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## COMMON ACTION: CAN GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES PROPEL TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE IN MONTENEGRO?

**Abstract.** In recent years, grassroots organising has become important in advocating for the interests of local communities in spatial development processes in the Balkans. Though differing in terms of size, focus, and method, these initiatives seek to articulate dissatisfaction with the existing models of spatial governance, and to imagine, propose, and demand more just and inclusive alternatives. This paper focuses on grassroots activism contesting the top-down model of governing space in Montenegro. Based on a case-study analysis, it traces developments in the forms of organising and degrees of influence of three distinct initiatives, examining what their impact on the development of territorial governance approach may be.

**Key words:** spatial development, collective initiatives, planning policy, territorial governance.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the spatial planning system in Montenegro has become centralised (Dragović, 2021). This means communities affected by spatial development-related decisions are often bypassed when those decisions are made and they are left to grapple with the consequences. This paper examines the recent grassroots response to these processes and focuses on the local communities' activism resisting the way in which spatial resources are governed in Montenegro.

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By organising in a bottom-up manner to resist the projects imposed from the top, these communities articulate the need for creating a more inclusive, more just, and better integrated system of managing spatial development.

Spatial issues have long been a catalyst for civic action in Montenegro, from rural ecological movements (Komar, 2015; Baća, 2017a; Baća, 2017b), to collectives establishing various urban practices of commons (Čukić *et al.*, 2020). Many of these actions have been undertaken in response to the effects of the neoliberal model of spatial governance, which facilitates economic growth for narrow, privileged interests at the expense of balanced and sustainable development (Allmendinger, 2016). Golubchikov's description of the effects of the long transition process from state socialism to neoliberalism – “the economic collapse and marginalization, the rise of poverty and inequality, class division, the loss of prospects and hope for better life for many, uneven development, environmentally and ethically destructive consumerism, inter-ethnic conflicts and intolerance, the loss of social cohesion” (2016, p. 614) – is illustrative of the Montenegrin experience as well (see Djurić, 2003; Bieber, 2020). These economic, social, and political changes have a clear spatial component: “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2004), which through the privatisation of the industry, land, and natural resources has left many local communities that used to be reliant on these resources impoverished and vulnerable.<sup>1</sup> The bottom-up response to these pressures has also been spatial, in the form of organised protests against policies and projects founded on the extractive development model (see Baća, 2017b). As they are mounted in opposition to what can be described as a “set of politics injecting a new free-market ethic based on systematic deregulation and the radical de-politicization” (Monno, 2016, p. 7), these protest actions belong to the third wave of activism: often fragmented and lacking capacity to resist oppressive policies (Mayer and Boudreau, 2012) but necessary as the infrastructures of socio-environmental justice which continuously challenge neoliberal power (Monno, 2014). In Montenegro, such challenges have produced an array of distinctly spatialised results, from stopping the project that jeopardised the Tara Canyon in 2004 (Komar, 2015), to protecting the Valdanos Bay from privatisation and commercial exploitation through continuous action during the 2008–2014 period, to preventing the construction of a tunnel in the Gorica urban park in the centre of the capital city in 2012 and the successful 2010–2014 mobilisation against illegal waste disposal in the village of Beranselo (see Baća, 2017b). Furthermore, some of these actions gave way to other forms of joint spatial practices and struggles: the one in Beranselo grew into a nationwide movement and a symbol of civil resistance (Baća, 2017a), while the protests in the Gorica urban park have led to the emergence of Mediterranean Garden as urban commons, now governed by the civic association which originated from these protests (see Čukić *et al.*, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> On privatisation processes in Montenegro, see Džankić (2018); on social conditions of local communities see Šarović (2012) and Vukićević (2012).

