

# ACTIVISM IN HARD TIMES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

People Power

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## EVERYDAY ENVIRONMENTALISM

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This chapter focuses on everyday environmental activism and the countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter, BiH) and Russia as windows into understanding the motivations, actions, and impact of everyday activism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Everyday activism focuses on practical problems that people encounter in their day-to-day lives, attracting participation by regular citizens and often lacking formal organizational structure (Sundstrom et al., 2022). Citizens' repeated interactions with visible problems that are close to home may compel them to take action. By definition, this type of activism is primarily grassroots in nature, initiated by ordinary people and tending to start at the local or regional level, although it may develop, formalize, and expand over time.

Everyday activism often exhibits a strong attachment to a place or community. Local identities may coexist and compete with national patriotism (Polese et al., 2018). Thus, the values or emotions that drive activists to improve the quality of life in their home communities may differ from those of political opposition movements. This activism may not become visible to outside observers unless it generates large gatherings that attract media attention. Aggrieved citizens often first seek to solve their problems through institutional channels, asking bureaucrats or politicians to provide more information or resolve a complaint before resorting to protests.

As everyday activism tends to be bottom-up and decentralized, it can be hard to characterize tactically. The forms of activism are quite varied, with different networked participants taking the initiative at various times. This fragmentation may be beneficial, especially in less democratic contexts, as there is no "head" of the movement who can be decapitated but also may result in uncoordinated and ineffective activism. To sustain their campaigns,

everyday activists may need to formalize their efforts through organization building. Everyday activists generally have few resources at their disposal, relying more on volunteers, in-kind donations, or crowdfunding than donors. Everyday activists may accept support from established donors but only if it contributes to the original cause.

Everyday activism emerges around issues ranging from urban development and labor issues to minority cultural rights; yet, grassroots environmental activism is becoming increasingly common across CEE and beyond (Evans et al., 2006; Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2020; Maltby et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2023). Everyday environmentalism is tied to locally experienced environmental issues. The air people breathe; the water they drink and use for their crops; the soil they use to plant vegetables and fruit trees; the parks they use to cool off during sweltering summer days; the rivers, lakes, forests, and mountains that draw tourists to their communities. It includes efforts to preserve green space,<sup>1</sup> to object to air pollution,<sup>2</sup> and to decry waste disposal practices.<sup>3</sup> The activists we profile in this chapter, Samir Lemeš (BiH) and Sasha Ivanova (a pseudonym, Russia), offer examples of a shared commitment to place/community-based action driven by repeated interaction with a problem. These stories also provide examples of environmental activism at different ends of the spectrum of everyday activism in terms of how they engage average citizens; the issue of concern; their level of organizational structure; and their interaction with domestic and international networks, donors, and political authorities.

### **Samir Lemeš – fighting for clean air in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Samir Lemeš' breaking point occurred in 2009, when his father passed away. Lemeš could not separate his father's fate from the environmental conditions in his town. The air pollution resumed in his hometown of Zenica, BiH in 2008, when its newly privatized steel plant restarted production. Lemeš was sure that Zenica's air pollution, which is the worst in a country that has the world's fifth highest incidence of death by air pollution,<sup>4</sup> contributed to his father's premature death. Lemeš decided to join a group of citizens with no prior experience in civic activism, who gathered around a common cause: to force the steel factory and domestic officials to comply with environmental laws.

As a professor at Zenica University, Lemeš feels that it is his responsibility to teach his engineering students and improve society. Lemeš saw a devastating problem, an injustice in his community, and knew he was expected to do something about it. He is tackling a problem so complex it is, as a Bosnian saying goes, like trying to straighten the country's curvy Drina river. In this long battle, he is encouraged by his wife and by his upbringing in socialist Yugoslavia, which valued the common good over the profit of a few. Within

months of meeting informally to discuss what public actions they should take to advocate for clean air, concerned citizens registered Eko Forum Zenica<sup>5</sup> as a citizens' association in 2009. Lemeš believes that formalizing the group was needed to put pressure on political authorities, which own 8% of the factory, and on the multinational corporation ArcelorMittal, which owns the remaining 92%, to take them seriously.

Being taken seriously is no small task for a civil society organization (CSO) up against the world's largest steelmaker, whose turnover is 20 times the annual budget of BiH. The Government of the Federation of BiH,<sup>6</sup> moreover, has continuously prioritized employment and followed an unofficial policy of not discussing pollution for fear of deterring investment. With this said, the drawbacks of creating a CSO include the costs of office space, the insecurity of constantly seeking funding to support their work, and harassment and pressure by authorities.

Eko Forum wants the factory to live up to its pledge made in the privatization agreement to make investments to reduce emissions and to comply with BiH environmental laws and domestic government institutions to enforce laws. The initial strategies Eko Forum used to achieve these goals were unfortunately ignored. These included demanding public information about the privatization agreement, monitoring air quality, attending public hearings, and advocating for legal enforcement. Undeterred, Lemeš and fellow activists in 2012 organized a protest of thousands of Zenica citizens<sup>7</sup> (Photo 6.1). Buoyed by the large show of support, Lemeš took the microphone to voice their demands to state institutions and the factory's leadership. The protest got the attention of national and international media<sup>8</sup> and of municipal authorities, even if higher levels of government and the factory ignored them.

