children's Fund, "*The fight for air quality for children across the Western Balkans*", 2024.

gy transition,[7] all confirm the empirical basis of this assessment. Institutional trust of this depth cannot be addressed through communication strategies, stakeholder engagement events, or advisory councils without decision-making authority. It requires demonstrated changes in institutional behavior, specifically and measurably in the ecological domain, that are sustained over time.

The third conclusion is that the eco-digital infrastructure documented in this research is a genuine political resource that policy frameworks have consistently failed to channel into productive institutional engagement. Young people in the Western Balkans have built monitoring networks and cross-national solidarity structures for understanding ecological governance failure. These are prerequisites for effective policy implementation, not obstacles to it. European Union accession processes and foundation programming that treat youth ecological engagement as a problem of awareness or motivation rather than as a resource of civic knowledge will continue to produce the digital participation paradox described here, in which high engagement coexists with stable distrust and sustained institutional distance.

The fourth conclusion concerns demographic specificity in a way that existing youth policy frameworks in the region consistently overlook. The 25 to 29 age cohort records the highest digital ecological participation in the sample at 53.5%, above both the 18 to 24 cohort at 49.3% and the 30 to 35 cohort at 47.2%. This difference identifies a specific generational stratum that combines digital organizational capacity with sufficient civic socialization to sustain structured engagement across time, precisely the combination that distinguishes durable movement infrastructure from episodic mobilization. Policy interventions and foundation programming that target youth as an undifferentiated category, or that concentrate resources on the youngest cohort, assuming that digital nativity automatically translates into civic capacity, are directing support toward the wrong generational stratum. The strategic core of regional eco-digital activism lies in the 25 to 29

[7] Carnegie Endowment, "*The Green Transition and the Western Balkans*", 2023.

age group, and it resides there without institutional recognition, dedicated funding streams, or structural mechanisms that would convert its organizational capacity into formal participatory power. Sustained engagement with this cohort, through mechanisms that connect digital organizational infrastructure to binding input in regulatory processes, is the most direct available route from the current paradox of high engagement and low efficacy toward ecological governance that carries genuine democratic legitimacy.

Conclusion

The research captures a generation in a specific political context. The youth have done the analytical work of diagnosing what is wrong with the governance of environmental conditions in their countries, built the civic infrastructure of sustained digital engagement with ecological politics, and developed shared political vocabularies for describing slow harm, institutional delay, the decoupling of belonging from trust, and the precise mechanics of symbolic inclusion. By the available measures, they are engaged and capable and present. What the data also document is the systematic calibration of institutional arrangements to contain their engagement instead of respond to it, to welcome their symbolic participation while withholding the procedural action that would make it meaningful. This calibration is ecological postponement, observed from the civic side of its operation: the governance mode through which documented harm is converted into procedure and procedure into an indefinite horizon of almost-action. It endures through political cycles because deferral yields political benefits for those who administer it, and the familiar appeal to institutional incapacity functions as an alibi rather than an explanation. Understood in this way, the term describes a coherent mode of governance, more specific than slowness, inefficiency, or administrative dysfunction, in which the absorptive capacity of procedure, its ability to contain civic pressure within cycles of assessment, consultation, and planning, becomes a political product in itself. Each cycle generates documentation that demonstrates attention without remediation; each consultation

generates legitimacy without distribution of power; and finally, each plan generates an image of future commitment without obligation in the present. The consistency of this pattern across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia – countries that differ in political system, institutional structure, and EU integration status – identifies ecological postponement as a transferable political technology, structurally available wherever the costs of remediation exceed those of sustained deferral. The strong correlation between environmental conditions that affect the decision to remain and the difficulty of imagining a future is a measure of how a policy addresses this, describing what happens to political belonging when institutions manage civic pressure rather than ecological harm. It is the accumulated cost, in democratic terms, of the regional governance pattern this research has documented. Whether the eco-digital infrastructure of Western Balkan youth becomes a foundation for democratic renewal or remains an expression of democratic frustration will be determined less by what young people do next than by whether the institutions managing their exclusion can be held to account for the costs.

CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

502.175(497-15)

KUKOLJ, Srđan, 1983-
Conflict by another name ecological postponement as institutional strategy in the western Balkans [Elektronski izvor] / Srđan Kukolj.
- Belgrade : Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory : Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS ; Rijeka :
Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe, 2026 (Beograd : Institute for Philosophy and Social
Theory). - 1 elektronski optički disk (CD-ROM) : tekst ; 12 cm. - (Book Series Square ; [Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory,
University of Belgrade])

Sistemski zahtevi: Nisu navedeni. - Nasl. sa naslovne strane dokumenta. - Tiraž 50. - Napomene i bibliografske reference uz tekst.

ISBN 978-86-6190-047-1 (IPST)

а) Заштита животне средине -- Западни Балкан

COBISS.SR-ID 198971657