These examples demonstrate the continuous impact that various forms of civic organising have on how space is developed and governed in Montenegro. However, they also show that this impact is limited and achieved through grassroots activism reacting to decisions imposed from the top down, rather than through coordination between actors and institutions and mobilised participation in the formulation and implementation of public policies, i.e., the process of territorial governance (ES-PON, 2013, p. 11). The territorial governance approach, with a focus on “negotiation and consensus-building” (OECD, 2001, p. 142), “intensive and continuous dialogue between all stakeholders of territorial development” (MUDTCEU, 2007, p. 2) and “cooperative process involving the various actors (...) at political, administrative and technical levels” (MUDTCEU, 2011, p. 15), offers a framework through which territorial development could be negotiated in a more efficient manner, ensuring spatial coherence of different policies and actions (Davoudi *et al.*, 2008) which is currently lacking in Montenegro, as the cases analysed in this paper show. While keeping in mind that territorial governance cannot be expected to solve the core problems of the neoliberal project (Gallardo *et al.*, 2019) and can eventually deepen neoliberal governance if imposed from the supra-state level (Tulumello *et al.*, 2019), it is worth considering how place-based knowledge and more tailor-made/context-sensitive/place-based governance arrangement (Oliveira, 2016) could improve the territorial development in Montenegro. Place-based knowledge does exist but remains largely untapped in the existing framework of spatial policy development and implementation, as the three cases presented here illustrate.

The cases – an activist-research group KANA / Who if not Architect, a coalition of local actions against small hydropower, and the Save Sinjajevina initiative – have been chosen for this analysis as examples of recent grassroots actions questioning the dominant model of decision-making and resisting its spatial outcomes. These three cases are not the only instances of such actions; indeed, several other examples could have been included (some of them presented in Čukić *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, this selection was made to showcase the diverse ways in which the current mode of territorial development is opposed in Montenegro through bottom-up organising. The three cases are heterogenous, but what they have in common is the impulse to contest top-down decisions, to intervene in the process, and to attempt to change it at a point when the governing structures have already pronounced it final and immutable. Furthermore, each of these initiatives succeeded in mobilising significant public support and changing the discourse surrounding the projects they opposed. They represent the persistent communal reaction to an exclusionary and increasingly centralised system of spatial governance (see Dragović, 2021) and demonstrate why it is crucial for such a system to be changed – and to adopt a territorial perspective.

By providing an overview of the decisions against which these actions have mobilised, along with an analysis of the mobilisations, this paper aims to show how these actions are formed and organised, what their methods are, and to what

extent they have been able to influence the decision-making processes related to spatial governance. The findings stem from the analysis of three case studies, based on data collected from direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and secondary sources such as newspaper coverage and social media records. Direct observation was used as the primary method in studying the case of KANA/ Who if not Architect: the author followed their 2015/2016 campaign and visited some of their protests, making observations which became the basis for some of the findings presented here. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Denis Mekić, one of the organisers in the coalition of local actions against small hydropower, and with Milan Sekulović, one of the founders of the Save Sinjajevina initiative. As for the secondary sources, most of the media coverage used here came from the “Vijesti” daily newspaper and news portal, an independent media house enjoying the highest level of public confidence in Montenegro (Safejournalists.net, 2021). Social media records came from Facebook, which was the dominant social media platform used by the initiatives analysed in this paper. The case studies are presented in individual chapters, followed by a discussion and some concluding remarks.

## 2. KANA/ WHO IF NOT ARCHITECT

The group KANA/ Ko ako ne arhitekt (Who if not an architect; hereinafter: KANA), a non-governmental organisation based in Podgorica, emerged from a 2015 campaign against a controversial downtown construction project. The project proposed building a 12-floor business tower in the city centre, on the bank of the Morača river, where such a structure would disturb the delicate balance between the existing built environment and the city’s natural landscape. The closeness of the new construction site to the building of Hotel Podgorica, one of the most important objects of modernist architectural heritage in Montenegro (Alihodžić and Stamatović Vučković, 2019), though not recognised as cultural heritage, was especially problematic. When it became obvious the project with a potentially vast impact on the cityscape was approved without a broad public debate on its implications, a campaign to stop the construction and protect the hotel building was started (Vijesti, 2015a); with it, a long-overdue debate about the politics of spatial development in Podgorica also began. Prior to this, the public response to the news of historic buildings and places in Podgorica being jeopardised by dubious new private developments was a mixture of distress and disbelief (Slobodna Evropa, 2013). The KANA group seems to have emerged as a reaction to this state of inaction; it opened a space to demand accountability in spatial planning and to propose a more participatory approach to urban governance.