After the watershed protest, things started to change. Local authorities relented and began conducting regular public measurements of air quality,<sup>9</sup> which often showed sulfur dioxide levels at three times the legal limit (and more than 166 times the legal limit in the European Union (EU)). These toxic air quality measurements, which are made visible to the community on the roof top of Zenica's tallest building, led the city's Mayor to issue the first air quality alert in December 2013, compelling the factory to make temporary changes to reduce air pollution. Instantly, the air quality in Zenica improved. Yet, long-term investments in cleaner technology and installing filters were partial and slow. In 2015, Lemeš and activists at Eko Forum partnered with the Czech-based Arnika CSO, which works in all countries where ArcelorMittal owns factories, to sue the factory and federal authorities for violations of environmental laws. These charges finally got higher level governmental institutions to take notice of Eko Forum's demands.

Unfortunately, the politically influenced judicial system eventually dismissed the charges, arguing that the factory had already paid the penalties



**PHOTO 6.1** Samir Lemeš (with megaphone) prepares to speak to a citizens' march advocating for clean air that was organized by Eko Forum Zenica in 2012 (courtesy of Eko Forum Zenica).

(however paltry) and that Eko Forum failed to provide solid proof that the factory was responsible for intentionally polluting the air.

Undiscouraged, Lemeš and Eko Forum activists seized the opportunity of the upcoming expiration of the factory's environmental permit to press the Federal Government to raise fines for non-compliance with environmental laws. Low fines failed to punish polluters, because it was cheaper to pay fines than to make necessary environmental investments. In 2021, the Federal Government accepted a new regulation that raised fines, as Eko Forum requested. In the spring of 2022, the threat of higher fines forced the factory to finally conduct measurements of benzene concentrations in Zenica, an obligation that was delayed for more than a decade.

Another approach that brought change is working with international banks and financial institutions. Lemeš and Eko Forum deterred international banks from investing in the steel factory<sup>10</sup> and in a hydroelectric dam in Zenica<sup>11</sup> by raising the projects' non-compliance with environmental regulations. Finally, in 2020, these actions forced ArcelorMittal to invest in technologies to cut emissions. Lemeš believes that to achieve his goals, his activism needs to be fought simultaneously on two fronts: the local level and the international level. He also believes citizens are more likely to act if they see the problem

as an injustice that directly affects them, like toxic air. Lemeš has learned that to mobilize citizens to support environmental causes requires talking not just about climate change in general but also about the more visible and direct problem of air pollution.

Lemeš uses different types of media to engage local citizens. His first task was creating Eko Forum's website,<sup>12</sup> which documented the CSO's work, facts about the environment, and even financial reports,<sup>13</sup> which show how every dollar the CSO received has been spent. Lemeš views financial transparency as vital for building citizens' trust in CSOs. It also demonstrates that they are not just another "grant-catcher" CSO looking for high salaries but are genuinely committed to improving the environment. He complements regular appearances on TV with the use of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

Lemeš uses all these tools to encourage Bosnians to take action themselves, rather than wait for someone else to solve problems. Citizens' tendency to adapt to, rather than fight to improve, poor policies is learned through historical experiences with authoritarianism and the country's painful transition from socialism. This behavior is also nurtured by religious and political officials. Encouraging sustained engagement, particularly by youth, who Lemeš sees as either tending to avoid problems or participating in a single action and then disengaging after it does not immediately achieve results, requires creativity. One such effort was awarding Certificates of No Appreciation on the CSO's 10th anniversary<sup>14</sup> to groups that failed to fight for cleaner air. For Lemeš, effective environmental activism uses plain and concise language to inform and engage local citizens while also providing expertise and putting pressure on institutions to improve policies and law enforcement.

Despite encountering many challenges, Lemeš and Eko Forum's activism has achieved tangible benefits. Zenica's air, on average, is less polluted now than it was when the steel factory started working again in 2008. They also improved environmental permits, introducing clear deadlines, significantly raising penalties for violations, and making emission limits stricter. In addition, environmental activists have compelled authorities to provide the public with reports on emissions<sup>15</sup> and the implementation of environmental action plans,<sup>16</sup> as well as a register of polluters.<sup>17</sup> One of the major obstacles that Lemeš has confronted in his environmental activism is the lack of relevant scientific information. While activism resulted in regular and public measurements of sulfur dioxide in Zenica's air, the community lacks the precise scientific information that would pinpoint the factory as the source of carcinogenic elements in the air and the negative health outcomes. Lack of this specific information hampered the criminal case Eko Forum filed against ArcelorMittal and domestic authorities. Not surprisingly, none of the domestic institutions, which are influenced by political and economic factors,

are interested in producing this information. They simply ignore or obfuscate the problem instead of finding solutions.

As a result, a priority for Lemeš is conducting genotoxicity testing, which would provide scientific evidence connecting the factory to carcinogenic elements in the air and their adverse public health consequences. Eko Forum did manage to obtain international funding for sampling, performing DNA tests, and conducting an analysis. It also changed the environmental permit, requiring ArcelorMittal to measure concentrations of carcinogenic air pollutants throughout 2023. Building on their success in deterring banks to invest in projects harming Zenica's environment, Lemeš is currently working with colleagues to use the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's Complaint Resolution Mechanism<sup>18</sup> to demonstrate ArcelorMittal's non-compliance with conditions for a European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) loan.<sup>19</sup>

To achieve cleaner air in Zenica and in BiH, Eko Forum needs more younger activists to engage. It also needs multi-year funding that allows them to do the work they know needs to be done, instead of the work donors prioritize. Even when laws change, there will always be self-interested individuals who are eager to find new investors, draw out legal challenges, demobilize activists, and undermine enforcement of laws. Thus, the battle for clean air and a better environment is on-going for Lemeš.

### **How everyday environmentalism connects local and global concerns**

Lemeš' family suffered harm from air pollution, which highlighted a devastating problem in his local community. As a result, he took action. Action on concrete problems by citizens without prior experience in formal civil society organizations is a hallmark of everyday activism. As mentioned in the Introduction, everyday activism is an increasingly popular expression of domestic rather than foreign donor-driven activism. In nationally representative surveys conducted in 2019 in BiH and Russia, for example, respondents were more likely to report that their activism was motivated by a concrete rather than an abstract problem (Pickering, 2022). Lemeš' activism was encouraged by repeated interaction with a local problem. But he boldly took on a corporation with global reach and unresponsive political authorities for an extended time. As he indicated, this requires waging a battle simultaneously at the local and global levels.

Lemeš' account challenges scholarly assessments that Russia and BiH's historical experience with decades of rule by communist parties has solely weakened the capacity of these societies to engage in civic activism (Introduction). Instead, Lemeš and other activists have identified positive aspects of the socialist legacy with its emphasis on the common good, rather than individual profit, and rhetoric about the importance of collective action.

In the socialist period, citizens also developed expectations around the government's guarantee of their social rights to things like health care and basic social services (Smyth & Sokhey, 2021). Examples of civic activism that helped bring down communist governments in the late 1980s and develop democracies in CEE include environmental movements that emerged in reaction to the dramatic harm caused by the explosion of Ukraine's Chernobyl nuclear power plant and to address damage from Communist-party-led rapid industrialization drives.

However, civic activists in CEE struggled after regime change in 1989 and 1991, and Lemeš' everyday activism stands out in a region whose citizens have been commonly characterized as passive (Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans, 2019; Dvornik, 2009; Džihic et al., 2018; Fiket & Pudar Draško, 2018; Pinjo Talevska, 2019; Rakaj-Vrugtman et al., 2019; Vishinova & Mladenovska, 2022). There are many scholarly explanations for societal disengagement, including the networks and expectations of the socialist past; political culture, low levels of trust; partial economic reforms leading to deindustrialization and reduced social services (Howard, 2003; Jowitt, 1992; Mishler & Rose, 1997). And in BiH, war. In addition, people in post-socialist societies that have become more religious use it as an excuse for not civically engaging, saying things like "nothing can be done, it is just God's will" (Ipgrave, 2008; Naumescu, 2007; Pipes, 2015; Wax, 2021).

There is also a gap in generational mentalities, where young people lose interest in activism after a few days or avoid problems rather than trying to solve them (Galimberti, 2017). In BiH, young people's dominant coping strategies of "tuning out," as Lemeš mentions, or "getting out" through emigration<sup>20</sup> from villages or small towns with struggling economies like Zenica is a formidable obstacle for civic activism (Perry & Stefanovski, 2021). This is why engaging youth is such a priority for sustaining Eko Forum's activism.

Activists in Russia and BiH working for social change who persisted in the 1990s and early 2000s did so under difficult economic and political conditions. Russia was mired in a prolonged economic recession, limiting domestic sources of financial support and preoccupying the population. While the Russian state did not actively repress social organizations during this period, it failed to offer a predictable arena for policymaking and governance that activists could navigate (Evans et al., 2006; Henderson, 2001). War in BiH between April 1992 and December 1995, in which nearly 98,000 citizens were killed and 2.2 million forcibly displaced, created even tougher conditions for civic activism in the 1990s (Cutts, 1999). The effectiveness of international aid to BiH after the war has been undermined by the internationally endorsed ethnic power-sharing rules that monoethnic nationalist parties have manipulated to dominate politics and the economy and demobilize civic activists (Gordy, 2015; Mujkić, 2015; Milan, 2019; Puljek-Shank & Fritsch, 2019).



As a result of these challenging domestic conditions, many civic activists working in both countries seized on opportunities to participate in transnational dialogues and partnerships, relying heavily on international donors. To attract international donors, these activists often had to create organizations and develop projects – even before attracting a robust base of supporters in their local communities. This dynamic emphasizes global forces over local ones. This is why the most common form of environmental activism in the 1990s was based in NGOs. Laura Henry's (2010) research on environmental activism illustrates how new organizations were encouraged by donors to professionalize and develop their capacity, similar to interest groups in Western political systems.