The campaign started at the end of 2015 with a public statement from a group of young architects, criticising the construction project as invasive and the local government as susceptible to private investors' demands (Jovičević, 2015). The statement also addressed the planners and the architects associated with the project, highlighting the problem of their role in the profit-oriented processes of city building. The critique was well-received by the public, which emboldened the group to try gather support and pressure the local government into stopping the construction. In addition to traditional media channels, they used social media (KANA's Facebook page rapidly grew to several hundreds followers) and an online petition, which collected almost 1,500 signatures in less than a week (Petitions.net, 2015). The acronym in the group's name, KANA, stands for a rhetorical question "Who if not an architect?," emphasising the responsibility of planning and construction experts towards public interest; if they do not oppose the damaging practices in decision-making related to spatial development, who will? Moreover, KANA references the name of late Svetlana Kana Radević, the award-winning designer of Hotel Podgorica and one of the most important Montenegrin architects. Hence, by choosing its name, the KANA group signalled its priorities: to use their expertise to examine the established practices of spatial development and to honour the under-researched modernist heritage in local architecture and urbanism.<sup>2</sup>

These priorities were consolidated through the campaign against the new construction and for the protection of Hotel Podgorica, during which the KANA group started developing its research and action methods. The research involved analysing the decision-making process in the case of the new tower; based on the results, various forms of action followed. The most important one was to provide detailed explanations of the process and its implications in order to make it more accessible to the general public and to attract new allies, outside of the narrow professional fields of architecture and urbanism. To achieve this, the materials were disseminated through traditional media outlets and social media, often in short or nonconventional formats (collages, posters, and memes),<sup>3</sup> aiming to communicate efficiently and engage the audience.

Apart from analysing the process of urban governance and publicising the findings, the KANA group engaged in direct action by organising educational events and protest walks with up to a hundred participants (Vijesti, 2016a), securing support from architectural associations beyond the local context (Docomomo, 2015), and appealing to the governing institutions at the local and central levels.

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<sup>2</sup> The author gained substantial information about the work of this group through direct observation and participation in the protests organised by KANA.

<sup>3</sup> In this example, the historic clock tower of Podgorica is shown in relation to the future tower, so that the general public could understand the scale of the project; the collage was spread through social media: <https://www.facebook.com/koakonearhitekt/photos/255002168164411> [accessed on: 27.03.2021].

The campaign lasted throughout 2016, during which KANA identified irregularities in the process of granting the construction permit and discrepancies between detailed urban plan stipulations and the extent of the new construction (Vijesti, 2016b). The concerns raised by KANA resulted in an investigation by the Sector for Urbanism and Geodetic Inspection, which advised the authorities to revoke the construction permit. The advice was rejected, resulting in a series of complaints and lawsuits filed against the local authorities by the KANA group and by the Inspection. The latter won their case before the Administrative Court, which ruled the process of granting the construction permit should be re-examined (Vijesti, 2016c). However, by the time of this ruling was made, the construction was largely completed; it was never halted by the authorities, although its legitimacy was under review for an entire year. The campaign to recognise the building of Hotel Podgorica as cultural heritage was also unsuccessful; the initiative (Vijesti, 2016d) was mostly ignored by the Ministry of Culture, which maintained that the new construction was not a threat to the hotel's building.



Fig. 1. Hotel Podgorica with the new business tower in the background

Source: own work.



Even though KANA's 2015–2016 campaign did not result in the outcomes for which the group wished, it was not entirely unsuccessful: it provoked a conversation about the process of spatial planning and demonstrated how resistant it was to bottom-up challenges. Moreover, it created new connections within the community, and provided a platform for young spatial professionals to engage in the debate – with each other, with the public, and with the governing institutions – about the processes of spatial production. Finally, it helped increase the awareness of the public towards these processes and the ways in which they shape the urban environment (see Šimpraga, 2021). The business tower next to Hotel Podgorica is a constant reminder of this (Fig. 1), as is the work of the KANA group,<sup>4</sup> which continues to criticise profit-oriented urban planning practices and support local spatial justice initiatives (*ibid*).