While these organizations had some success in changing attitudes and laws in Russia and BiH, scholars identified important challenges to their work (Belloni, 2020; Bojicic-Dzelilovic et al., 2013; Fagan & Sircar, 2015; Martus, 2017; McMahan, 2017; Oldfield, 2005; Yanitsky, 2010). As with other types of organizations we mention in the Introduction, these challenges included donor-driven agendas, the NGO-ization or projectization of civic work, and the elevation of English-speaking activists preferred by international donors. Consequently, these social organizations were often detached from their domestic constituents, failing to reflect their priorities and to bring tangible change (Henry, 2010).

In Putin's Russia, the government came to view many of these organizations with suspicion, as not representative of the country's national interests, characterizing many of them as “foreign agents” (Tysiachniouk et al., 2018). In BiH, nationalist parties and many citizens also grew skeptical of Western-funded NGOs, if not as deeply as in Russia (Perry & Stefanovski, 2021). Lemeš illustrates how some activists have tried to rectify some of the negative consequences of NGO-ization. Eko Forum has worked to address citizens' concerns about NGOs by practicing financial transparency, using plain language to talk to citizens about the concrete problem they are tackling, their achievements, and why the work is important for citizens' health. At the same time, Eko Forum seeks donors who empower rather than dictate their work to improve air quality.

Yet, the backlash against NGOs in the 2010s throughout CEE has contributed to governments “shrinking the space” for civic activism, which our book stresses as part of the recent “hard times” in CEE. This backlash also facilitates shifts toward more locally based and informal, grassroots activism. In BiH, ruling parties have tightened their control over political and economic institutions, rewarding those loyal to them with jobs, cultivating compliance through promoting the idea that change is not possible, while punishing critics through harassment and threats of job loss (Perry & Stefanovski, 2021). Lemeš, for example, was targeted by social media and a defamation lawsuit (which he won), and Eko Forum has suffered harassment

from public authorities, who dislike the organization's political independence and efforts to hold public authorities and the factory accountable.

Meanwhile, Russia has moved from a part authoritarian, part democratic regime reliant on compliance from a disengaged majority to a "hard" authoritarian one (Volkov, 2012). Laws adopted around the full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have made public action even more dangerous for Russian activists like Sasha Ivanova. To protect her safety, we use a pseudonym. Taking into account these contexts, we view local communities in Russia and BiH as sites both conducive to everyday environmentalism but also difficult for such activism to realize change.

### **Sasha Ivanova – building sustainable rural communities in Ukraine**

Some everyday activists do not engage in organization-based advocacy directed toward the state or private companies. Indeed, they may not even address mainstream environmental problems such as pollution, waste, and the preservation of green space. Instead, these activists may choose to work on small projects, engaging directly with "ordinary" people beyond the urban context, where activism is more likely to flourish. This everyday environmental activism is, instead, centered on community-building and changing each participant's lived experience. Prefigurative activism<sup>21</sup> is a type of new social movement activity in which participants try to craft a life that embodies their principles and to construct communities based on alternative models of social organization. Such models often focus on sustainability and seek to avoid hierarchy. This is another form of everyday activism and may be especially likely in countries where the political and legal context for activism is highly repressive, as in Putin's Russia today.

Sasha Ivanova has attempted to construct several sustainable communities in Russia since the 1990s, drawing upon Russia's rural heritage and blending it with more recent sustainability practices. Trained as an economist, Ivanova could have pursued more conventional environmental activism and occasionally has worked as a team member on grant-funded international projects. But she ultimately found more value in efforts to revitalize a rural community and to pass on the traditional, sustainable practices of the Russian countryside. In the course of these efforts, Ivanova's activism confronted the challenges prevalent in rural areas across Russia<sup>22</sup> – poor infrastructure and services, high costs, depopulation – while also celebrating the joy of returning to the land. While these community-based projects were difficult to sustain in the long run, Ivanova still expresses pride in how this model of activism provides people with a hands-on opportunity to experience sustainable living and to change their conceptions of the world and their role in it.

In explaining her journey to everyday environmental activism, Ivanova recounts how each summer as a child she had the opportunity to leave the

city where she attended school to live with her extended family in their village. These summers in the countryside allowed Ivanova to explore the forest and inspired her deep love of nature. After initially studying biology in school, at university, Ivanova decided to switch to economics. She attempted to connect her two interests by researching environmental economics and natural resource management.

After graduating from university in the late 1990s, Ivanova moved to a village with her husband. The village was small, but Ivanova discovered that there was a club focused on nature and health in the capital city of the region. She made contact and became friends with the members of this club, eventually inviting them to visit her village. Together, they began to imagine environmentally oriented programs related to health that could take place in the village. They decided to start a small family camp to offer urban parents and children the chance to experience life in the countryside. Over time, news of the camp spread through friends and family networks. Ivanova began to offer more programs to a wider array of people. Programs ranged from the study of ecology and the promotion of healthy living to demonstrations of how traditional practices from the village can still be used today to cultivate sustainability in food production, shelter, energy use, and even recreation.

Ivanova had many motives for undertaking this work. She is passionately committed to a sustainable lifestyle for her own family, and she is a natural educator. Her life experience had also given her connections in both urban and rural areas, and she wanted to bridge this divide. In the midst of Russia's economic and social crisis of the 1990s,<sup>23</sup> she wanted to try to create a community for herself and others. As Ivanova recounts, "Why did I do it? Well, I wanted to make connections beyond my children and neighbors and to cultivate some kind of wider engagement, some kind of exchange of experience." Ivanova views community-building as the most valuable result of her activism.

Ivanova's efforts continued to grow over the course of several years. The work was concentrated in the summer months when the countryside was more accessible, and visitors could camp or live in unheated accommodations. Ivanova engaged in outreach to summer vacationers in the area and descendants of those who had lived in this village. She also asked her neighbors to help with the programs, drawing on their knowledge of how to survive and be self-sufficient in remote and climatically challenging areas of Russia. Eventually, visitors to Ivanova's camp and other environmental programs came not only from the relatively proximate regional capital but also from St. Petersburg, Moscow, and beyond.

At this point, Ivanova did not describe herself as an activist. Her life was multifaceted and busy. She was the primary caregiver for her three children, but after the birth of her third child, she decided to return to graduate school to study the economic aspects of sustainable development, even as

she continued her summer activities in the village. In her graduate courses, Ivanova met a small group of people who were interested in environmental activism and research. At that time, in the early 2000s, this group began a dialogue with some U.S. environmental organizations and began to envision how they could work together; they also interacted with international donors to Russian civil society organizations, a trend that was common then.<sup>24</sup>

In one memorable collaboration, Ivanova hosted an international group of scientists and activists in her village to discuss how to protect bodies of water in the area and analyze water quality. Ivanova invited teachers and schoolchildren from the districts neighboring the village to learn these techniques as well. Inspired by this experience, Ivanova applied for a small grant to work with local schoolchildren and teachers on the conservation of lakes and rivers. Ivanova states, “In this way, my activity in my village and my wider work are intertwined. For me, this is a special kind of activism.”

In the early 2010s, Ivanova moved to a village in a new region, where she lived for eight years. In this new village, her ambitions went beyond organizing a family camp. Ivanova tried “to create an ecological community – a community based on ecological and social principles with a social organization that is not hierarchical.” For this community, Ivanova sought to synthesize knowledge she had gained about village life in Russia and put it into practice. Eventually, Ivanova pooled resources with several like-minded friends and bought four inexpensive houses in a remote, run-down village. She invited her acquaintances and colleagues from various cities to contribute to this idealistic and ambitious project. And some of her university colleagues arrived with their students in tow. Soon after, they broke ground for a large vegetable garden guided by principles of traditional peasant agriculture in the region. They purchased livestock – two cows, a horse, ten goats. Ivanova and her partners also devised a cultural program to entertain and enrich the participants. “People came to be educated, to learn how to do things ecologically and in a traditional way. It is very valuable for them to see how it is possible to live on earth and to try to do something with their own hands.”

The community was run on a collaborative basis, with daily planning meetings and rotation for different tasks. Everyone contributed to the substantial, common work of the community – preparing food, tending the garden, and caring for livestock. They sowed grain and planted potatoes. The community also sponsored social activities, which included physical training, yoga, singing lessons, and theatrical performances. Ivanova fondly remembers intense discussions late into the night. Of this period, Ivanova recalls, “Of course, it was difficult, but this was the best time.”

For example, when Ivanova first started the community garden, she found that the soil seemed poor and depleted. She invited an expert in permaculture<sup>25</sup> who taught classes about soil regeneration. Four years later, this expert

returned and marveled at the improvement in the soil, even though the community had been growing crops throughout that period. Ivanova drew a broad lesson from this experience that goes beyond gardening. “In our country, the soils are generally depleted, but we saw that we could increase its fertility. This is a specific result that meant a lot to me, and it shows what is possible.” It is this kind of practical example that inspires Ivanova that broader ecological and social change is possible in Russia.

Many of those who joined the community, seeking a more environmentally friendly lifestyle and an escape from urban culture, had faced serious problems in the past and were escaping personal difficulties. As a result, Ivanova recounts how the community became a kind of rehabilitation center. “We are not professionals, not psychologists, but we started to study how to help people with different kinds of rehabilitation.” Ivanova recounts the story of a middle-aged man<sup>26</sup> who just appeared one day and ended up living in the community for more than four years. She also recalls how much he changed while living in the community, developing new interests and adapting his worldview, finally leaving as a completely different person. Ivanova concludes, “People’s horizons expanded in our community.” Ivanova envisioned the community as a microcosm for broader social and environmental renewal in Russia.

From the start, however, the sustainable community was challenging to maintain. The living conditions were difficult and the housing rudimentary, with many people sleeping in one room. It was a non-commercial venture and thus had little revenue. They relied on volunteers to contribute labor and teach. Any money paid by visitors was funneled into hiring master craftsmen to teach courses and contribute to the community’s restoration or to purchase necessary food to supplement what they could grow. Ivanova never received a salary for her efforts. Occasionally, they were involved in small, grant-funded projects that brought in modest funds. For example, in 2020, a group of Russian university students engaged in an EU-funded project to study adaptation to climate change in rural Russia hired Ivanova as a partner and used the village as a base for their research.