### 3. COALITION OF LOCAL ACTIONS AGAINST SMALL HYDROPOWER

The project of developing small hydropower plants, although promoted and implemented globally as part of the effort to secure a more sustainable and renewable source of energy, has in recent years been criticised for the environmental damage it may trigger (see Pacara, 2016; Yuebo *et al.*, 2018; Temper *et al.*, 2020). In Montenegro, the central Government's program to support the construction of small hydropower plants in the mountainous northern region of the country was met with strong grassroots opposition, which brought together local communities, environmental activists, and expert associations (Slobodna Evropa, 2020). The protests were localised and small at first, as this chapter shows, but have grown into coordinated action over the years; now, their agenda includes not only halting harmful individual projects but changing the existing spatial governance decisions and processes so that they reflect the needs of local communities and address broader environmental concerns.

The program of exploiting hydropower in Montenegro started with the adoption of the Small Hydropower Development Strategy (Ministry of Economy, 2006) and was not designed to promote or, indeed, allow the involvement of local communities, even though they are directly reliant on local water streams. Instead, the decisions on the locations and conditions of exploitation were made by the central Government. The concessions were not always granted through public tenders, and the investors who gained them were often connected with the ruling political parties, which raised questions about the legitimacy of the process (MANS,

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<sup>4</sup> The author became more closely involved with the work of the KANA group and started collaborating with them after the events discussed in this chapter, therefore becoming more acquainted with the practice and more active in its work process and outcomes.

2017). Therefore, the program was burdened with a lack of transparency from the start, which only worsened when the first small hydropower plants became operational and the extent of the negative consequences they caused became obvious, all while receiving large public subsidies (MANS, 2018).

As the program progressed, it became clear that the initial plans for utilising small hydropower were based on outdated or insufficient data, resulting in false predictions of environmental effects and economic results (Green Home, 2015). Although the Small Hydropower Development Strategy (Ministry of Economy, 2006, p. 10) envisioned rich hydro potential of the depopulated and traditionally underdeveloped northern region of the country as the engine of its future economic growth, the results proved the opposite: instead of creating new jobs, excessive construction disrupted the ecosystems and hurt the local economies by interrupting the streams on which local communities depended for water and irrigation (Vijesti, 2018). At the beginning of the program development, the central Government did not consider these factors and granted concessions assuming the local communities would not object. Between 2008 until 2015, 43 small hydropower plants were approved for construction on 25 rivers and streams; by 2020, the number of approved plants reached 85 (Green Home, 2015; Slobodna Evropa, 2020).

Soon after the first constructions started, local communities began organising to oppose them. One of the first protests was held in Gusinje in 2011 against the dam on the Grlja river; it continued through communal gatherings and media campaign until 2015, when the concession contract was revoked after the central Government and the investor company spent years avoiding engaging with the protest by claiming it was the other party's responsibility to secure the consent of the local population (Vijesti, 2015b). The lack of clarity in the decision-making procedure prolonged the process while keeping the most affected communities excluded.

The protest in Gusinje was ultimately successful, but not all the constructions were as persistently contested. In the first few years of the program, many projects were successfully concluded. As the number of completed dams grew, so did the discrepancy between the project's positive and negative effects. The expected positives, such as job creation, new industries, and major infrastructure improvements were mostly absent, while the negatives, i.e. dry riverbeds, ruined landscapes, and water shortages, were overwhelmingly present (Vijesti, 2018). Local communities started challenging the projects openly and often physically, in a process that gradually became more massive and better organised. The pressure influenced the Ministry of Economy's 2013 decision to withdraw several concessions, although the main reasons for this action were the investors' failures to fulfil contractual obligations, along with the lack of local-level spatial planning documents, insufficiently developed electrical transmission-and-distribution network, and the difficulties with integrating the future power plants into the electrical power grid (Vijesti, 2013). The fact that these concessions had been approved before these administrative and infrastructural aspects were analysed shows that by making decisions based on in-



complete information and by failing to integrate different government levels and non-government actors in the process the central Government actively contributed to the problems caused by the extraction of hydropower in northern Montenegro.



Fig. 2. Protest against a hydropower plant in Bukovica

Source: photo by Svetlana Mandić.

Over the next few years, the resistance to the program grew: from 2017 until the end of 2020 protests were organised in several municipalities, most prominently in Plav (the Murinska, Đurička, and Komaračka rivers), Šavnik (the Bukovica river), Bijelo Polje (the Bistrica and Lještanica rivers), and Kolašin (the Čestogaz, Ljubaštica, Crnja, Rečinska, and Skrbuša rivers). Gradually, the protests transformed into joint actions, insisting that the right to clean drinking water and the local need for irrigation were more important than heavily subsidised private ventures.<sup>5</sup> Several civic initiatives and ecological organisations were formed in the process,<sup>6</sup> contributing to increased media presence and an overall strengthening

<sup>5</sup> From mid-2014 until the end of 2019, Montenegro has paid 13.4 million euros in subsidies to small hydropower investors (Vijesti, 2020a).

<sup>6</sup> The initiatives and organisations grew out of local protest actions: NGO Save River Komarača and All the Rivers of Montenegro (Sačuvajmo rijeku Komaraču i sve rijeke u Crnoj Gori) were formed in Plav, Save Bistrica (Za spas Bistrice) civic initiative in Bijelo Polje, NGO Ecological Movement Donja Bukovica (Ekološki pokret Donja Bukovica) in Šavnik. In 2019, together with several other environmental organisations from Montenegro, these initiatives formed the Coalition for Sustainable Development (Koalicija za održivi razvoj – KOR), a platform dedicated to the protection of natural and spatial resources (Dan, 2019a).

of the movement's inner support structure. Apart from planning protests, these initiatives organised community meetings, public discussions, media campaigns, and petitions signings. They sought the expert analyses of the government concessions-granting procedures and filed lawsuits to contest them. If these actions failed, the activists formed barricades to stop construction processes; some of them were sued by the investors (Vijesti, 2018b). The protest in Bukovica in 2019 (Fig. 2) turned into a month-long sit-in, which ended only after the Ministry of Economy promised to review the protesters' demands and reconsider the decision. The local mayor did not support the protest, but he announced that small hydropower projects would be subject to a municipal referendum in the future (Dan, 2019b), thereby acknowledging the previously unheeded need for broad public consultation and responding to the demands for a more transparent and participative decision-making process.

After several years of civic action, the issue of small hydropower became an important topic of the 2020 parliamentary elections in Montenegro. The coalition led by the United Reform Action party ran on the green agenda and promoted a "Declaration on the permanent ban on the construction of small hydropower plants", signed by several thousands citizens (Vijesti, 2020b). The elections resulted in the formation of a new government, which announced the revision of all concession agreements and the introduction of a permanent ban on the construction of small hydropower plants (BalkanGreenEnergyNews, 2020). Meanwhile, environmental activists have continued to support the locals in physically obstructing the ongoing constructions (Vijesti, 2020c, Vijesti 2020d), while constructing new ways to connect in the time of COVID-19-preventive distancing measures. According to Denis Mekić, one of the movement's organisers, the strategy is to develop a platform where local communities can review the mechanisms to resist the extractive projects – which have often been presented as *fait accompli* by the decision-makers – and find the necessary support to protect local natural resources (personal communication, 20 November 2020). The Sačuvajmo rijeke Crne Gore (Save the Rivers of Montenegro) state-wide initiative<sup>7</sup> was formed and the Bistrenje (Clarifying) podcast was started; these channels are used for expanding the conversation on environmental issues and cultivating the alliance between locals, organisers, and experts from Montenegro and the Balkan region. Mekić believes that in order to change political decisions regarding spatial development, the problem of environmental degradation must be articulated by the local communities first. The successes the movement has had show that persistent civic action can influence both finalised top-down plans and nascent political agenda.