The challenges began to mount over time. The community faced rising prices<sup>27</sup> and rural depopulation.<sup>28</sup> “The local area emptied out, there was almost no one left in the countryside – some died due to old age and some left.” Services from the Soviet era also began to disappear, including a relatively nearby shop and library. The government no longer maintained the road to the village, snow was not plowed, and firewood was no longer delivered to support villagers. In this struggle, “You can only rely on your own strength,” Ivanova concluded.

Recalling the end of this experiment in rural sustainability: “I realized that we could not continue further. We could no longer fulfill our ecological or educational tasks, our mission. What happens next? We don’t know. It’s not

easy.” Ivanova notes that while some environmental activists are focused on passing legislation, her passion has always been sustainable development. She has focused on the quality of each person’s unique experience with the environment. Ivanova hopes to continue this work in the future. “Even if a person came to our community for a short time or came only once, the experience will influence him somehow, change him in some way. The village is such a natural environment for me because you are directly in contact with nature. That is what I am interested in.”

### **What facilitates everyday environmentalism?**

Ivanova’s experience, alongside Lemeš’ work with Eko Forum, demonstrates the breadth of what we might mean by everyday activism. Ivanova’s work is undeniably more limited in its scale and scope. For example, Ivanova did not build a formal organization or scale up her activism to broaden its reach. Instead, she worked informally, drawing participants from within friendship and professional networks mostly in a rural setting. Yet, Ivanova’s efforts are also a response to the broader context for activism in CEE and especially in Putin’s Russia. She saw her work on sustainability as responding to multiple, overlapping crises in post-Soviet Russia – environmental, economic, and social. In Ivanova’s view, self-interested political authorities make progress on sustainability unlikely.

Over time, Ivanova’s concerns about engaging the authorities were borne out both by her contentious interactions with some local educational officials who were skeptical of her courses for school children and by broader trends such as the Russian government’s label leading of some environmentalists as “foreign agents”<sup>29</sup> for their efforts to change policies. Ivanova’s orientation toward politics is, in part, a reflection of Russia’s more authoritarian political context. Her work also represents an alternative “theory of change.”<sup>30</sup> Specifically, Ivanova hopes that the personal transformation of many individuals experiencing a connection to nature will lead to broader political transformation. In that sense, Ivanova’s embrace of local activism is an effort inspired by international norms and discourses around sustainability to look within Russian history and culture for appropriate models of development.

As Lemeš and Ivanova’s stories illustrate, there are both negative and positive drivers of everyday environmental activism. On the negative side, persistent and pervasive corruption, which is facilitated by weak institutions responsible for enforcing the rule of law, has become a shared grievance in BiH and Russia. A key goal for Lemeš and many everyday activists interviewed across BiH is to get the political authorities to follow and enforce laws that exist mostly on paper. There is also a widespread sense among ordinary people that elites are gaining at the expense of the average person. As Ivanova’s story demonstrates, many governments’ increasing restrictions

on rights has limited the ability of civic activists to advocate for change through formal organizations; at the national political level; and, in Russia, by using foreign funding. Large mobilizations for political change in 2011/12 in Russia (Dollbaum, 2020) and in 2014 in BiH (Arsenijević, 2014) failed to achieve desired results. Authorities in both countries resisted changes, punished protesters, and further closed the civic and political space.

In BiH and Russia, these failures shifted activism to the local level, where community-based activism, like Ivanova's for sustainable development or Lemeš' for clean air, might garner more community support and also realize change (Puljek-Shank & Fritsch, 2019). Ivanova changed lived experiences and minds, while Lemeš and fellow Eko Forum activists improved Zenica's air quality and environmental permitting requirements. Public corruption and global climate change have exacerbated locally experienced environmental problems. At the same time, local campaigns may be able to connect with transnational environmental actors who focus on scientific evidence that links adverse health impacts, for example, to air pollution (World Health Organization, 2014).

On the positive side, technology increasingly facilitates information-sharing, networking, and crowdfunding, which can partly substitute for organization building. Social media also allows for self-representation and alternative framings to the state-dominated media. Economic growth and rising living standards have created greater material security for citizens – security threatened by economic downturns. In addition, relative stability at home and greater exposure to politics outside of one's home country have led to higher expectations for governance.

Other positive drivers are linked to where political opportunity structures provide space for civic activism. As Ivanova and Lemeš illustrate, much of everyday environmentalism focuses on problems at the local level, which is further away from political power struggles at the national level. Local problems often have a closer chain of accountability, which encourages local politicians to be responsive to local citizens vs. a national party, particularly in decentralized countries like BiH and Ukraine after the EuroMaidan Revolution in 2014 (Shapovalova, 2019). The high salience of local, place-based problems that people experience repeatedly in their daily lives facilitates mobilization. One study of recent environmental activism in Ukraine, for example, found that individuals' activism started as a response to accruing problems, such as living next to and experiencing daily polluted areas and rivers (Pietrzyk-Reeves et al., 2022).