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<sup>7</sup> Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/spasrijekacrnegore>

#### 4. SAVE SINJAJEVINA

Save Sinjajevina is a civic initiative which started in 2018, in reaction to the Ministry of Defence's plan to establish a military training field on the Sinjajevina mountain in northern Montenegro. Sinjajevina is the most extensive mountain range and the largest limestone plateau in the country, with an area of over 450 sq. km and a wealth of plant, animal, and fungal species (EPA, 2018). Its region extends across five municipalities (Mojkovac, Kolašin, Žabljak, Šavnik, and Danilovgrad) and is inhabited by approx. 20,000 people. Sinjajevina is one of the biggest pastures in Europe, utilised for cattle grazing by generations of transhumance herders (Domínguez *et al.*, 2020). However, since traditional agricultural work has subsided over the last decades, the local population decreased, leaving the pastures underused and underdeveloped. Nowadays, most Sinjajevina settlements offer the same infrastructure that existed 50 years ago: a network of poorly maintained roads, with no water supply and no power grid. Such inaccessibility made living on the mountain difficult, but it also conserved the natural ecosystem, situated in the vicinity of the internationally recognised protected areas of the Tara Canyon and the Durmitor National Park (UNESCO, 2018). Therefore, Sinjajevina was identified as a potential regional park in the Spatial Plan of Montenegro, adopted in 2008 and binding until 2020 (Ministry of Economic Development, p. 144). However, the plans to establish a military training ground in the same area were unveiled in 2018. This demonstrates the poor coordination between different governing levels and bodies. The case of Sinjajevina epitomises the spatial consequences caused by the lack of horizontal and vertical integration between different governing bodies, just as the case of the Save Sinjajevina initiative shows how civic engagement can problematise these consequences, intervene in the decision-making processes, and change their outcomes.

Different plans for Sinjajevina have originated within the same timeframe, but at various governing levels. The idea of forming a regional park was promoted at the municipal and regional scale: from 2013 to 2018 five municipalities of the Sinjajevina region cooperated on a EUR 300,000 project aimed at laying the groundwork for the regional park and funded partly from municipal budgets, but mostly (almost 70%) by the EU (Vijesti, 2019a). The project yielded several important results (an ecological conservation study, a road infrastructure reconstruction project, etc.) and ended with a proposal for an inter-municipal mechanism for the Regional Park management (*ibid.*) However, the decision to establish the park was never adopted at the municipal level due to a lack of a management model suitable for the inter-municipal cooperation and compatible with the existing legislative framework (*ibid.*) Therefore, the process of establishing the regional park was halted due to the shortcomings of regional-level spatial planning and management mechanisms.

Meanwhile, at the central level, the Ministry of Defence proposed Sinjajevina as the location for a new military training range. The idea was presented to the government in 2014 and the consent of competent ministries was secured by 2018 when the project was officially announced. The environmental impact of this scenario has never been assessed because the provisions of the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment (Parliament of Montenegro, 2018) do not apply to defence projects (Article 4). The municipal governments in the Sinjajevina region were informed about the plan after the project was already underway (Vijesti, 2019a).

The plan to establish a military training ground on Sinjajevina pastures surprised the residents of the region. According to Milan Sekulović (personal communication, 22 November 2020), a journalist from Sinjajevina and one of the founders of the Save Sinjajevina initiative, the reaction of the local communities was to reject the project openly and publicly, for two reasons: first, it was impossible to imagine that military exercises involving artillery and explosives would not cause damage to the natural habitat on which the communities of Sinjajevina pastures depend, and second, this plan was not discussed with these communities, even though they would have to bear the most immediate impact of its execution. Hence, the local communities started organising to protest, first within their villages and then at the municipal and regional levels.

In their first year (April 2018 – March 2019), the protest activities were limited to network and capacity-building. One of the first actions of the initiative, still informal and loosely coordinated, was to establish a social media communication channel, a Facebook page,<sup>8</sup> through which information could be shared and more support gathered. The community's members met with officials from the Ministry of Defence several times (Vijesti 2018c, Vijesti 2018d), but their concerns were left unanswered: the ministry refused to perform an environmental impact assessment, insisting the land of Sinjajevina was owned by the state and, therefore, should be managed as the central government intended (Vijesti, 2019b). Hence, the deliberate exclusion of the local communities from the decision-making process continued.

The Save Sinjajevina initiative was officially formed in March 2019 (*ibid.*) Throughout the following months, the initiative organised a media campaign, three protests at the mountain with several hundred participants (Vijesti, 2019c), and several performances in the capital city. It gathered national and international support from non-governmental organisations and political parties and collected more than 3,300 signatures for a petition urging the government of Montenegro to abandon the military project and establish the regional park (Slobodna Evropa, 2019). When the government decided in favour of the military project in September 2019, the initiative announced a more radical action against the planned military activities. The campaign continued throughout 2020 with increased media

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<sup>8</sup> Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/sacuvajmosinjajevinu>

attention,<sup>9</sup> which helped turn the spatial development of Sinjajevina into another prominent issue of the August 2020 parliamentary elections.

The most challenging part of the struggle against the military project came after the elections, even though the winning majority was sympathetic to the cause. While the new cabinet was being negotiated, the central government, then acting in a technical capacity, scheduled combat shooting exercises at the Sinjajevina training field. Members of the Save Sinjajevina initiative gathered at the designated location, occupied the space, and invited supporters to join them in physically stopping the training event. Resolved to prolong the sit-in until the Ministry of Defence cancelled the military exercise, the activists occupied the space for 50 days and nights, uninterruptedly, braving the sub-zero temperatures (Fig. 3.) The protest ended after the government of the new parliamentary majority was formed and it was able to guarantee that the immediate plans for military exercises would be cancelled and the entire project reconsidered (Vijesti, 2020e). The persistent action of local communities subverted the plan imposed from the top down. At this point, it remains unclear what the final decision on this issue will be, but it is unlikely to be made without the direct involvement of the Sinjajevina communities and a consideration of their needs.



Fig. 3. Sit-in protest on Sinjajevina

Source: photo by Jelena Jovanović.

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<sup>9</sup> An international statement of solidarity with traditional communities in Sinjajevina was published by Land Rights Now alliance and signed by 83 civic organisations from around the world (Land Rights Now, 2020).

## 5. DISCUSSION

The motivations behind the grassroots actions presented in this article demonstrate the spatial incoherence of the current development strategies and policies in Montenegro, while the processes and results of these actions show the potential that a more inclusive governance model could integrate, utilise, and rely upon. The policies adopted in the current decision-making framework, criticised by these initiatives for promoting spatial inequalities and environmental degradation, lack a territorial perspective. Improvement of the framework in accordance with territorial governance principles of cooperation would require the recognition of the place-based knowledge of local grassroots initiatives and inviting, rather than ignoring, their efforts to be heard and integrated in the process.

The analysis shows that the grassroots actions have utilised a variety of forms of organising (media campaigns, petitions, expert analysis, public debates, performances, protests, barricades, sit-ins, and legal action) through which their capacities gradually increased, and their structures have extended to other similar initiatives in the region or abroad. These connections offer the opportunity to solidify actions and create alliances, thereby increasing both the visibility of the problem and the pressure on the decision-makers, and increasing the chances of success. Social media play an important role in this process by facilitating information sharing and sustaining connections, which became particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results these efforts have produced by acting outside of the decision-making processes – results such as successfully contesting adopted spatial plans, changing the dominant narratives, influencing the agendas of major political parties, and turning the spatial development debate into a prominent theme of parliamentary elections – have clearly shown the necessity for and the potential of more collaborative and horizontal relations in spatial development decision-making processes in Montenegro. The territorial governance approach could be an answer to the demand for a more open and cooperative yet also more just and transparent process, through which local communities would acquire a legitimate space to be not only heard but listened to and actively involved in co-creating their spatial and social reality.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The centralised, top-down approach to governing the spatial resources in Montenegro has been repeatedly contested by grassroots actions of local communities, which have been deliberately excluded from important economic and political



decisions with significant territorial implications. Nevertheless, as evident from the case studies presented above, these communities have found ways to influence these processes from outside the existing system, through persistent spatial actions. By relying on communal networks and place-based knowledge, they have successfully built alliances, contested the imposed policies and projects, and demonstrated the need for a more context-sensitive governance arrangement.

The initiatives and coalitions emerging from these struggles offer important knowledge about the local and regional needs and potentials, as well as the sensitivity towards the territorial consequences of economic and political decisions. By adopting a territorial governance approach and constructing the spatial development decision-making process around full participation of local communities, Montenegro could tap into the insofar underused local potential and place-based knowledge. That kind of knowledge and awareness could be of great importance for tackling regional disparities and improving the entire system of governance in Montenegro – a system which needs to achieve functional horizontal and vertical integration, and begin to reflect the fact that each policy decision has an environmental consequence and a territorial character.

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