A plethora of serious local environmental problems have spurred activism across CEE. The following examples highlight how local peoples throughout CEE have stepped up to fight environmental threats produced by industry, development and landfills to their communities' water, soil, air quality, and green space. In response to growing problems with air pollution in their

communities, activists in Russia and in Poland have demanded authorities take action. Residents of the Russian city of Chelyabinsk demanded that the city and regional authorities address a persistent smog known locally as “black sky.” The pollution exacerbates suffering by Chelyabinsk residents, who already experience high levels of cancer and other diseases<sup>31</sup> due to several major Soviet-era accidents<sup>32</sup> involving radioactive contamination. Following citizens’ repeated protests<sup>33</sup> and their grassroots pollution monitoring system<sup>34</sup> that challenges official data, the Federal Government in 2021 required<sup>35</sup> cities like Chelyabinsk with severe air pollution to develop strategies to mitigate the problem.

In Poland, which has the dirtiest air in the EU, residents have joined Polish Smog Alert,<sup>36</sup> an umbrella organization of initially three community-based initiatives in severely polluted communities that grew to 44 initiatives working to monitor and improve air quality (Maltby et al., 2022). The more open political system in Poland has created opportunities for these environmental activists to use a variety of initiatives: citizen use of air quality apps, protests, participation in public consultation, and media campaigns. Activists’ focus on the specific adverse health effects of air pollution, particularly on children – rather than on climate change more generally – has helped everyday activists in Poland garner support from the public, the Catholic Church, and populist leaders. Environmental activism contributed to 10 of 16 Polish regional governments adopting anti-smog resolutions (Metalfachtg, 2022).

In BiH, citizens have also mobilized against threats to their communities’ water by hydropower plants and landfills. Concerned that construction of a mini-hydropower plant would jeopardize water for drinking and crops, women in the village of Kruščica, BiH,<sup>37</sup> camped out for over 500 days and endured violence, blocking the project. The success of these ordinary citizens encouraged citizens in other small communities across BiH to prevent construction of these mini-hydropower plants approved through non-transparent procedures and pushed by investors with close ties to the authorities. Their activism also contributed to and was supported by a network of informal and formal activists, working for ten years at the local, national (the Coalition for the Protection of Rivers in BiH<sup>38</sup>), and international levels (Save the Blue Heart of Europe<sup>39</sup>). Harnessing activism that is rooted in local problems and identities, this movement scaled up action, achieving a 2022 ban on the construction of mini-hydropower plants in half of the country<sup>40</sup> (the Federation entity) and an end to subsidies in the other half (Republika Srpska) (Kurtic, 2022; Puljek Shank & Popov-Momčinović, 2022).

Hazardous landfills have spurred angry citizens into civic action in Russia and BiH. Russian environmental activists led the “Russian North is Not a Dump!”<sup>41</sup> campaign to protest plans for an enormous landfill near the Shies railway station. The landfill was intended as a repository for trash from Moscow, approximately 1,200 km away. In 2018–2019, local residents from



nearby towns and villages used social media networks to coordinate protests across the region. In January 2019, some activists established a camp near Shies<sup>42</sup> and blocked the delivery of fuel and equipment to the construction site. After local government officials and activists won a series of court victories<sup>43</sup> in 2020, the project was abandoned. In BiH, the local civic movement “Jer me se tiče” (“Because it matters to me”) started a litigation case against the environmental permit for a city dump in 2019. The movement was started by residents living next to the dump, whose toxins poisoned the neighborhood’s soil and water. After years of harassment, lawsuits against activists, and bans on gatherings, the court finally decided in December 2022<sup>44</sup> that Mostar city council must close the city dump and find a new location for communal waste disposal.

Thousands of residents of the Russian city of Ekaterinburg in May 2019 protested a plan to build a cathedral in a popular downtown park.<sup>45</sup> Protesters lamented the lack of recreational sites in the city, with one commenting, “There are three green spaces in the city center and they’re taking one away.”<sup>46</sup> When confronted by riot police, protesters shouted “This is our city!”<sup>47</sup> Citizens demanding the preservation of the park eventually emerged victorious, after the authorities calmed the situation by organizing a referendum on the issue.

Efforts by activists to halt construction of a planned nuclear waste disposal site<sup>48</sup> for the Croatian and Slovenian-owned nuclear power plant Krško near BiH’s natural park “Una” and just hundreds of meters away from the water supply have been more difficult. While the local NGO “Green Team” started an advocacy campaign<sup>49</sup> against this project on Croatia’s side of the border and even managed to engage some politicians, the effort has confronted many political obstacles. Not even referral to the international treaties such as the ESPOO Convention or Aarhus Convention<sup>50</sup> has helped, as key Bosnian politicians are influenced by and acting in the interest of Croatia. The power of actors beyond a country, such as neighboring governments in the proposed Krško nuclear waste disposal site or the multinational corporation (MNC) ArcelorMittal, to pollute in CEE has compelled many activists to engage cross-national networks of local environmental activists to hold polluters accountable. For example, the Czech NGO Arnika<sup>51</sup> has coordinated efforts by NGOs in the 16 countries where ArcelorMittal works to share experiences and find ways to make the MNC more environmentally responsible.

## Challenges and the future

Everyday activism is a big tent – encompassing a wide variety of issues, campaigns, and tactics. Some everyday activist movements succeed in drawing attention to their demands and changing minds or policy, though many struggle to sustain themselves. What these activist efforts have in

common is their roots in the “everyday” in two senses of the term: first, in the nature of the problems addressed and, second, in the movements’ early participants. The everyday problems that people directly experience in their daily lives sometimes inspire them to demand change from the status quo, often because they perceive that their own or their family’s health or quality of life is at risk. We have considered activism focused on issues ranging from air pollution to waste disposal and healthy food production to green space. Everyday participants are those people who come to activism without previous experience in campaigns, protests, or politics. In other words, they are not professional activists – NGO staff members or specialists in the issue, and they rarely are paid for their involvement. They, instead, are individuals who are motivated by concern, frustration, and a sense that if they do not act, who will?

A great advantage of everyday activism is that it can start small. Over time, everyday activism may grow beyond its modest beginnings. The challenges of scaling-up and sustaining a movement, however, can be especially acute for new activists who have little experience at raising funds, rely on volunteers, or work in communities with few resources. In addition, few environmental issues are truly confined to a specific locality. Air pollution may be caused by a local factory owned by a multinational corporation with headquarters in a distant capital. To address the problem, activists may need to develop the organizational capacity to carry out multifaceted campaigns over time and to overcome skepticism of NGOs to attract new participants. They may need to extend their reach to identify regional and international partners who can offer funding or increase their leverage over an MNC. Sustaining activism also can be hard, due to the difficulty of engaging young people, especially if they are more likely to leave the area to escape problems than to voice their concerns (as in BiH).

Another challenge of everyday activism is how activists relate to politics and those who work in government institutions. To resolve pressing issues, activists often must engage the authorities at different levels, contacting the relevant municipal or regional elected officials or bureaucrats in charge of the issue to change and/or implement policies. Indeed, elected authorities have often exacerbated the problem by making decisions without considering their adverse environmental impact. Such harmful policymaking often compels grassroots activists to push back against political authorities, not out of ideological or partisan motives – as claimed by their detractors – but out of evidence-based concern for environmental and health damage. Yet, local political institutions and networks can be difficult to navigate. Local politicians may capture local power, controlling local media, funneling funds to friendly CSOs, steering employment and investment to loyalists, and deflecting blame. They may have the power to intimidate, punish, or defame those who speak out.

Many everyday activists see little value in engaging deeply in party politics or in politicizing their activism. In fact, activists may choose to frame their demands as “apolitical” – simply “enforcing existing laws” or demanding basic “good governance.” An apolitical approach seeks to bolster activists’ legitimacy by conveying that they have no ulterior motive of profit or political power and to attract the broadest range of possible sympathizers. Communist party rule left its mark in a deep public cynicism about and distrust of politicians and view of the political arena as corrupt. By engaging authorities in post-socialist countries where all politics is seen as “dirty,” much less directly affiliating with or participating in party politics, everyday activists risk alienating some groups of potential supporters. In this sense, activists’ portrayal of themselves as just “average citizens” may combine both an authentic position and strategic framing to achieve their goals.

In some cases, especially when movement participants become deeply frustrated by political inaction or abuse, everyday activism might become overtly political. Despite failed projects in other countries, MNC Rio Tinto started exploratory excavations of lithium ore in a rural part of western Serbia and gradually gained the trust of the Serbian government and local citizens. The company performed classic “greenwashing” techniques, helping the local football team, rebuilding a school and church, and even attending religious events. When locals realized that their agricultural lands and water supply would be endangered by mining, they started to act. This led to massive protests<sup>52</sup> in November 2021, fueled by anger against the government’s non-transparent procedures for the sale of land and permits allowing environmental damage. These protests expanded to more cities in Serbia and included sharp criticism of the government. The ruling political party broke the agreement with Rio Tinto just before the elections but allowed the multinational corporation to restart preparations for mining<sup>53</sup> after winning elections. In this case, everyday activists became more directly involved with politics but ultimately were not able to stop mining or mobilize citizens to vote out the ruling party. It also illustrates the difficulties of activism in a more centralized or authoritarian political context like Serbia and Russia.

Everyday activism – in its varied forms in pursuit of varied issues – is likely to persist in CEE and beyond because it represents responses to immediate concerns about enduring problems, and it does not require significant resources or experience to begin. As with any form of activism, everyday efforts have strengths and limitations. While everyday activism may offer the opportunity for citizens in CEE to leave their homes and enter the public arena to solve problems, it also faces serious challenges in scaling-up and sustaining itself.

Can average citizens really change cynical minds and win in their appeals against poor governance, self-interested politicians, and profit-seeking corporations? Our activist profiles and examples of everyday environmentalism in CEE show us that sometimes they can. In fact, small victories and the

experience of activism may inspire citizens in other communities to engage and empower activists to work toward broader political change in the future. The problems of everyday activism are often symbolic of issues at higher levels of the political system, highlighting the need for government accountability and responsiveness to citizens (CIVICUS, 2019). Taking civic action through everyday activism ultimately may signal deeper social and political transformation from the ground up.

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